

ON TRANSVESTISM

M.-G. Lily Stylianoudi

I first became interested in gender and gender transgression when I encountered the cult of the demons "Zar" while studying the legal history and society of Ethiopia. This cult requires its followers to be possessed by one of the demons, and during the period of the possession the person wears the attire of the demon, has the attitudes and habits specific to it and professes all the wrongdoings of individuals, or of the current social situation, however, the possessed one is well fed and taken care of by the whole community. This is mostly a feminine cult and it is taken up by women when they wish to publicly voice opinions which ordinarily, because of their role and status, they would not be allowed to. As can be easily understood, the demons are males and some of them are fierce warriors so that the possessed woman is allowed to carry weapons or any other "male" attributes characteristic of the demon.

In 1989 I was invited to see a show where all the female roles were played by very beautiful young men. I was mystified by the sight of the actors (or shall I say actresses?) where the boundaries between maleness and femaleness were very slight, and I became very interested in this phenomenon which in a way reminded me of the notion of the "androgynous" which I recall it from my Greek studies. My research started around that time in 1989 in Athens (Greece), and I am still gathering material by visiting bars, discos, etc., following some of the activities of the 'travestis' (a term designating the Greek transvestites) such as beauty contests, music festivals, etc. and by discussions with people. My first attempts to organize material which, by its nature, is very delicate and very disconcerting (although from another point of view very thrilling for an anthropologist) were guided by the material itself, the language (the Greek transvestite jargon possess an extended vocabulary of 3,000 words, Petropoulos 1993), expression (both verbal and non-verbal) and theatricality (Stylianoudi 1991). Now I am focusing on the body, the body not only being the mediator, the "boundary" between the inner and the outer self, but also the transcript of the signs of the social symptom.

In this paper I shall start by trying to give an overall view of the terms which are connected with the subject of transvestism; bearing in mind always that definitions may be the result of or may result in stereotypes. I shall continue with the case of the Greek "travestis" and try to give an interpretation within the context of the Greek culture.

Terms and definitions

The term transvestism (SMP 1962) refers to dressing as a member of the opposite sex. It derives from the latin trans = cross and vest=dressing. Thus, *cross -dressing* is the global neutral term for all wearing of clothes of the opposite sex, once or habitually. It may be done by a variety of people for a variety of reasons, with or without sexual stimulation resulting from doing so, and of whatever sexual orientation.

Transvestism is a sexual or emotional relief, or both, from dressing in the clothing of the opposite sex. The major factor is that the individual does not feel or believe he belongs to the opposite sex, nor does he have the desire to do so. Usually the person keeps a collection of women's clothes that he uses to cross-dress when alone. He is often or usually fetishistic, ranging from the male who will occasionally wear some female articles to the other extreme where he will dress completely as a female constantly.

Transsexualism has to be clearly distinguished from homosexuality and transvestism, with which it is often confused. Homosexuals and transvestites maintain their own sex-role identity and their only difference is that of the sexual orientation to the same sex for the homosexual, and that of the predilection for dressing as the opposite sex for the transvestite. Transsexualism is a gender identity disorientation in which the person feels he is of the opposite sex, and wants to be. Sometimes he/she undergoes a surgical procedure known as a sex reassignment or conversion to accomplish such a change. A transsexual usually reports the feeling of being in the wrong body from earliest memory and wishes to be, or sincerely believes that he/she is, a member of the opposite sex. Some males say that they have always felt themselves to be women in male bodies and they trace these feelings to their early childhood. As Jan Morris (1975) writes: "To me gender is not physical at all, but is altogether insubstantial. It is soul perhaps... it is how one feels... it is more truly life and love than any other combination of genitals, ovaries and hormones. It is the essentialness of oneself, the psyche, the fragment of unity. Male and female are sex, masculine and feminine are gender..." Jan Morris was born and raised as a male, had got married and fathered children although she was convinced she was a girl from early childhood. She

began dressing and living as a woman when an adult and at the age of 46 she underwent a sex reassignment operation. As she reports, she has developed a close friendship with her former wife and a good "auntie" relationship with her children.

