Anthropology 404: Paradise Bent: Boys will be Girls in Samoa

Life in Samoa – Cinepic circa 1960

[1960 Narrator]: Among the many beautiful islands that dot the vast Pacific Ocean, Tau, in the Samoan group is one of the few that has remained relatively unchanged in spite of modern civilization. From early childhood the natives begin to cope with the forces of nature and are left to lead an idealic and a carefree life with few if any restriction.

[Narrator]: 30 years later when we arrived in Samoa, life was a bit different.

Woman is seen getting her under arms waxed as the specialist speaks to her about her waxing.

We learned that not everything is quite what it seems in Samoa.

Paradise Bent: Boys will be girls in Samoa

[Blondie]: I've got seven boys and eight girls and three of us are Fa'afafines

[Older woman with Blondie]: Blonde thinks he's a girl. As far as I'm concerned, when they go out at night, they can behave like girls. But here in our family, they are boys. They do the chores.

[Narrator]: Blondie was the first of many Fa'afafines we met. The word itself means in the manor of a woman, and we found these men playing out a whole range of feminine roles largely accepted by the community in which they life.

[Samoan Man 1]: This is my son. I was surprised when he began to wear his lava lava under his armpits. That was when we realized he's changed. He was starting to behave like a fa'afafine.

[Samoan Man 2]: I never thought my boy would be in this situation. But he's turned out to be an aunty.

[Fa'afafine Man 1]: I can do all the jobs that girls and women do. I'm also good at sewing. She understands what I am and she wants to look after me (referring to older woman). She's the only mother I have and I love her so much.

[Fa'afafine son of Agnes]: I have to do the cooking, laundry, washing, everything like the girl. And I just want to be with my mom all the time, just want to assist her with things around the home the chores that I do. Oh hello, this is my mother Agnes.

[Agnes]: I love my son, he's a good boy.

[Maxine]: When I was 5 years old, my mom starts to give me dresses and stuff like that. Being that my family only has two girls.

[Fa'afafine Man 3]: All my brothers and my sisters, they call me their sister. They don't call me a brother you know.

[**Dr. Jeanette Mageo]:** Well when I first went to Samoa I was teaching in a small college there and the president's secretary was a very tall, statuesque woman. Well after I had lived there for some months, someone told me that she was not a woman. And I could not believe it. And I mean after all she was the president's secretary. Well of course I saw what they meant and I began to see these people all over the place.

[Narrator]: I had first became intrigued by fa'afafines years ago when I was in Samoa on an assignment for UNISEV; now I was back with a film crew and the people we met started to teach us that there is a Samoan way of looking at the world.

[Tosi – Dancer & DJ]: I was raised up as a Fa'afafines and over here in Samoa you are very acceptable, as you are accepted as part of the community here in the country and I was raised up as a Fa'afafine or as a queen and when I went to school, it was so hard for me to wear the boys uniform because at the same time I really thought to myself as I was a real woman.

[Mishiee with her mother]: We have a family of 14 children. 8 of them are girls.

[Older Woman with Mishie]: No, 5 are girls, 9 are boys.

[Mishiee with her mother]: Oh 5 are girls and 9 are boys.

[Older Woman with Mishie]: Sorry mom is sick, she's got a stroke and we're trying to massage her.

[Mishie with her mother]: When I was a little kid I started to see myself as a female, the female being role models and see her comb her hair, wearing her lava lava up here, you know sweeping, cooking, ironing, washing; to me it was a role model and I took it up as an example for me. As I grew up I never thought of it as being an odd sort of character that I would be growing up and becoming older.

[Older Woman with Mishie]: It was no problem to be honest. It was no problem when he was growing up; he likes to have his hair growing, to have the long hair. And he likes staying in the house and doing all the house work and help out with mom and all what the girls do, he likes doing that.

