
Homosexuality in Cross-Cultural Perspective

Michael A. Rynkiewich

In the American debate about sexuality, homosexuality is portrayed as an aberrance of choice by one side and as a natural outcome of biology by the other, sometimes with nuanced stances in between. Both sides tend to take for granted that the thing that they are talking about exists, and some argue that it is a unitary phenomenon found across cultures and through time. I question whether or not the English concept of homosexuality can serve as a scientific category for cross-cultural comparison. Similar practices identified in one culture area reveal that the characteristics of same-sex behavior and belief vary significantly, thus deconstructing American narratives. Those arguing for a more traditional perspective have too easily accepted the terms of the debate. Perhaps it is time to step back and take a broader view that includes the experiences and narratives of a full range of the world's many cultures and many Christianities.

As anthropologist Robert Priest¹ has emphasized in another context, “Zeal without knowledge is not good,” and to complete the proverb, “how much more will hasty feet miss the way!”² Zeal may lead to a category error in cross-cultural matters. That happens when the American category of homosexuality is treated as if it were a universal phenomenon that is adequate to describe beliefs and behavior in all cultures. A category error occurs when, for example, a young person mistakes someone who shows interest on the internet as a ‘friend’. A smile does not always signal good will. Likewise, language and behavior that is carelessly identified as homosexual may lead to an embarrassing confrontation in other cultures, or it may lead to a rush to judgment. Culture is always an open question until a person takes the opportunity to walk a mile in the other person’s shoes.

The Problem of Developing Cross-cultural Categories in Anthropology

Anthropology is not an ancient discipline like theology. Although there have been accounts of

various people that were written by travelers since ancient times, not every person with a pencil and a notebook is an anthropologist. The first university position in anthropology was held by Edward B. Tylor at Oxford, as a Reader in Anthropology in 1884, and then as the first Professor of Anthropology in 1896. That same year, Franz Boas was appointed a Lecturer in Physical Anthropology at Columbia University, and then promoted to Professor of Anthropology in 1899. Boas founded the first department to offer a Ph.D. in Anthropology in America. So, professional anthropology begins approximately with the dawn of the 20th Century.

I began studying anthropology in 1964 at Bethel College, in St. Paul, Minnesota.³ I was graduated in 1966 with a major in anthropology, then earned a master’s in anthropology in 1968, and a Ph.D. in 1972, both at the University of Minnesota. That means that I have been around for nearly half the life of the discipline. In fact, my first advisor at Minnesota was E. Adamson Hoebel, who himself had been a student of Franz Boas. One of my professors was Robert F. Spencer, who had studied under Alfred Kroeber, also

¹ This article was first presented as a talk given at Taylor University at the invitation of Robert Priest on April 15, 2018. I thank him for that opportunity and for his critique that has informed this revision for publication. The article still retains some of the characteristics of a talk, though I appreciate the critiques offered by Eloise Meneses and the reviewers. I am still responsible for the final form.

² Proverbs 19:2, a variation on the NIV translation.

³ I studied under Claude Stipe and Tom Correll.

a student of Franz Boas. Is it no wonder that I have strong Boasian tendencies?

What makes the discipline attractive to me is its commitment to a two-step process for understanding people, including Americans themselves as a society.⁴ The first way begins with observation, inquiry, description, and analysis. This is called doing ethnography, that is, making sense of the thoughts and behavior of one group of people, and, I might add, the internal variations in culture, which are many.

The second way depends on the availability of written ethnographic reports about several groups of people. This step is comparison. Doing ethnology involves developing appropriate categories, running a cross-cultural comparison, and drawing generalizations. Sounds simple, but, as you might guess, it is and it isn't.

Step One: Doing Ethnography

Ethnographic research involves using the people's language, speaking from a particular perspective, and speaking to a particular audience. However, we have to ask: Whose language? Whose perspective? Which audience? There is no universal language; not English, not Spanish, not Chinese, not Hindi. None of these can pretend to be a scientific language. There is no neutral vantage point. Every perspective is shaped by gender, class, and ethnicity, at the least. Every audience requires a different narrative according to time, place, and composition of the audience. We see this in the existence of two histories of Israel: Kings and Chronicles; as well as four narratives about the life and teachings of Jesus, each serving different purposes.