Transexualists usually complain of being uncomfortable in the clothes of their own anatomical sex, and this frequently leads to cross-dressing. They often engage in activities that in a given culture are associated with the other sex. Very often such individuals will deny that their behaviour is homosexual because of their conviction that they are "really" of the other sex. With cross-dressing, hormonal treatment and electrolysis, some males appear relatively indistinguishable from members of the other sex. It is interesting to note (Garber 1992) that till very recently transvestism or transsexualism were primarily attributed to the male population, a fact which may have its explanation in a male biased western culture.

Wearing drag refers to male (drag queens) and female (the "butch") homosexuals who like to wear the clothing of the opposite sex but do not depend on it for sexual excitement; often it is for exaggeration or spoofing. These practices are basically caricatures of masculinity and femininity.

Another aspect of cross-dressing is when transsexuals go through a stage of cross-dressing in the process of becoming women. Also included are female impersonators who are men dressed up as women (or vice versa), as part of their jobs as entertainers. And, finally, some - perhaps many - adolescent boys cross-dress usually once or a few times. This behaviour does not necessarily mean a life of transvestism: it may simply reflect the sexual drives, confusions and frustrations of adolescence.

Gender role inversion. Most cultures have clear expectations of what males and females should do, and these expectations begin at birth and continue through schooling. Inversion is the acting out of the opposite gender's role, which may entail wearing their clothes. Contrary to a transsexual, a gender role invert accepts his or her body but wishes to experience the other gender's social reality in a psychological-cultural sense. Men and women in Gondar (Ethiopia) for example, become possessed by female or male spirits respectively (or fake possession) and assume their clothing and attributes, and are able to act as women or men (Leiris 1958). Although in this case one might argue that this is a socially prescribed and accepted way of gender role inversion serving special purposes, nevertheless, the fact remains that it is often used individually and for individual purposes.

Homosexuality. As already mentioned transvestite phenomena range from occasional solitary wearing of female clothes to extensive

involvement in a transvestite subculture. Some men wear a single item of feminine clothing (e.g. underwear) under their masculine attire. When more than one article of women's clothing are involved, the man may wear makeup and dress entirely as a woman. The degree to which he appears to be a woman varies depending also on body mannerisms and skill. Although the basic preference is heterosexual, he may be engaged in occasional homosexual acts.

Thus we arrive at another term linked with the transvestite phenomenon, that of homosexuality, considered as deviant sexual behaviour which involves supportive social structures either for the purpose of entry into the system of behaviour or for the maintenance of the individual in that behaviour. This type of behaviour comprises prostitution as well. It has often been the case in my research that transvestism, homosexuality and prostitution intermingled. It is not my concern here to discuss the origins and causes of homosexuality. I shall consider though the conscious acceptance of one's homosexuality to be the turning point from which the search for sexual partners begins. This search usually requires entry into the world of homosexual bars, development of the slang of homosexual life and gradual learning about the modes of approach and retreat that are related to the satisfaction of sexual needs. It is the process of adult socialisation that is involved in the development of the homosexual commitment.

Research on homosexuality is of major significance for the light it throws on the relations between social structure and cultural norms, and the patterns of human sexuality, on normal and abnormal personality, in masculinity and femininity, as well as on social deviance and deviant subcultures. In questions of masculinity and femininity an aspect which has been studied is that of the active-passive roles in sex. Two new terms are now applied; the "insertee" and the "insertor" (SMP, 1962). These two terms are now also applied by social anthropologists as, for instance, by Herdt in his book *Hall of Mirrors: Ritualized Homosexuality in Melanesia*, which leads us to ethnographic accounts of homosexuality. I shall cite some examples, as reported by E. Hooker (1968) from a survey of studies of sexual behaviour in 190 societies (Ford et al., 1951). According to this report, there are societies where homosexuality is regarded as normal or socially acceptable and even encouraged for at least some classes of individuals. In some cultures, such as those of the Siberian Chukchee, the institutionalised role of shaman is provided for adult male homosexuals. These men adopt feminine dress, activities, mannerisms, become "wives" of other men and assume the "female" role in anal intercourse. Their social status may be high.

