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MIGRATING GENDERS

WESTERNISATION, MIGRATION, AND SAMOAN FA'AFINE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an investigation of how fa'afafine identities are constructed, maintained, and changed in the contexts of contemporary Samoa and New Zealand. Fa'afafine are biological Samoan males who, to varying degrees, enact feminised gender identities. In existent representations, fa'afafine tend to be interpreted through western conceptualisations of sex/gender/sexuality, or using models of 'primitivism', which locate them as instantiations of expressions of gender or sexuality that are more 'natural' than those of the 'civilised' west.

'Traditionally', all gender in Samoa is primarily marked through labour, although the influx of western material and discursive culture has led to a shift in emphasis on sexuality in expressions of Samoan gender. These shifts have inevitably affected how fa'afafine identities are enacted, experienced, and understood. These influences are even more marked for fa'afafine who migrate to New Zealand, who appear to go through a number of 'stages' in first assimilating into western sex/gender discourses, and then asserting their unique identities as fa'afafine. However, the paths followed by individual migrants vary according to the dominant ideologies of the time. The processes by which migrant fa'afafine locate physical and social spaces in which they can enact feminine identities are outlined, which usually initially involve identifying as either 'gay man' or 'woman'. In order to identify explicitly as 'fa'afafine' in a New Zealand context, participants must understand themselves as somewhat ambiguously gendered.

Data collection has been primarily through in-depth interviews, supplemented by observation, to enable analysis of how fa'afafine themselves understand their identities and lived experiences. The particular problems outlining these processes in the light of the exigencies of cross-cultural research are discussed in the methodology chapter. The theoretical approaches underlying the thesis as a whole incorporate the perspectives of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Judith Butler in understanding gender as performative and open to slippage in response to the availability of particular discourses, yet also sedimented over time in a manner which configures the body in ways which are not easily altered.

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