When anthropologists get the language right, the perspective generous, and the audience identified; then we develop descriptions called ethnographies. An ethnography is something written, but not just anything written. People write travelogues about a vacation they took. Soldiers, business agents, and missionaries report their experiences. These are not ethnographies. Ethnographic research involves a serious attempt to learn the local people's perspective, not to impose one's own.

Ethnography is based on the experience of an anthropologist living among a people for an extended period of time, usually at least a year, often for as long

as two years. Some anthropologists keep going back over a life-time. I lived on an isolated coral atoll in the southern Marshall Islands for 18 months; but I have been back for research at times. In addition, as a Pacific Islands anthropologist and a United Methodist missionary, I have lived and done research in New Guinea during a five year residence.⁵ I have also visited other Pacific islands. Overall, I have spent about eight years of my life in the Pacific Islands. And still, I consider myself an expert only on limited aspects of culture and language, and even that understanding is now dated. During my doctoral research in the Marshalls, I knew about homosexuality and had read some accounts of similar practices in Melanesia and Polynesia, but that was not the focus of my research program.

Step Two: Doing Ethnology

Comparison is a different animal altogether. Assuming that a particular scholar has access to a number of good ethnographies, written over time, in different languages, from different perspectives, and to different audiences; then it may be possible to make comparisons of whole cultures. However, it is more practical to make comparisons of selected aspects of cultures. The first hurdle to jump is to make sure, as we add culture after culture to the comparison, that we are in fact talking about the same thing, or at least something similar in each culture.

Let me provide an example. By 1910, there had emerged in anthropology a pair of concepts called 'totem' and 'taboo'. Broadly speaking, a society employs totems when an animal or spirit is linked to certain divisions of society and ensures their prosperity. Taboo comes from a Polynesian word that means 'forbidden', particularly in a sacred context. In fact, as you might recognize, the concepts had already escaped from the fledgling discipline of anthropology and had found a refuge in the discipline of psychology. In 1913, Sigmund Freud published *Totem and Taboo*, with this subtitle: *Resemblances Between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics*. Clearly, Freud played fast and loose with the data.

This work, and a lot of early anthropological work, builds on the assumption that totemism is a "thing" that exists out there in the real world. As it turns out,

⁴ For example, Chinese Anthropologist Francis L. K. Hsu studied Americans.

⁵ I worked at the Melanesian Institute in Goroka, Eastern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea.

totemism is not a universal reality or even regional reality. In 1910, Alexander Goldenweiser deconstructed the concept of Totemism as a cross-cultural comparative concept in his doctoral dissertation, *Totemism: An Analytical Study*. Goldenweiser declared that this is where anthropologists go wrong:

On the basis of material furnished by some one area or a number of areas, a definite group of features is called 'totemism'. Another totemic area is discovered where an additional feature is found, or where one of the old ones is missing. Immediately the questions arise . . . Is *this* totemism? Or Was *that* totemism? Or Is *this* true totemism, and *that* was *incompletely developed*, . . . or a *later development*?⁹ In the light of the foregoing discussion, any definite answer to these questions must needs be arbitrary. (1910, 89-90)

Goldenweiser demonstrated that there is no single universal concept we can call totemism, and the whole comparative project around totemism tends to generate too many useless questions. Franz Boas was convinced since six years later he wrote: "Totemism is an artificial unit, not a natural one" (1916, 321). Warren Shapiro agrees that anthropologists and other scholars assumed that "the expression 'totemism' designated a unitary class of phenomena. Goldenweiser's initial contribution to the controversy, ". . . was to show that the alleged unitary character of totemism is in fact an analytical concoction" (1991, 610).

When anthropologists are doing research, it is a good practice to keep major concepts *in language*⁶ as long as possible. When we move to the level of making cross-cultural comparisons, then we do need a more universal language. However, we always want to discover what is similar and what is different in the cases at hand to ensure that we are talking about the same thing.

When anthropologists make comparisons, we tend to follow a method that Fred Eggan called "controlled comparison" (1954). That is, we do not, as the American proverb says, "Compare apples and

oranges." We compare apples to apples. We do this in order to make sure that we are talking about the same thing, and to be able to say something meaningful about which apples are good to eat, which ones are good to make pies with, and which ones are available in which areas in which months.