Male homosexuality in some societies, such as those of the Keraki, the Kiwai, the Iatmul, the Hua or the Fore of New Guinea is an institutionalized feature of puberty rites. Thus, all males must engage in homosexual practices, either as initiates in the insertee role in anal intercourse or as married or unmarried males who perform the insertor role. Such practices are believed to be essential for male growth and strength.

It has also been reported that all men and boys among the Siwans of northeast Africa engage in homosexual practices; married and unmarried males have homosexual and heterosexual liaisons.

In societies in which homosexuality was said to be rare, specific social pressure was directed against it. Condemnation and penalties ranged from ridicule to threat of death.

Some societies also report female homosexuality, but it seems that it is highly probable that females (Garber 1992) are less likely than males to engage in homosexual practices.

Homosexuality as a subculture. Whether or not a homosexual community forms a subculture is a debate in modern theories concerning culture and subcultures (Astrinakis, 1991). Thus the homosexual community is considered nowadays as an active social group (minority group), exercising influence and pressure, winning battles (legal acquisitions, social welfare, marital status, etc.). Within this group, different kinds of subcultures (from mild subcultures to very hard ones) may appear. It is debatable whether homosexual communities in modern urban centers are formed because of collective reactions to legal pressures or social stigma. One of the theories (Goffman 1963) is that deviant as well as conforming behaviour is learned in interaction with others, and it cannot be understood without reference to the societal reactions it invokes. Male homosexual communities develop on a sizeable scale only in modern industrialized societies. These communities are made up of constantly changing groups of persons who are loosely linked by friendship and sexual interests in an extended and overlapping series of networks.

Community gathering places are centers from which information is transmitted concerning social occasions for homosexuals, attitudes and organized activities. Some sectors of these networks, bars, taverns, or private clubs are informally institutionalized as homo-territory. These places provide opportunities for the initiation of sexual contact and for an in-group social life (McDonogh 1992). A standardized and essential feature of interaction in bars, baths, streets and parks is the expectation that sex can be had without obligation or commitment. Sexuality is separated from emotional and social life, but in other sectors sexuality is integrated in the emotional,

personal and social patterns of individuals who establish relatively stable and long-lasting relationships.

Ending this introduction, I would like to add that during the last twenty years, a new, radical interdisciplinary perspective on the meaning of sexual behaviour and sexual identity has emerged. Sociologists (sociology has played an important early role), anthropologists, historians, psychologists and, more recently, constructionists have contributed to this endeavour, but, unfortunately this article is not the place to list all these studies. In a recent article (Epstein 1991), an interesting approach is made to the subject of sexuality and identity by using a combination of sociological, psycho-analytical and constructionist theories. Terms such as homosexuals and heterosexuals, which were taken for granted, are now considered more or less as culturally constructed labels, and it is as such that they have to be understood in relation to other social institutions.

Transvestism and the Greek “travestis”

It is essential I think to stress once more the significance of interpreting a social phenomenon within the framework of and in interaction with the culture in which it has been produced. For our subject, although the act or the actors can be freely translated in English as transvestism or transvestites, these terms, nevertheless, convey on closer inspection a very specific meaning in Greek. So, although the Greek term “travesti” is derived from “transvestism”, Greek “travestis” are in fact transexualists. From the signification point of view, the stress is on the body, the body seen not only as a collection of organs and functions linked and functioning according to the laws of anatomy and physiology but also as a symbolic structure (Garber, 1992). The body is at the same time a map of pleasure and power where along with the passive/active dimension, there is also a configuration of sex/power that “renders certain organs and roles ‘active’, other body passages and roles ‘passive’, and assigns honour/shame and status/stigma accordingly.” (Lancaster, 1988: 123).

The body is socially and culturally imprinted within infinitely variable limits. From one culture to the other, it is a changing reality. In our societies based on the individual who is relatively autonomous with regard to his choices and interaction with the others, isolated from nature, well locked in his/her body, it is this body which is the “factor of individuation” (facteur d’individuation). This body which identifies the individual is an “interruptor “ (interrupteur), permits the affirmation of individual difference, and emphasizes this differ-

ence with an "I" (*je*). In our societies the individual is shut in his feeling of identity, delimited by his body (Le Breton 1991).

