



EQUALITY SIGNS

ISSUE 10
SPRING 2021

ENG



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Bringing masculine and feminine together in an unusual way: the third gender together

I didn't intend to create a catalogue of freaks. I wanted to show that a third gender always was and still is an accepted, traditional, respected and valued element of the life of a community in many societies on all continents. These societies have developed specific paths to adulthood and modes of functioning for those people who don't fit into the narrow, dual, binary gender division that we're accustomed to.

- Waldemar Kuligowski talks about his captivating and great looking book "The world's third gender".

How did you choose the examples of a third gender that you write about in your book?

I'm an academic, a cultural anthropologist. Studying cultural diversity is my bread and butter. I've noticed in Poland, particularly in recent years, a considerable lack of scholarly knowledge, supported by research, concerning the phenomenon of the third gender, or people who are seen by themselves and by the societies they come from as neither men, nor women. My aim was, at least in part, to fill this gap. I was aware that an academic book that's difficult to read wasn't necessarily the way forward. So I wrote a book which is a collection of short "films" that show thirteen examples of the third gender from all over the world. But I'm sure I haven't exhausted the topic.

It was important for me to present people who are our contemporaries so that we can compare ourselves to them. I described ordinary people in ordinary societies. It wasn't my intention to create something like a "catalogue of freaks". Marianna Sztyma's illustrations play a significant role in the book. They're not merely decoration, she uses certain motives, gestures and elements of dress

brilliantly. Her illustrations have a documentary function.

But you don't always refer exclusively to contemporary examples

A departure from this book's focus on the present is represented by the part that describes the phenomenon of a third gender in Polynesia. Long ago, people who combined both male and female traits were called *māhū*. The artist Paul Gauguin was fascinated by them. When he arrived in Polynesia in 1891 he started painting the inhabitants. Today we have no doubt that it's precisely *māhū* figures that many of his paintings immortalise. This is suggested by their build and their ambiguous clothing. Interestingly, Gauguin himself was most probably seen by the Polynesians as a foreign *māhū*. Evidence for this is his long hair and rather unkempt, untypical clothing. A modern version of the traditional role of the *māhū* is played by people called *rae-rae*. These are biologically men but they use exclusively female names, and are present in large numbers in the tourist industry. They are praised everywhere for their friendliness and the high standard of the services they provide. Paradoxically, hotel guests in popular tourist destinations sometimes don't even realise that they're surrounded by staff made up of people who belong to the third gender.

Either way, modern *rae-rae* don't always see historical *māhū* people positively. This probably has something to do with the past. When white colonisers appeared in Hawaii, they were surprised by the fact that a third gender played a role in the society of the island. They tried to declass and marginalise them. A shameful role in this process was also played by missionaries. However, after a while the colonisers realised that members of the third gender didn't present a threat to them. Furthermore,

they came to appreciate the attributes of the *māhū* and started to employ them as cooks, childminders and laundresses. Some contemporary *rae-rae* see this process as having been some sort of collaboration with the occupier. From the perspective of the researcher this story is a mere a fragment of a broader issue, the essence of which concerns how members of the third gender were treated by the colonisers. The usual course of events was grim - they fell victim to brutal repressions or were simply murdered. Early 17th century engravings from Central America have survived that show these people being mauled to death by dogs that belonged to the conquerors. For this reason, the recent return to the third gender, for example *two-spirit* in the indigenous communities of North America, is an expression of rebellion against colonisation and "white" power. It has almost risen to the rank of identity through resistance.

Stepping away from the question of resistance, don't you get the impression that the book suggests that third-gender people are often associated with the world of art, culture and leisure?

That is indeed typical. In the introduction to the book I even ventured the claim that in the case of third-gender people we are dealing with a "bohemian gender". Very many things, both traditional and contemporary, that these people do are connected to the arts, for example they're fantastic singers, dancers and poets. They're also involved in care, whether this be for tourists or for children. Other roles performed by third-gender people include leaders, healers, shamans and intertribal mediators. In these societies it is clear that people who combine both male and female characteristics are equipped with an element of extraordinariness and that it is worth allowing

them to develop freely because this can help society to gain something. In most instances this really is the case.

It's intriguing that the majority of these examples make reference to a harmonious co-existence between third-gender people and the rest of society. Is this impression incorrect?

No, quite the opposite. It's a very accurate observation. This is one of the most important lessons that I wanted readers to learn from the book. As I've already said, I didn't intend to create a catalogue of freaks. I wanted to show that a third gender always was and still is an accepted, traditional, respected and valued element of the life of a community in many societies on all continents. These societies have developed specific paths to adulthood and modes of functioning for those people who don't fit into the narrow, dual, binary gender division that we're accustomed to. So I tried to write a lot about everyday life, to show these people working in hairdressing salons, for airlines, or welcoming newlyweds at hotels. Most often the fact of their existence doesn't excite negative emotions. The societies I describe know that these people exist and have an understanding of how to behave towards them. This is something lightyears away from what we currently have in Poland. Here people who belong to the third gender are associated with sin, depravity, illness, perversion, with something that's generally considered abnormal. In the societies that I describe in the book, the third gender remains something normal, acceptable and belongs to a tradition that everyone is trying to preserve as a shared asset.