A classic example of the problem of developing a universal comparative language is the case of the British social anthropologists who cut their teeth studying African societies.⁷ The research of the 1900s gave us some outstanding ethnographies: E. E. Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer*, Paul Bohannan's *Justice and Judgment among the Tiv*, and John Beattie's *The Nyoro State*, among others. These gave us concepts like "tribe" and "kingdom" and "patrilineal descent." However, when the Highlands of New Guinea were 'opened up', to use a colonial term, after World War II, students of the British school of social anthropology flocked to New Guinea to study these new people. They brought with them the theories and concepts that anthropologists had developed in Africa.

After nearly two decades, it became clear that something was seriously wrong. J. A. Barnes wrote a seminal article titled, "African Models in the New Guinea Highlands" (1962). Barnes demonstrated that what they thought they knew about African "tribes" and "chiefs" and "kingdoms" did not help very much in understanding New Guinea society, polity, economics, kinship, and religion. In other words, the people of New Guinea had their own reality, their own conceptions of how society is organized; and they followed their own thoughts, not African thoughts.⁸ This caused a reflective and reflexive swing in anthropology that is not over yet. It even made anthropologists rethink what they thought they knew about Africa.

In a similar vein, one year later, Marshall Sahlins wrote "Rich Man, Poor Man, Big Man, Chief: Political Types in Polynesia and Melanesia" (1963). Sahlins made the case that political leadership in Melanesia did not involve anything like a chief ruling over a chiefdom, a polity that was imagined for Polynesia and for Africa. In Melanesia, Big Man leadership involves different dynamics than leadership by a chief.

⁶ A term frequently used by SIL Bible translators to mean "in the local language."

⁷ It's the 'Colonial Connexion', another subject that is also of interest.

⁸ Note that the assumption that these peoples might be similar is based on colonial assumptions about 'primitive' 'natives' with a lower level of social organization. All that was wrong, but that is another subject.

So, now, on the first day of class when I am teaching anthropology, I tell my students that the best way to fail this class is to use questionable terms like “totemism,” or “tribe,” or “chief,” or “animism,” or “primitive,” or “simple.”

Question: Does Homosexuality Exist in the Pacific Islands?

All that to say, when someone asks me to speak or write about homosexuality in cross-cultural perspective, I am hesitant. Most of my life has been focused elsewhere, on land tenure and political organization specifically in the islands of the Pacific. My first question is whether or not the English term homosexuality is a legitimate cross-cultural category? What descriptions do we have of things that people do that are like what Americans mean when they use the term? The answers are so varied and nuanced that some have taken to speak of homosexualities, even within one culture.⁹

Keep in mind that just because we talk about something in American English does not mean that thing is real outside of the world of American English speakers. In this case, not even all English speakers agree about which phenomenon they are talking about. Identity formation, sexual desire and behavior, and self-perception vary greatly and are difficult to capture in a few terms. Americans seem to be still expanding the category, now including LGBTQQICAPF2K+.¹⁰ Can this concept be turned into a category suitable for cross-cultural comparison? Or, put differently, can we learn anything about same-sex feelings, motivations, and relationships by conducting a controlled comparison of Pacific Islanders’ practices? The answer will reflect back on the question of the universality of homosexuality as defined by Americans.

My own doctorate does not help much. I studied land tenure in both the Marshall Islands and Papua New Guinea. I did not ask about sexual practices, and I do not see in the literature on Micronesia much about same-sex attraction. However, the literature from Melanesia and Polynesia is thicker on the subject.

First, the whole issue of what a person is, how a person is constructed, and the place of sexual identity

in one’s personal identity has been raised and addressed by a number of anthropologists working in Melanesia. The work of Marilyn Strathern (1988) and others (e.g., Read 1955; Burridge 1979; Iteanu 1990; Josephides 1991) provides a caution against pretending that Western conceptions of personhood are somehow scientific or universal. There are many systems for constructing a person, perhaps as many as there are cultures.

I made this point for an audience concerned with cross-cultural mission in an article entitled “Person In Mission” (2003). There I argued that persons are constructed differently in different societies, and therefore it is incumbent on a missionary to ask: Who am I talking to?

Melanesia: Is this Homosexual Behavior?