The image of his/her body a person has is influenced by a series of representations imposed on him/her in his/her life by all sorts of information which largely bypass his/her knowledge and which enforce him/her to form instead of an integrated and harmonious image a scattered, jigsaw image of the body. The efficiency of this image is that it permits the individual to be a part within a vision of the world collectively admitted.

In the case of the "travesti", the body is not only what she wants it to be, but also a vehicle of signification. We can seek this signification if we consider and try to read the body as a "text". As such, it portends, on another connotation level, the dichotomy detected in the Greek culture (or maybe splitting is a better term to describe this phenomenon), which appears in different situations: in language it appears as "diglossia" for instance (Frangoudaki 1992), or in gender ideology clearly opposing man and woman (Du Boulay 1986:140). Gender ideology may have some "complementary oppositions (especially honor/shame, men/women, public/domestic)" (Herzfeld 1986). The dichotomy may also appear as national culture vs local culture and so forth. I would agree with Herzfeld though (1986:218) that all these patterns (which are expressions of this dichotomy) in the Greek society must be addressed with the term of "disemia" rather than the term of dichotomy. It is under the term of disemia that I perceive the meaning and symbolism of the travesti's body in Greece, as a "facet of a more general rhetoric of concealment and display".

The body of the 'travesti' has two distinct features: male genitalia and female breasts (nothing new here compared with the rest of the world). Very few of them undergo sex reassignment surgery in order to become full women but many, if not all of them, dream of having female breasts and by aesthetic surgery and hormone therapy they acquire this symbol of femininity. The body of the 'travesti', this androgyne, is first of all the body of a hermaphrodite, the hermaphrodite par excellence (and where if not in Greece can we claim this attribute as an ideal of perfection and wholeness; Delcourt 1958), is the designator of what they say they are: a woman in a man's body, hence the embodiment of perfection.

The gender identity is defined by culture. Maleness and femaleness is but a series of characteristics, roles and attitudes channelled through family and education. The male and female individuals are two distinct and complementary entities well defined in and by their bodies and their role in society. A man or a woman is a man or a woman, he or she feels like one and acts according to the norms of the

society. He or she is “whole”, well defined and “complete” (all these prerogatives in the sense that he/she feels and behaves the way he/she is expected to). But a woman in a man’s body is a human “monstrosity” (‘teras, pedi mou, teras’ = a monster, my dear, a monster). It is worthwhile noting that the Greek word “teras” (meaning monster) was a divine sign prophesying the will of the gods, or their presence. It also meant someone born with or under a divine sign, not obligingly with a bodily deformity as the term is usually applied these days. In this “monstrosity” is there a feeling of “incompleteness”, of “unwholesomeness” or is it exactly the opposite? What is the meaning of this “monstrosity”? Should we understand this term as it is usually applied nowadays or should we understand it as some kind of ‘divineness’? There is a very strong contradiction: how can it be a woman in a man’s body? - a ‘mistake’ of the nature as the ‘travestis’ repeat. One of them characteristically said: “ego, chrysson mou, gennithica me tis goves” (= I, my dear, was born with my high heels on).

This “monstrous” (please, note the ambiguity of the way the term is applied) character has to be shown somehow. If you feel like a woman and you are in a man’s body, this contradiction –or should I say this complementarity– between the inner and the outer self, the in and the out of the body, must somehow manifest itself clearly. If you are androgynous, it has to be shown somehow. Hence the male genitalia and female breasts. Being androgynous is in fact being “complete”, being “perfect”, in the real sense of the word. Not only do they represent the perfect being (do not forget Plato’s *Symposium* and the presentation of the myth of the androgyne) but they also transcribe in their body, they express through their body, another type of the disemia cited above. But here also lies the contradiction with social norms and definitions regarding maleness and femaleness: the travesti wholeness, their “completeness” is something which cannot be assigned to the social norms; regarded from the point of view of the “others” it might be considered as a deformity (“monstrosity”) or even as “evil”, evil here defined as a physical deformity or a physical “incompleteness” (Parkin 1985). In the travesti’s context, this deformity by a reversal of meaning and symbolic representation becomes “whole” and “divine” (As I understand it and from my point of view there is ambiguity in the way they apply the terms and there is disemia in the meanings of the terms applied, which from an interpretative point of view enforces Herzfeld’s argument).