The next thing that draws our attention is the fact that in this book there are no descriptions of gender dysphoria, which is understood in psychology as prolonged suffering and discomfort that stem from the discrepancy between the gender assigned at birth and one's sense of gender. Do you think that society's acceptance may be the reason why, for example, third-gender people in Polynesia don't experience these issues?

If there's no tension, there's no conflict. If we're accepted, we don't cause moral panic, no one points at us, no one fears us - so there's no reason for us to feel bad. Of course, like everyone else who belongs to society, we can be

more or less friendly, smart or chatty, but who we are in terms of our gender doesn't determine how we are perceived. In such a situation life's definitely simpler.

How do you think modernity, globalisation and mass culture are influencing members of the third gender in these corners of the world?

This isn't a simple question. People who identify with the third gender very often talk about how people's perception of their identity has been distorted by the proliferation of gay men and lesbians in the media and pop culture. They suggest that people have begun to look at them exclusively through the prism of their sexuality and don't consider what they're like as people. People have started to place an equals sign between third-gender people and gays and lesbians.

Many acts of discrimination can be linked to the expansion of pop culture. What usually happens is tradition becomes something that stands in opposition to modernity; whether in North America, mentioned earlier, or Indonesia or Sulawesi, it appears as a manifestation of an unmistakable return to the past, to that which people want to preserve, to cultural heritage. In this context globalisation seems to be a continuation of colonisation.

Here it's worth mentioning the example of the Bugis people from Sulawesi and the metagender *bissu*. Members of this gender not only straddled the borderline between genders, but also played the role of spiritual leaders. For

a long time colonial powers subjected them to repression and even murdered them. Now the Bugis community is trying, in a civil way, to resurrect this dying social role.

The last important problem worth mentioning is the fact that because of ignorance third-gender people are often portrayed in a caricatured manner. As "something" that is supposed to draw the attention of tourists – travelling to Thailand, for example who after photographing a person create a rather unsuccessful meme.

Regarding tourism and the images of trips to hot countries, what's striking in the book is the large number of societies that inhabit countries with a warm climate. Do you think this is a factor that influences society's attitude to people of the third gender?

I definitely warn against thinking in categories of climatic determinism. Such attempts were undertaken in the 19th century, when, for example, people wondered why love poetry developed in hot countries, but not cold ones. Scholars knew the poetry of the Troubadours and the Cathars well, but they knew nothing about the poetry of the Inuits of the Arctic Circle. It turned out that this type of research didn't lead to any intelligent conclusions. It's true that my book doesn't consider a balanced range of climates, but apart from the examples described in it we know of instances of third-gender people among the aboriginal communities of Siberia. There they were often shamans. The situation in northern Canada was similar.

We can see from the examples you've given that in these societies, possessing attributes of different genders is often associated with something sacred and supernatural. Does this phenomenon only occur in these societies?

In very many cultures the third gender was indeed associated with being closer to *sacrum*. The belief dominated that there must have been some sort of wonderful divine intervention that resulted in a person who combines attributes of different genders. However, many things suggest that this could be a supracultural rule. Let's look at how priests and people in monastic communities function in our culture. These are people who reject the "normal" way of life of adult women and men. Firstly, they give up sexual contacts and having children. Secondly, they refrain from having family. They also dress in a highly significant way – Catholic priests wear long robes, which are essentially just as feminine as they are masculine. In order to get closer to the world of *sacrum*, we must turn our backs on the world of *profanum* and reject its normal rules. Being a priest essentially means functioning within a certain specific cultural gender associated with unusual rules. In summary, there is a certain supracultural rule that says that if we want to come closer to the world of *sacrum*, we must distance ourselves from the sphere of *profanum* and its rules.

Referring to the sphere of sacrum, one immediately thinks of the words of an inhabitant of Oman that you

quote: "See how Allah created your hand. He gave you five fingers, and each of them is a little different... It's similar with people, everyone is different".

Exactly. The more diversity, the better people's wellbeing. I'm reminded of an argument put forward by biologists who suggest that the worst and most vulnerable environment model is the monoculture, in which plants of the same species are cultivated in one place. In such conditions the appearance of a pest which is harmful for the species immediately destroys the whole biotope. It's similar with culture and society. It's best when different "species" are mixed in suitable proportions. I believe that it is then that both the biological and human oecumene have the best chances.

Waldemar Kuligowski spoke to Mateusz Gędzba

The book "The world's third gender" written by Waldemar Kuligowski, illustrations and graphic design by Marianna Sztyma, is published by Wydawnictwo Albus (2020).