When anthropologists entered the Highlands of Papua New Guinea in the 1950s, they began to uncover some initiation rites and practices that certainly seemed strange to Euro-Americans. The work of Kenneth Read (1980 [1965]) and other anthropologists reveals in traditional cultures a widespread concern with gender formation, particularly a concern by the men that boys who are raised by their mothers need help in becoming men, as the culture defines men. Boys must go through initiation rites in order to be separated from the polluting influences of women and then they need to be properly fortified with male influences (Meggit 1964). In some Melanesian cultures, men thought that only in this way would boys transition to become men.

The context is that, in pre-colonial times, these were societies where strong men were needed to hunt, to garden, and to fight when necessary for kinfolk and political allies. Men were anxious about raising up the next generation of warriors and hunters in order for the society to thrive and survive.

Here is what concerned the men. Baby boys are born in female fluids, nurse mother’s milk, accept sweet potatoes and other food from the hands of menstruating women, and thus are in constant danger of being weakened physically and spiritually. There are social and political issues here as well since their

⁹ Most prominently, Stephen O. Murray, who spent a lifetime as a “comparative sociologist” studying and gathering material from around the world, titled his definitive tome: *Homosexualities*.

¹⁰ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Curious, Asexual, Agender, Ally, Pansexual, Polysexual, Friends and family, Two-spirit, Kink, plus anything else that is not heterosexual.

mothers may have come from a former ally who has currently shifted to enemy status in the alliances of yesterday's New Guinea. So, the overriding concern of men has been how to rescue boys, to cleanse them from the polluting influences of women, and strengthen them so that they grow up to be men.

Of course, all of this depends on local definitions of what constitutes a person, how a person grows and develops, what is a male, and what is a female. In the cultural logic, particularly in Highlands societies on the island of New Guinea, boys need to be separated from women. Thus, they are removed from their mother's houses at about age 9 and taken to live in the men's house. Then, boys need to be purged of female influences. In some societies, this means a regular regimen of induced vomiting. Even adult men would regularly take a piece of cane, curve it into a U shape, and ratchet it down their throats until they vomited. Who knows what they might have ingested along with the food that women prepare, and so they take no chances. In other societies, men would roll up leaves with sharp edges into a cigar-like shape, and then jam these up their nostrils until they bleed. Out with the blood comes any female fluids they might have ingested.

Men have noticed, by the way, that girls seem to come to maturity all by themselves: they grow breasts, they begin to menstruate, and then they become pregnant. How is it that boys are so slow to develop while girls jump out ahead? Their answer is that boys are being held back by the detrimental influences of women. In some societies, nose bleeding by males is thought to mimic girl's menstruation and thus this practice will help bring the boy to maturity. One anthropologist entitled his ethnography: *The Island of Menstruating Men*.¹¹

So, boys must be separated from women, and boys must be purged of female influences that might weaken them. Finally, boys must be given semen in order to strengthen them since semen does not develop naturally but must be planted in them (Kelly 1977, 16). This is where 'something like homosexuality' comes into play. In some societies, during initiation rites, men masturbated and deposited semen on boys' heads (Ernst 1991, 5). In other societies, boys were expected to perform fellatio on adult males and thus swallow

semen (Herdt 1981, 2). And in other societies, men performed anal sex on boys and thus deposited semen that way (Schieffelin 1982, 163).

I said "during initiation rites," but that is misleading since in some societies this continued on a regular basis over a period of years. There is another problem with our study, and that is the issue of how to describe something that is rapidly disappearing, if not gone altogether. There is something in anthropology called "the ethnographic present." In the colonial era, this was an attempt to reconstruct culture and society the way it was at the point of the European encounter. Anthropologists often showed up ten to twenty years later, and so they talked to older men, and infrequently, to older women, then tried to reconstruct what life was like before colonialists and missionaries arrived. This approach carries its own ethical issues, of course.

However, in the case of the Highlands of New Guinea, the ethnographic present was nearly at the same time as the colonial contact. In many cases, anthropologists and missionaries followed right behind government patrols into the mountains and valleys of central New Guinea.

Early anthropologists in the Highlands discovered these practices by accident, by which I mean that most of them were not looking for or expecting something like homosexuality. By following men around and watching everything that they did, anthropologists observed initiation rites. Thus, Kenneth Read gives us a rather sanitized description of initiation rites in his classic ethnography, *The High Valley* (1965). Other anthropologists began to develop the story of male initiation rites as observed after World War II into the 1950s and 1960s.

