The Omani Xanith: A Third Gender Role?
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The Omani *xanith*: a third gender role?

Sir,

I should appreciate space to answer two commentaries to my article 'Man becomes woman' (Man (N.S.) **12**, 304–19). First to reply briefly to Brain (Man (N.S.) 322): he takes me to task for ethnocentricity and not making use of comparative material, and in the process aggravates the confusion which renders much anthropological literature useless on this point by confounding a rag-bag of male (and female) sexual and behavioural 'deviance'. I submit that it will not further our analysis to compare indiscriminately and crossculturally the roles of persons who dress like the opposite sex, persons who enter into contracts as if they were of the opposite sex, persons who engage in sexual relations with members of their own sex, persons who assume a role in intercourse which in their culture is associated with the other sex, etc. etc. Our first step must be to clarify which of these features, and possibly others, are combined in any particular cultural conceptualisation. This will require greater rigour, clarity, and contextual description from us in the future.

A further dimension of difference, which I gave less explicit attention, is also inadvertently raised by Brain: the degree of in-stitutionalisation. There seems to me an important difference to be made between the social 'recognition' of being able to identify persons as sexual deviants from their use of certain emblems and signals, as Brain does in his walk down the streets of Naples after midnight, and the kind of normative recognition of a role entailed in making arrangements to accommodate *xanith* among women in all major situations where the sexes are segregated, as Sohari do. My claim that I am dealing with a third gender role obviously depends, in part, on this more deeply entrenched institutionalisation, such as was also characteristic of the *berdache* and certain Arctic transvestites.

Though Shepherd (Man (N.S.) **13**: 133) seems to commit some of these same confusions, her material from Mombasa is very useful in highlighting the uniqueness of the Sohari *xanith* role. This is particularly intriguing in view of the close historical relationship between Oman and Mombasa— intermittently in Omani possession from the seventeenth to early nineteenth century.

Shepherd tells us that the *washoga* she encountered in Mombasa, like the *xanith* I reported from Sohar, 'are passive male homosexuals offering their persons for money'. Though this appears to satisfy Shepherd as to the comparability of the two roles, I should like to emphasize that it pretty nearly exhausts the similarity between the two, as reported by Shepherd in her comment and by me in my article. For example, the *washoga* appear to change clothes according to occasion: bright tight male attire at most times, female dress at weddings, whereas *xanith* always wear characteristic clothes intermediate in a number of features between male and female. *Washoga* have all the liberties of men, whereas *xanith* may not eat or sit with men (except in seclusion), may not play musical instruments, may not join men in cafes, etc. *Washoga* 'are also welcome in many contexts otherwise exclusive to women' whereas *xanith* are regularly assigned to the female category in contexts where the sexes are segregated. *Washoga* have patrons, apparently parties to semi-permanent relationships leading even to gifts of house or land, whereas *xanith* receive customers/lovers on an *ad hoc* basis. *Washoga* subsist on earnings from their sexual services, whereas *xanith* have well-paid jobs by virtue of their recognised specialisation as domestic servants, for which there is a large unsatisfied labour market. *Xanith* have salaries ranging from £100 to £130 a month for a 4–5 hour day.

Some *washoga* fail to marry because they do not earn enough, whereas some *xanith* fail to marry because they prove unable to consummate intercourse with a bride. I am not

sure if they would see such an act as
'heterosexual' or 'homosexual'. Following
Benjamin (1966) 'transsexual' has been used in
contradistinction to 'transvestite' for those
males whose cherished identity is that of
woman rather than man. If *xanith* truly
resemble such transsexuals they would per-
ceive intercourse with a bride as a homosexual
experience.