Another aspect of this complementarity (this wholeness) is the relation between their attire and their behaviour which expresses the relation between the inner and the outer part of the self. Their clothes are feminine clothes and very provocative ones: mini skirts, low

decolletages showing off their breasts, long hair (they usually grow their own hair), lots of jewellery, etc. The outcome is of something very shiny, lots of glitter, shiny material and tissue, golden tresses, etc. Although the clothes are very provocative and in some cases very "kitsch", their behaviour is very conservative and reserved. They do not gesture with their hands, they are well behaved and almost shy and their voices (usually husky and low) does not have the intonations one can in certain cases detect in homosexuals. So here again we are confronted with the same complementarity between the inner self, the female part, expressed in the outfit, (out of the body), and the outer self, the male part, expressed in behaviour (in the body).

It is apparent, I believe, that soul and body, inner self and outer self, in and out of the body, body expression and self expression, intermingle and co-exist giving meaning to this complementary bipolarity, male/female, which finds its full meaning in the body and the presentation of the body of the travesti.

As shown here the body of the Greek travesti is the designator, the transcript, of the main code of Greek culture which is characterized by "disemia": it is the embodiment of the synthesis of the two poles of the disemic contradiction.

Bibliography

- Astrinakis, A., 1991: *Youth Subcultures. Deviant Subcultures of the Working Class Youth*. The British Conception and the Greek Experience. Athens: Papazissis (in Greek)
- Delcourt, M., 1958: *Hermaphrodite. Mythes et Rites de la Bisexualité dans l'Antiquité Classique*, Paris:P.U.F.
- Dubish, Jill (ed.), 1986: *Gender and Power in rural Greece*. Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Du Boulet, Juliet, 1986: *Women-Images of Their Nature and Destiny in Rural Greece*, in Dubisch (ed.), 1986: 139-168
- Epstein, Steven, 1991: Sexuality and Identity: The contribution of object relations theory to a constructionist sociology, in *Theory and Society. Renewal and Critique in Social Theory*, Vol.20/6: 825-873
- Ford, Clelia S. and Franck A. Beach, 1951: *Patterns of Sexual Behaviour*. N.Y.: Harper
- Frangoudaki, Anna, 1992: Diglossia and the present language situation in Greece: A sociological approach to the interpretation of Diglossia and some hypotheses on today's linguistic reality, in *Language in Society*, 21:365-381
- Garber, Marjorie, 1992: *Vested Interests. Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, N.Y. & London: Routledge
- Goffman, Irving, 1963: *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identities*, Englewoods Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall

- Herzfeld, Michael. 1986: Within and Without: The Category of "Female" in the Ethnography of Modern Greece, in Dubisch (ed.) 1986:215-233
- Hooker, E., 1968: Homosexuality in *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*.
- Lancaster, Roger N., 1988: Subject Honor and Object Shame: the Construction of male Homosexuality and Stigma in Nicaragua, in *Ethnology*, Vol. XXVII, 2:111-125
- Le Breton, David, 1991: Corps et Anthropologie: De l'Efficacité Symbolique, in *Diogene*, 153: 92-107
- Leiris, M., 1958: *La Possession et ses Aspects Théâtraux chez les Ethiopiens de Gondar*, Paris:Plon
- McDonogh, Gary Wray, 1992: Bars, Gender, and Virtue: Myth and Practice in Barcelona's Barrio Chino, in *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol.65:19-33.
- Morris, J., 1975: *Conundrum*, N.Y.:Signet
- Parkin, D., 1985 : Introduction, in *The Anthropology of Evil*, ed. D. Parkin, Oxford: B. Blackwell
- Petropoulos, E., 1993 (1971): *KALIARDA, an Etymological Dictionary of Greek Homosexuals' Slang*, Athens: Nefeli
- Society of Medical Psychotherapy*. 1962
- Stylianoudi, M.-G. Lily, 1991: The Theatrical Aspects of Evil, paper presented at the workshop on "The Cultural Constuction of Evil" at The Swedish Institute at Athens