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Cross-Dressing Magic

Intersexuals and Feminine Husbands

by Roberta Perkins

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Dahomey (now Benin) Warriors around 1890.

Africa offers a great range of gender-crossing types, more so than any other continent on Earth. There are examples of crossing gender by both sexes, there are cases of men and women taking on the roles of the opposite sex without adopting the appropriate dress, and there are rituals in which one or both sexes cross-dress for the period of the ceremony only.

The phenomenon of same-sex marriages were also frequent across Africa ... marriages between men were not uncommon. But more widespread were marriages between women.

The Magic of Cross-Dressing

When female diviners of the Zulus are called upon to forecast rain they carry the spears and shields of warriors, the symbols of male potency to pierce the clouds. Among the Masai - boys are dressed as girls during their initiation into warriorhood. The Sotho of South Africa dress their girls in boys' clothing for their initiation into womanhood. When a man in the Bangala tribe of the Congo is attacked by an evil spirit he dresses as a woman in the hope that the disguise will fool the demon. Zulu men put on women's girdles at a time of drought hoping this would bring sympathy from the rain gods. These are examples of cross-dressing to induce a magical change in certain circumstances. The idea of temporarily donning the clothing of the opposite sex for the purpose of seeking supernatural help is not confined to African societies, but can also be found among some native Brazilian, Papuan and Asian societies. They all have one thing in common: the belief that a change of clothes will bring about a change of luck.

Every year the Zulu performed a ceremony at the time they planted their crops. Women dressed as warriors, carried the men's spears and shields and herded the cattle, which was normally an exclusively male occupation. At the same time, the men hid inside their houses like women do when the village is under attack. This was the annual ritual of Nomkubulwana, the goddess of fertility. The Zulus had another ceremony, known as the umkaba, performed whenever disease threatened the tribe's cattle herd, in which girls donned their brother's clothes and tended to the cattle. Among the Yoruba of West Africa impotent men dressed as women and danced publicly to Gelede, a female demon and cult goddess of witches. These are all examples of cross-dressing and a type of ritual called 'rites of rebellion'. Not only in Africa, but rites of rebellion which feature transvestism are common to many tribes in New Guinea, as well as many societies in pre-Christian and Medieval Europe, with fiestas such as Mummers parades, Halloween, Mardi Gras and Carnival. Rites of rebellion, whether or not they involved transvestism, were an expression of a change in order, which not only sought to reset the world to its normal order, but provided participants with the chance to temporarily reverse their roles, a kind of social safety valve enabling men to become women, and vice versa, for a period as a way of relieving the pressure of living in one role all the time. The Feast of Fools is an example of non-transvestic rite of rebellion, whereby the King became a beggar and a beggar the King for a day.

Warrior Women and Women Marriages

There are many examples in Africa of women taking on men's roles for longer periods than the length of a ritual. The best known of these masculine women are the female warriors of West Africa. The Ashanti, Benin and Ibe all had women in their armies who fought as hard and as furiously as their male counterparts. But the Dahomey formed an entire regiment of full-time women warriors. In 1845, 5,000 of these women made up nearly half of the Dahomey's fighting strength of 12,000 troops. Under King Ghezo his personal bodyguard of female soldiers were largely responsible for overthrowing the Yoruba domination of Dahomey.

The phenomenon of same-sex marriages were also frequent across Africa. Among the Nuba and Azande of Sudan, the Siwan of southern Egypt, and the Nzema of Ghana marriages between men were not uncommon. But more widespread were marriages between women, in such societies as the Nuer and Dinka in Sudan, the Dahomey and Ibo in West Africa, the Zulu, Venda and Lovedu of southern Africa, and some twenty-three other tribes. These women-marriages vary greatly from one tribe to another. Among the Nuer it occurs when an older barren woman who has acquired a cattle herd from a previous heterosexual marriage purchases a woman from her clansmen with the normal bride price for other marriages. The woman-husband herds the cattle and sometimes practises magic, both normally the prerogative of men. Whilst she does not identify as a man she has all the privileges that go with the male role. In Dahomey, the situation is similar except women-husbands can acquire wealth for the bride price without having inherited it in a

previous heterosexual marriage, and she may not necessarily be barren. But among the Venda a woman needs to have acquired the status and property of a district chief, no mean feat for a woman, before she can obtain a bride. The woman-marriage of the Lovedu (which form over a third of all marriages) usually take place when a woman has a right to a daughter-in-law in the levirate system when she has no son to marry her brother's widow. To acquire an heir to her cattle herd and other property, the woman-husband will hire a non-kinsmen to sleep with her wife and any child from the resultant pregnancy is socially considered to be a member of the woman-husband's clan, just as with any husband who fathers a child. The difference is that the child grows up with two female parents, even though it will call one of them by the term for 'father'.