Then, some anthropologists began to make something like homosexuality the focus of their studies. For example, after he discovered initiation rites, the anthropologist Gilbert H. Herdt conducted research into this practice in the 1960s and 1970s.¹² Herdt conducted his research in the Eastern Highlands among a people he calls the Sambia, although that is a pseudonym, given his subject matter. He begins his introduction with these questions:

¹¹ Ian Hogbin. 1970. *The Island of Menstruating Men: Religion in Wogeo, New Guinea*.

¹² "The initial two years of my fieldwork (1974-76) among the Sambia amounted to an accidental study of their sexuality, since it never was my intention to study sex in the field" (Herdt 1999, 6).

Why should a secret society of manly warriors believe that a boy must be orally inseminated to become masculine? What happens when this conviction is implemented through a prolonged ritualized homosexuality? It is with the origins of this male developmental cycle that I will be concerned; with its behavioral manifestations that constantly polarize masculinity and femininity in idioms and myth; and with exploring ways in which we can set about studying that gender symbolism. (1994 [1981], 1)

Herdt then claims that “My anthropological task is this: to explain this puzzling pattern of culturally constituted development in which Sambia heterosexual manhood emerges only after years of normatively prescribed and prolonged homosexual activities” (1994 [1981], 3).

What is the “puzzling pattern”? The puzzle, for Herdt, is that the boys engage in what appears to be homosexual behavior, not just in one initiation rite but over a number of years. However, the goal, and the actual result, is that they become heterosexual men. Of course, this is a puzzle *only* if you think that, in the language of the American worldview, homosexuality cannot be changed to heterosexuality. Yet here are a people who practice *one* in order to get to the *other*. Early on, Herdt used the term “ritualized homosexuality,” but later he dropped the term.

In his new foreword to the 1994 edition of this book, Herdt writes: “It is no longer useful to think of the Sambia as engaging in ‘homosexuality’, because of the confusing meanings of this concept and their intellectual bias in the Western history of sexuality” (Herd 1994, xiii-xiv). Exactly. Yet, the cases from Melanesia do tell us something. First, any concept, like ‘homosexuality’, is always entwined and embedded in other concepts, such as “gender identity,” and even institutions, such as “clan security and warfare.”

Second, inasmuch as these instances of ‘homosexual-like’ behavior seem significant early in the life of a young man, they do not lead to an exclusive pattern of homosexuality as an adult, though occasionally a longer term relationship develops alongside heterosexual behavior (Serpenti 1884, 305). Most of the time, this homosexual-like behavior leads to a heterosexual life, a man married to a woman and producing children for the next generation. Same-sex behavior,

then, is a step in the process of emphasizing male dominance and aggression (Langness 1999, 154; Murray 2000, 25) in order “to promote their masculinity and aggressiveness” (Watson 1971, 269). Trying to interpret Melanesian homosexual-like behavior in terms of Western homosexual narratives is not very productive.

Let’s add to this an interesting account from the Highlands of New Guinea by Bruce Knauff. Knauff provides us with ethnographic descriptions of the hunting and gathering Gebusi, including the practice of same-sex behavior among some young men on extended hunting trips, but not elsewhere in society (1986; 1987). Knauff followed up his initial ethnographic fieldwork with another period of fieldwork carried out twenty years later (reported in 2012). By this time the people had been touched by global flows of capitalism in the form of a nearby mine, and Christianity brought by missionaries. Knauff recounts an incident in which he heard a word in conversation that he did not understand. He asked if it was related to the aforementioned practice of young men in hunting parties. The men, in their 20s, did not know what he was talking about and took offense at the suggestion that such a thing had ever been a part of their culture. He quickly changed the subject.

As we leave this culture area, we can say that homosexual-like behavior in Melanesia (1) is embedded in other concepts and practices and thus has its own narrative, (2) is ephemeral in that it does not last a life-time,¹³ (3) serves other purposes than sexual desire, (4) is connected causatively to the production of a masculine heterosexual identity, and (5) has been susceptible to rapid change and even loss in colonial and globalizing contexts.

Polynesia: Is this Homosexual Behavior?

In the interest of space, I will access only one case study, although a major one, from Polynesia; the research of Robert I. Levy, a psychological anthropologist, entitled: *Tahitians: Mind and Experience in the Society Islands* (1973).

