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[Gender Across Cultures: An Interview with Serena Nanda](#)

Serena Nanda is the author of (among other books) Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India, a study of a social group of people born as men but who adopt female dress and mannerisms. Often castrated, hijras are considered to be a “third sex,” both by hijras themselves and by the larger culture. This interview first appeared in LiP: Informed Revolt, Summer 2006.

Erin Wiegand: What are some examples of third or fourth genders, or variances in traditional male/female gender expression in non-Western cultures?

Serena Nanda: There are many examples of gender variance/diversity from other cultures. Among different Native American societies there were a great many different roles; some males who take female roles, and [some] females who take male roles. Some of the most well described are among the Zuni and the Mohave. In many cases such roles were associated with the sacred powers of shamans that was specifically related to this gender “in-betweenness.” Alternative gender roles have existed in Tahiti (*mahu*); Thailand (*kathoey*); the Philippines (*bakla*); the Balkans (a female to male role called “sworn virgins”); and Oman, (*xanith*). Female to male roles occur much more infrequently than male to female roles.

Many of these traditional cultures that acknowledged and found a place for gender diverse people/roles have been strongly influenced by Western cultures and religion, some over several centuries. This has, generally speaking, meant a decline in the acceptance and/or positive attitudes toward such roles, and indeed, a decline in the roles themselves.

In *Neither Man Nor Woman* you studied the hijras, who, as you say, are both “man minus man,” (because they are castrated), but also “man plus woman” (through adoption of behavior and dress). What are some similarities and differences between hijras and MTF transgender people in Western cultures?

First, there is a differentiation between transsexual and transgendered. In my understanding, the term transsexual means a person who has “crossed over” (in various stages, mainly through altering physical aspects of the body) from either male to female or female to male. Thus, in this definition, a transsexual really reinforces the sex/gender binary of the West, i.e., male/female; man/woman. As I understand transgenderism, on the other hand, what I see is a broadening of the whole US/Western gender system; these folks don’t want to be one or the other and insist on an “in-between” category. This is gaining ground, I believe, in the West, and suggests our gender system may be moving away, albeit very slowly, from binaries. Hijras, and other similar gender variants in other cultures, do not cross sexes or gender within a binary gender system, but are viewed culturally (and view themselves) as autonomous, alternatives to this binary, whether described as “in-betweens,” third or fourth genders, or whatever. Thus, such roles exist as evidence and serve to further the idea that gender is not necessarily binary.

One has to keep in mind here that since there is so little really known about the internal/psychological/identity of many of the individuals who occupied these roles, how each individual views themselves may be different from the cultural perspective. And so much of what we can say about these roles is cultural, not individual. With regard to the hijras, there are a great variety of self-identities, some of which match the cultural “neither here nor there,” others of which don’t; many hijras do express the idea that have moved from male to female, though they recognize this transition cannot be complete.

As I recall from your book, some hijras want to be accepted as women; others don’t.

I would say that hijras identify more as female than as male, but they aren’t really perceived as females by the larger culture. Their female behavior is often an exaggeration—even a spoof—of traditional Indian femininity; many (though by no means all) hijras, physically appear masculine (from hardly to very), and Indian people “know” they are males who try to be like females, but are not. If [sex reassignment surgery] was available in India on an accessible scale, would some hijras become women (i.e., transsexuals)? Probably some would, but we need to keep in mind that being a recognized hijra also has some advantages—[as hijras, they have a] traditional performance role, they receive alms, etc, which would be lost if they became women. So I would say, their dominant identity is as an in-between or third gender, though as Gayatri Reddy has written, they have many other identities as well, [including] religious [ones]. Reddy has also written on hijras in (mostly local) contemporary political roles and points out, very interestingly, that they run on a platform that they are neither male nor female and thus do not have family or caste ties, and so will be less likely to practice nepotism (widespread in India)—and thereby will serve the public interest better.

What about people born as women, but adopting either a more masculine or alternative gender role, in other non-Western cultures?

There is such a role in India, called the *sadhin*, and one, mentioned above, in the Balkans called the sworn virgin, as well as such roles among Native American societies, where they perhaps occur most frequently. But for various reasons, female to male roles are much fewer in number than the reverse, are more invisible where they might have occurred (ie, Polynesia), or are no longer viable where they once existed historically (ie, Thailand). And certainly [they] are much less described in the anthropological literature. Where female to male roles have existed/exist in other cultures, there is a special kind of cultural situation that calls them forth, and a special kind of behavior they are associated with.

What can the existence of gender-variant people in other cultures offer to queer/trans movements in the West?

I think that the very fact of such diversity of cultural systems and attitudes cannot help but be useful to groups trying to broaden understanding in their own (our own) culture. I hope that my work (and those of other anthropologists like Gil Herdt, Gayatri Reddy, Will Roscoe, [and others] who work in the area of gender diversity) will further the awareness and acceptance of trans and intersex people. Because our work is such strong evidence of the role of culture in the construction of gender, it has applications to more general gender issues as well, and has been used in this way.

It is part of the creed of humanist anthropology, I think, to believe that however specific a cultural situation is, if one allows the individuals within the system to have a voice, or to describe things that seem different to us in an empathic way, people will respond and overcome previous ignorance and prejudice. Not quickly, not all at once, but hopefully, eventually. My students always start out hostile toward hijras and the like, but by the end of the book and [after] some discussion, one does see movement toward understanding, even acceptance. So I just keep on trucking.

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• About Erin





Erin Wiegand is a writer and editor living in Oakland, California. Currently a senior editor at North Atlantic Books, she is also the former managing editor of *LiP Magazine*, an award-winning journal of radical politics, culture, sex, and humor. Her writing has appeared in several print and web magazines, including AlterNet, *LiP*, *In These Times*, and *Paracinema*, and in two books: *Tipping the Sacred Cow* (a *LiP* anthology) and *In the Beginning* (from the editors of *mental_floss*).

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