Language, genders, identities

It's generally known that Polish isn't the easiest language and doesn't always seem to be flexible enough to allow us to say everything that comes into our heads. It's even more difficult to use it to describe the diversity of the world that we perceive. A world in which gender is not just one of two options, rather it's a particular spectrum of colours, like a rainbow. A world in which a question about the number of genders seems as paradoxical as a question about the number of colours.

Many people have to face the difficulties of describing this world. Waldemar Kuligowski – the author of the book *The world's third gender* – and Mateusz Gędzba from the Equals Signs Federation have also grappled with them. The interview above is a written version of a conversation about the book, which in addition to receiving enthusiastic reactions, has also been the trigger of a wide-ranging and sometimes critical discussion about how to speak and write about gender diversity, so that the discourse doesn't exclude anyone and isn't understood in the wrong way by anyone. To Waldemar and Mateusz's aid came Wit Kania from the Equals Signs Federation's counselling team, who led the first training session on inclusive language in the history of the organisation.

Our three heroes valiantly tackled the difficult topic of terminology and nuances of meaning connected with the English origin of many expressions.

- The participants learnt about the relationship between the scope of the expressions "transgender people" and "non-binary" people.
- The next interesting topic was the issue of pronouns. Here Waldemar, Mateusz and Wit were assisted by such interesting sources of knowledge as the website www.zaimki.pl and a Facebook group called Empathetic Dictionary of Polish (Słownik Empatyczny Języka Polskiego).

Wit gave a very interesting description of how you can understand the phrase third gender itself.

- Some people understand it as something pejorative, as an indirect suggestion that there are men, women and "weirdos". Here one is immediately reminded of Karren Walker from the cult LGBT+ comedy series 'Will and Grace', who sometimes started speaking using the formula 'Ladies, Gentlemen and Undecided'.
- On the other hand, the formulation "third gender" certainly need not have a negative meaning. Sometimes it can be used to drive a wedge into the existing binary understanding of gender and to show that this issue really isn't so simple and binary after all, as it seems to be to many people.

It's precisely such a wedge that the author of *The world's third gender* has in mind. The intention of the book is to draw the attention of so-called main-

-stream media consumers to its message concerning socially acceptable gender diversity and to encourage reflection on this topic. Looking at reactions to the book's publication, it seems that the seed that has been sown is sprouting. We all hope that the effects of this will one day make all of us happy.

The ABC of diversity

The letters of the acronym LGBT+ refer to different identities and experiences. A society that is diverse in terms of gender and sexuality deserves to be spoken about appropriately. We hope the modest glossary of terms below will serve you and your friends as a handy guide to the key terminology concerning gender and sexual diversity.

The glossary below consists of snippets of educational materials prepared by Wit Kania and used in the Federation's training session on 'the third gender'. If you want us to lead similar training sessions in your company or organisation, send us an email to: kontakt@znakirownosci.org.pl

The psychological and cultural aspects of gender

Metrical gender / assigned gender at birth (AGAB) – one's gender designation (male, female, in some countries there is a third option 'X'). This is determined by a doctor on the basis of the appearance of the newborn's external sexual organs. It's not a synonym of biological gender because biological gender is made up of many features that can exhibit a high degree of variation, e.g. genetic make-up, the presence of ovaries, testicles or ovotestis (mixed gonads – some people have both testicles and ovaries), the appearance of the external sexual organs, the relationship between hormones, the enzymes used by certain metabolic systems.

- AFAB (*assigned female at birth*)
- AMAB (*assigned male at birth*)

Gender identity – the most important aspect of gender. It concerns how a person experiences their gender and what gender category they feel they belong to (men, women, to more than one, and others)

Gender expression – how a person expresses their gender identity on the outside, e.g. through dress and behaviour. It's linked to how a person's culture of origin defines the standards of gender expression for the various genders. It's worth remembering that, for various reasons, not everyone has the opportunity to express themselves in accordance with their own needs.

Gender role – this is linked to how we act and what behaviours we adopt in society. It arises from cultural standards related to norms that dictate how people of a particular gender 'should' behave.

The ABC of gender diversity

Transgender people – their gender identity differs from that assigned at birth. Transgender men and women are **binary people** (because they feel that they belong exclusively to one gender or the other).

Cisgender people – their gender identity is the same as that assigned at birth.

Non-binary people – their gender identity is different from that assigned at birth. Furthermore, their experience of gender is not unambiguously female or male (that's why we call them non-binary, they fall outside the division into two categories). These people may feel that they belong to more than one gender category at the same time, their identity can be fluid, they may not feel that they belong to any category at all, or may not feel the need to define their own identity (and many other options!).

Non-binary – an umbrella term that covers various categories.

- The gender identity of a non-binary person differs from that assigned at birth.
- The term non-binary defines gender identities outside the binary division into identities that are unambiguously male or female.
- Some non-binary people prefer not to be called transgender!



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