As early as 1791, explorers in the Society Islands could tell that there was something unusual going on, at least unusual to the European eye. James Morrison reported:

¹³ That is, “The modern northern European and American notion that everyone who repeatedly engages in homosexual behavior is ‘a homosexual’, a distinct ‘species’ with unique features, is far from being universally credited” (Murray 2000, 1).

They have a set of men called Mahoo (*māhū*). These men are in some respects like the Eunuchs in India but they 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 these and are as effeminate in their voice. They are generally excellent hands at making and painting of cloth, making mats and every other women's employment (Morrison 1935, 238; quoted in Levy 1973, 130).

Captain Bligh, on the same ship as Morrison, investigated when he encountered a *Māhū*. He reported: ". . . I had myself some idea that it was common in this sea. I was however mistaken in all my conjectures except that things equally disgusting were committed. . . . The women treat him as one of their sex, and he observed every restriction that they do, and is equally respected and esteemed" (Bligh 1937, 16-17; quoted in Levy 1973, 131).

It turns out that the *māhū* is a recognized status. People claim that there is only one for each village or district, just as there is only one chief, and claim that there is never more than one "because when one dies, then another substitutes. . . . God arranges it like that" (Levy 1973, 132).

It is also similar to the status of a chief, in that, as Levy reports:

One can discontinue being a *māhū* as one can discontinue being chief. There is a case in the village of a young man who in his early adolescence dressed from time to time in girl's clothes and was thus a *māhū* and who in his early twenties rejected (*fā'aru'e* 'cast off') the role. It is assumed in the village that this is the end of it and that he is leading an ordinary masculine life. (Levy 1973, 133)

While not all *māhū* engage in sexual activity, those that do perform fellatio, usually on young men. The favor is never returned. Anal sex, by contrast, is considered to be a "non-Tahitian" practice that has been imported from the outside (Levy 1973, 137). Those who visit a *māhū* are not considered to be *māhū* themselves. They are predominately heterosexual,

and for them the *māhū* is just a substitute for a woman (Levy 1973, 134, 235). In addition, two *māhū* never hook up or form a couple. While there are vague reports of female homosexual-like behavior, there is no status like the *māhū* and no evidence that the practice is anything more than a diversion from the more normative heterosexual behavior.

Conclusions

What does our quick survey of Tahitian practices tell us? Unlike Melanesia, in Polynesia, or at least in Tahiti,¹⁴ there is a designated status for a man behaving like a woman; and a person could remain a *māhū* for life. However, like Melanesia, this sexual identity by choice might not last a lifetime. Further, there does not seem to be widespread agreement in Tahiti today about the role of the *māhū*, with some saying it begins at birth and others saying that it is adopted later. Some say that the sexual practice is central to the role, others say that one can be a *māhū* and not engage in sex at all. Overall, there does not seem to be the sharp division and antagonism between males and females like that characteristic of Melanesia.

The two examples afforded by Pacific ethnography do reflect two of the most common patterns around the world for "same sex" behavior: (1) it occurs between different generations in settings of age transition and (2) it occurs around a formal status of gender modification.¹⁵

The examples show significant differences from American assumptions. First, in the Melanesian case, such behavior is generation wide, not a personal choice. The Tahitian example is more like a personal choice, but is not widespread. Second, in both cases, the pattern is open to change. In the Melanesian example, change is expected since same-sex behavior is a step on the way to a heterosexual identity. In the Polynesian example, change is possible if the person changes his mind.

Questions remain: Do the beliefs and practices described belong in the same category? Are they the same thing that people talk about in the United States? Are they all instances of a single global phenomenon that could be called 'homosexuality'? The evidence

¹⁴ There are similar, but not the same, categories recognized elsewhere in Polynesia: Hawaii *aikāne*, Tonga *fakaleiti*, Samoa *fa'alafine*, and Maori *takatāpui*.

¹⁵ "...for whatever ultimate historical and structural causes, the two root forms scarcely overlap in any area of the premodern world" (Herdt 1999, 270). The root forms he discusses are "age structured" and "gender transformed." See also Murray 2000, 5.

does not support the hasty conclusion that such a category exists. It appears that, so far, we are talking about apples and oranges; and that we need to look closer in every case to make sure that we know what we are talking about.