Transgender people and Intersexuals

In many parts of Africa the phenomenon of male and female transgender people is quite widespread. There are some strange examples reported by nineteenth century European travellers to the interior of the 'dark continent', such as the sacrificial priest of the Kingdom of Congo dressed as a woman and was called 'grandmother', the Ankole of Uganda had a woman who dressed as a man in order to become an oracle for the god Mukasa, or Bangala shamans who dressed in female clothing to detect a murderer, to mention just a few. Among the Bala of the Congo were both men and women who were unhappy with their given genders and desired to change their sex roles. But Bala society frowns on gender-crossing, some people accusing both sexes who try it of doing so for purely homosexual reasons, others saying they are simpletons, and all give them a derogatory term, bitesha. Bitesha only partly cross-dress to avoid ridicule, for instance men may wear skirts but not tops or kerchiefs about their heads, which only makes women suspect them of wanting to rape them. The poor bitesha try to meet opposition to them with some optimism. "I like to be insulted", said one bitesha. "This is what bitesha like ... I love being a bitesha because no one expects or demands things or actions from him".

Like elsewhere in the world Intersexuals (hermaphrodites) were not unknown in Africa. But among the Pokot of Kenya they were given a special social status in the society, a sort of third sex. Pokot society underwent genital mutilation during their respective initiation rites: boys were circumcised, and girls were clitoridectomised. But, because Intersexuals' genitals did not conform to what was considered normal they could not undergo the genital surgery. Thus, they could not pass into adulthood and were given a status of non-person, as well as neutral sex category, sererr. They were not allowed to have sex, nor to herd cattle, hunt, fish or undertake female manufactures. They were taunted mercilessly by other Pokots and many were put to death at birth. They considered themselves as mistakes of divine creation. Yet, those who escaped the infanticide claimed this was due to the intervention of a supernatural force called Torurut.

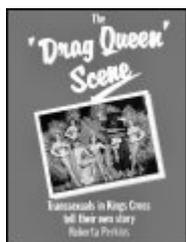
Trannie Entertainers on Madagascar

The large island of Madagascar off Africa's east coast had a long tradition of gender crossing among certain males in the island's tribes. Among the Sakalavas little boys thought to have a feminine appearance were raised as girls. The Antandroy and Hova called their gender-crossers sekrata, who like women, wore their hair long and in decorative knots, inserted silver coins in pierced ears, and wore many bracelets on their arms, wrists and ankles. They considered themselves 'real' women, totally forgetting they were born males, and through long practice spoke with a woman's voice. Their society thought their efforts to be female natural and believed that they had supernatural protection which punished anyone who attempted to do them harm. What a contrast to the sekrata were to the unfortunate Pokot sererr.

The Tanala were the most powerful of the Madagascar tribes and noted as great traders with visiting mariners. Their gender-crossers, or tsekats, were the island's outstanding entertainers, dancing for visiting chieftains, who paid them in lavish gifts for their performances. They also received payment from lovers when they pleased them. Legueval de Lacombe had this to say about them when he visited the island in 1840: "They have their own manners and customs and live apart. They do not marry and even affect a dislike for women, although they wear the dress of the latter and imitate their voice, gestures and general habits. They wear large earrings of gold or silver, necklaces of coral or coloured beads, and bracelets of silver. They carefully extract the hair of their beards and in short play the part of women so well that one is often deceived. For the rest, these dancers have simple manners, and are very sober in their habits. They are continually on the move, and are well accepted wherever they go".