Indeed, Shepherd seems to have missed the
main theme of my analysis, which is con-
cerned with how *xanith* classify/perceive
themselves and are perceived by others. She
assumes an exteriorist viewpoint, and pro-
ceeds as if it were clear *a priori* what the
important facts are, among other things, by
providing next to no information on *washoga-*
female interaction in Mombasa, and over-
looking material to which I have devoted
large portions of my article. The most
essential datum which she ignores is the
significance Sohari attach to potency in
marriage (see below). Even more seriously,
she introduces hear-say evidence on Oman
from Mombasa, 3000 km away, e.g. to the
effect that 'lesbians' are found in Oman. I do
not know which Oman this refers to—inner
Oman, where to my knowledge there are no
xanith, Dhofar with highly distinctive tradi-
tions of its own, or even the neighbouring
emirates in the Gulf, often included in a wide
geographical sense of Oman and in the
colonial British concept of Trucial Oman. I
made it clear that I was reporting on society in
Sohar, reasonably representative of the region
of the Batineh on Oman's north-east coast.
For this area, I should be silly to declare that
sexual relations have never ever taken place
between two women. But I would insist on
the ethnographic statement that no social role
involving lesbian relationships is found or
accepted in Sohar. Nor do I, incidentally,
'analyse Oman's male homosexuals as
pseudo-women': it is the *xanith* and not their
customers on which I focus.

On this rather flawed basis Shepherd makes
certain generalisations which are supposed to
hold for both 'field situations'. 1) 'those who
offer sexual favours in return for economic
security must expect to be regarded as
inferiors. Marriage creates such a situation,
and so does prostitution, male or female. In
that specific way *xanith* are like women'.
There is no Sohari basis for such a generali-
sation. Quite clearly, girls when they marry
greatly *enhance* their status rather than reduce
it. Shepherd's assertion that marriage creates
such inferiority seems nothing less than
straightforward, and fashionable, ethnocen-
tricity. Some Sohari had heard of insti-
tutionalised celibacy, and judged it both
bizarre and compromising for both sexes.
Nor is there any evidence in my article that

xanith offer their favours in return for econ-
omic security. They are in stable, well paid
jobs and the Sohari view is that it is some form
of lust or desire that drives them to sexual
activity. So the young and pretty *xanith*
receives substantial gifts and payments from
his paramours whereas the old and un-
attractive *xanith*, according to Sohari, 'will
pay the men to do it to them'. Nor can I
accept the blanket characterisation that *xanith*
are regarded as inferiors. By whom? Though
parents seem to respond to such proclivities in
their sons as undesirable and even tragic, the
general Sohari response is one of non-
involvement: people's natures are different.
Indeed, the reaction to female prostitution is
also of this character: the husband is shamed
by it, but no one else and so hardly the
unfaithful wife.

2) Shepherd's second generalisation con-
structs an over-all inferior-superior con-
tinuum for the society I have analysed. She
places *xanith* low on this continuum, charac-
terising the term as 'derisory' without any
basis in my account. ('We find a gradated
hierarchy stretching upwards from the
powerless, poor and dependent to the power-
ful, wealthy and independent. On this con-
tinuum there is no one point at which "man
becomes woman".'.) The construction fails in
other significant ways: it ignores the whole
population of manumitted slaves, and de-
scendants of such (inferior though often
powerful, wealthy and independent), the
prejudices towards Bedouin (certainly inde-
pendent, and some of them powerful and
wealthy), the presence of certain despised
crafts, etc. etc.—indeed it seems to arise from
preconceptions more related to European
political and social thought than to Omani
conceptualisations. Her stubborn insensitivity
to the ethnographic data even tempts her to
use the *xanith* who marries as a test case in her
favour, ignoring the fact that all the money in
the world could not help him succeed in the
potency test which is the crux of his transfor-
mation to man, Sohari style. And what about
all those *xanith* who after an interlude of
marriage revert back into their previous role?