However, with the arrival of globalization, we may not have much time left to figure this out. Global flows of people, products, and perspectives include not only capitalism and Christianity, but also the narratives and practices of homoerotic cultures. As with other exports, there is local resistance, rejection, reinvention, or adaptation. Peter Jackson describes the way that global cities are linked to each other, with a focus on the history of how Bangkok became a “gay capital” (Jackson 2003, 153). Jackson pays due attention to traditional Thai understandings, identities, and practices, and then shows how Thais now negotiate what Dennis Altman has called “global queering” (Altman 1996, 77-78). These global flows include people (through migration and tourism) as well as ideas (homosexuality as defined by Europe and America) that are linked mostly to port cities in capitalist trading networks. Thus urbanization and globalization intersect to create sites for the exportation of different understandings of sexuality—a cultural and social phenomenon, not just a personal one as imagined in the United States.

This reflects other lessons learned in anthropology. First, people create culture, then they forget that they did that, and they begin to pretend that what they created is a given in nature. Second, people are caught in webs of significance not all of their own making, but they are resourceful in negotiating their way through the maze.

Missiological Anthropology

From a missiological standpoint, we have skirted sex and gender issues before. The construction of male and female identities, and how that affects marriage and family life, is a long-standing missiological interest—perhaps last discussed under the guise of “polygamy.” Auli Vähäkangas (2009) reminds us that this conversation has not gone away since childlessness is still an issue in many societies, including those of Tanzania. Childlessness raises issues of wholeness (identity), salvation, and immortality—all missional concerns.

This quick survey of extant literature about same-sex sexual behavior in Melanesia and Polynesia reveals that the American category, homosexuality, even when it is pluralized as homosexualities,¹⁶ still leads to questionable cross-cultural comparisons. The American narrative, with assertions of sexuality being inborn, unchangeable, and natural (if that means everywhere existent among humans) is just that, an American narrative. All narratives are cultural constructs, so we should not pretend that the narratives created in the United States or Europe will help us understand and communicate with all people. Those narratives are inadequate.

The way forward, for missionaries, is to learn to use anthropological methods in developing a critical view of culture, history, and theology as a mission strategy. In this urbanized, globalized, migratory, and newly-gendered world, new mission concepts and practices are in order. Those who develop them must be as grounded in culture as in Scripture.

The conversation around same-sex behavior must include other cultures outside the United States and Europe. Ethnographic descriptions should remain *in language* as long as possible, meaning that local understandings should be allowed to emerge rather than be hidden behind rhetorically powerful Western concepts.

A missiological understanding of same-sex behavior must include the perspectives of the “new faces of Christianity” of which Philip Jenkins writes (2006). Insofar as the church’s center of gravity has shifted south and east, so has the center of the sending mission, leaving the First World on the periphery. No conversation about LGBTQ issues can long continue in missiological circles without voices from the Global South being heard. As Jenkins shows, if we did not already know, the kinds of readings of Scripture proposed in the West are not what Christians in the Global South churches practice, nor, I might add, what their own missionaries teach when they send them back to countries in North America and Europe. To them, the debate about homosexuality might look like a case of poorly contextualized Christianity.

However, we must remind ourselves that no narrative is stable over time. Any narrative is subject to change either by natural literary development, by migration, or by colonial imposition. When conditions change, when people exchange ideas, or when the

¹⁶ The choice made by Stephen O. Murray.

power and money speak, then change happens. It may be soldiers establishing outposts, or missionaries planting churches, or sex tourists paying to indulge their fantasies. Change happens, and thus understanding requires repetitive ethnographic research.

We need to be patient as well as persistent. The behavior described here disappeared, or went underground, in Melanesia and Polynesia with increased contact with the outside world, with the reduction of isolation and fear of attack by enemies, and when people responded to the Gospel. However, Western notions of gender and sexuality are rushing in to revise or replace local iterations, and missionaries are often not prepared to engage that trend if they bring American culture wars to frame the issue.

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Michael A. Rynkiewich is Professor of Anthropology, retired, from Asbury Seminary. He took his Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Minnesota (1972) after 18 months fieldwork in the Marshall Islands. He taught for 10 years at Macalester College, and has published a number of books and articles. Later in life he served as a Methodist missionary anthropologist at the Melanesian Institute in Goroka, Eastern Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea. Besides preaching and teaching, he led a four year research project that resulted in two books on problems with church ownership of land. At Asbury Seminary he served as Director of Postgraduate Studies before retiring in 2010.

Author email: Michael.rynkiewich@asburyseminary.edu