Roberta Perkins

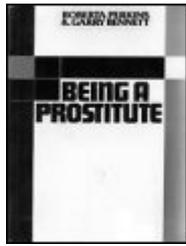
Roberta Perkins established the Gender Centre (then known as Tiresias House) in 1983. She is also a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at The University of New South Wales and has conducted many government-funded research projects into prostitution. A transsexual herself, she has the confidence of the people she interviews; a sociologist, she has counselled transsexuals for a number of years; an activist, she has worked with them in the struggle to overcome the problems they face every day of their lives. Roberta is also the author, and co-author of five books and scores of journal articles on sex work research in Australia and has also taught Native American Studies for many years in Sydney



The Drag Queen Scene: Transsexuals in Kings Cross
Author: Roberta Perkins Publisher: Allen & Unwin (1983)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0868610474

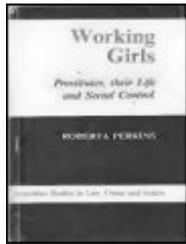
Through a unique series of frank interviews, *The Drag Queen Scene* deals with the experiences of male-to-female transsexuals who live and work in Sydney's Kings Cross area. It focuses on twelve people — showgirls, strippers, bar girls and prostitutes. Each of the twelve speaks for herself, providing first-hand insights into life and work in her world — a world a few people understand. Their stories uncover the raw reality behind the shallow popular view of the "Drag Queen". These revealing every-day accounts demonstrate how much accepted attitudes are based on ignorance, prejudice and callousness. By offering the reader a rare opportunity to view a closed subculture as its participants see it, *The Drag Queen Scene* is an attempt to break down the resistance facing transsexuals, to influence changes in social attitudes and the law. In this book, twelve voices, hitherto silent, challenge the reader to question the stigmatising and

ostracising transsexuals endure.



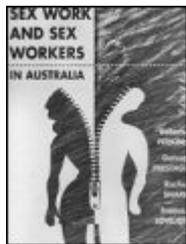
Being a Prostitute: Prostitute Women and Prostitute Men (with Garry Bennett)
Author: Roberta Perkins and Garry Bennett Publisher: Allen & Unwin (1986)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0868616780

Constant media coverage and popular concern about prostitution, recent changes to legal and administrative regulations governing prostitution in its various forms in its several States, and the emergence of organised groups to represent the views and interests of prostitutes in public discussions and to influence policy formation ensure that the subject retains a high level of visibility and social significance. At the same time there have been remarkably few empirical studies of prostitution in Australia and our knowledge is largely confined to sensationalised reports of criminal cases and media exposés. So a book giving detailed accounts of the perceptions and experiences of a variety of prostitutes, male and female, homosexual and heterosexual, of different ages and background, and covering the diversity of forms of occupational types and organisational settings of prostitution at the present time would seem to be timely.



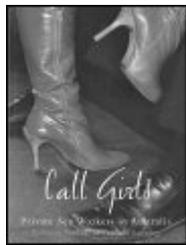
Working Girls: Prostitutes, Their Life and Social Control
Author: Roberta Perkins
Publisher: Australian Institute of Criminology (1991)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0642158765

From Abe Books:  This book has three objectives: 1. To demonstrate empirically that prostitutes are basically ordinary women with only their occupation distinguishing them from others; 2. To bring to the general public a balanced, well-informed view of prostitution, shed of its tawdry reputation; 3. To convince legislators to adopt a more practical method of dealing with prostitution.



Sex Work and Sex Workers in Australia
Author: Roberta Perkins
Publisher: University of New South Wales Press (1994)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0868401744

From Google Books:  *Sex Work and Sex Workers in Australia* is one of the most comprehensive books on the sex industry. This book's main focus is on prostitution and it is broken down on many levels: female, male, transsexual, health care, oral histories, and foreign workers (e.g.. Thai). It is very easy to read and one leaves this book with an excellent history lesson as well as viewpoints from both men and women which balances this book.



Call Girls: Private Sex Workers in Australia
Author: Roberta Perkins and Frances Lovejoy
Publisher: U.W.A. Publishing (2007)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 1920694913

From Booktopia:  *Call Girls* casts a penetrating, red light gaze upon the upper echelons of the worlds oldest profession private sex workers who use the telephone as a means to solicit clients. Containing frank accounts from women working in the Australian sex industry. *Call Girls* puts a human face on this hitherto shadowy, clandestine world as it documents how many women became sex workers; run their businesses; maintain their health; and how the call girls work affects their relationships with husbands, lovers and families. Far-removed from the moralising, victim stereotypes and *Pretty Woman*-inspired fantasies which pervade popular culture, *Call Girls* places the world of the sex worker within social, political and legal contexts which will surprise and change the preconceived notions of many readers.

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