3) Finally, she suggests that poverty holds
the key to understanding the *xanith*.
Arguments against this interpretation were
available throughout my original article, and
have been summarised above. Her inci-
dental suggestions that female prostitution is
similarly conditioned is almost equally mis-
placed. Women need not prostitute them-
selves to engage in economic manoeuvering.
Nearly 50 per cent. engage in trade, home
crafts etc., and these are from all economic
strata (in a society with an effective minimal
wage of £45/month, and great demand for
unskilled male labour). Sohari women be-

lieve that what drives a woman to prostitution is emphatically not economic need, but sexual desire (or her 'nature'—rohha/umraha).

The startling difference between Sohar and Mombasa, if Shepherd's information correctly depicts the local situation there, seems to me to support the validity of my gender interpretation of the xanith in Sohar.

The two commentaries by Brain and Shepherd could well occasion a more general discussion of analytical requirements and comparative methodology in role analysis. Suffice it to say that the kind of analysis I have attempted depends both on the observation of the social systems in which the parties interact, and the cultural categories and criteria employed by actors. Thus we need to focus closely on the connexion between xanith behaviour in *all* its features, and the conceptualisation of xanith identity by the xanith himself, and by men and women. Secondly we need to specify the context of the xanith role in terms of its alternatives and reciprocals. There seems to me no exteriorist shortcut to the kind of insight into roles and their interdependencies which such an analysis provides.

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Benjamin, 1966. *The transsexual phenomenon.*

The principle of reciprocal sets

SIR,

It is indeed gratifying to have Anthony Good's proof that terminologies need not conform to the specious principle of the consistency of reciprocals, and his demonstration does vindicate ethnographic facts as opposed to doctrine. Very likely he is right in suggesting that inconsistency may result during historical changes, but I am sure he would not wish to maintain either that discrepancies of the kind in question are a necessary consequence of social transformation or that they could have no other cause. A reciprocal pair of terms can, of course, shift concomitantly. On the other hand, an absence of complete reciprocity might be explainable by the way a terminology works at a given period.

In discussing history and terminological consistency, we must observe several common distinctions. In the first place there are the vocabulary items themselves, a collection of words, each with an etymology of its own. Different languages (or even different communities speaking the same language) may use cognates of a given term to designate quite various relationships. Some Austronesian expressions which have a common root nevertheless describe grandparents in some languages, grandchildren in others, wifegiving affines in some areas, wife-takers elsewhere, and occasionally two or more kinds of relatives within the same language (Rivers 1914: 2: 180–182, 200; Barnes 1977a: 152–153). The etymologies of such words, to the extent that they can be reconstructed, give us fragmentary information about the differing systems in which they have been employed. Therefore relationship terms must be distinguished from the categories they name.

The very word 'category' has been used in various ways by anthropologists. Kroeber (1909) even employed it as a synonym for 'principles' of classification. Other anthropologists have created confusion by letting it mean genealogical specification. A relationship category, however, is neither of these, but a structural region in a system of classification, delineated or signalled by the terms. When examining a specific system, we may have no practical reason to insist on the distinction between category and term, but when we begin to make comparisons its usefulness becomes apparent. There is no necessary connexion between a name for a category and the category itself. Historically linked and structurally identical terminologies from adjacent communities may name the same category by different words; and even within a single community and terminology, there may be alternative names for the same category. Conversely, when we consider a terminology from a specific point of view, we may find advantages in saying that one term names more than one category—especially when it appears that the speakers of the language consistently take this stance. It is also neccessary to keep category separate from the diagrammatic regions which derive from representing a system by a particular model.

Principles determine the distribution of categories through a classification; so we must again differentiate categories from principles. In a famous paper (1909) Kroeber established that in any terminology there are many different grounds for classification, and furthermore that it is a commonplace for these principles to be only partially exhibited. Not one of the eight principles by which he chose to analyse the Pawnee or Mohave systems affected each of their terms. Kroeber showed that in so far as the number of principles is great in relation to the number of terms available some of them at least must be only partly expressed. Only poverty of rules or abundance of terms can produce consistent expression. Principles are then, in a way, in competition; and sometimes one has to give way in order to allow another to come to the fore. The analyst can then attempt to rank them according to relative dominance