[Mishie with her mother]: As a son more, I believe that with Fa'afines in the past, femininely but they did not have them in the respect that we have them as of now as drag queens. You know being put aside as a different sex. They were there as part of a family you know, they did the cooking they did most of the looking after the elderly; a lot of

caring for the little children in the family you know they had their own carved out in society in the past like we still have it now.

[**Dr. Jeanette Mageo]:** I was reading the missionary journals and reading 19th century sorts of things on Samoa and one of the things that was curious to me was, there were no reports of fa'afafines in these sort of sources. And I slowly realized for some reason, between contact or between the time when the missionaries arrived circa 1830 and the present, that there had been a great increase in transvestism and this was sort of the first question I had encountered on the subject, why had there been such a great increase in transvestism?

[Narrator]: Maybe the fa'afafines had always been there and some people simply hadn't noticed.

[**Dr. Tom Pollard**]: There's a little bit of controversy about whether there were fa'afafines before 1960, and I believe that there were and probably back for thousands of years. And Margret Mead is one example of an anthropologist who talked about boys and young men who are acting in the role of women. One of the boys she met in Samoa and she was there in 1926, named Sassi, was a feminine boy and did women work and liked to hang out with the women and the women liked him and accepted him as one of their own and we would call that person a fa'afafine today.

[Haci's Mother]: I never thought he'd be a fa'afafine. But when he grew up he was more like a girl. A girl rather than a boy.

[Haci – Farmer]: And you're quite happy, aren't you?

[Haci's Mother]: Yes, I am happy about it. He is very helpful with chores like sewing and washing. And he's also helpful in other ways, like with the cooking.

[Chief Vaasili Fiji]: I think I am very very humbled and very very proud that the fa'afafines as a community is well accepted in our community. Most of the families consider having a fa'afafine in the Samoan home as an asset. Because in the plantation they are men, in the house they are wonderful and great house keepers. So I was very interested in this issue. Especially I was brought up with quite a number of fa'afafines at home and in the village. One of my great uncles was a fa'afafine and this fa'afafine had played a great part in my own family, especially in the bringing of the family together. And this had also directed me to look at other fa'afafines.

[Blondie]: She had a fa'afafine uncle.

[Older woman with Blondie]: I had an uncle fa'afafine, the famous George Loke Fluen, he passed away a few years ago.

[Blondie]: That's her uncle fa'afafine.

[**Dr. Tom Pollard**]: Anthropologist Derek Freeman didn't record any use of the word fa'afafine and didn't hear about any fa'afafines when he was in Samoa in the 1940s, he said there were no fa'afafines that he could discover till the 1960s when the culture was drastically changed. But I'm positive there were fa'afafines in the 1940s and he just didn't notice them because they weren't as public as they are now.

[Narrator]: Professor Freeman did not want to participate in the film but Tanya who was raised as a fa'afafine in the 1940s, did.

[Tanya – Retired Dancer]: I think the percentages of fa'afafines in Samoa, is most of the family has about 2 or 3 in each family. You know it's growing very fast now.

[Friend of Tanya 1]: Are you playing tennis Tanya?

[Tanya – Retired Dancer]: It depends if she's putting me in, haha.

[Friend of Tanya 1]: Because everybody knows Tanya. And they're all scared of Tanya. Whenever she's around, she's the boss. She's a well-known young lady in town, and I don't mean it derogatory.

[Friend of Tanya 2]: When I was younger I only heard Tanya but I didn't know Tanya then. My older siblings, relatives, talk to me and they talk about Tanya the way she dances and the way she dresses but I never, shh, I'm being interviewed. But I never get to see her because you know I was to young, I wasn't allowed to go to those night clubs and places like that.

[Tanya]: I'm over 50 now, but I started, I guess dancing since I was 7 years old. I do all the solos, I was dancing with the girls because all my life I've been with the girls all the time, I dance like a girl, brought up like a girl.

[Tosi – Dancer & DJ]: Sometimes when we do things in school like traditional dancing and that, we do the dancing that the women do you know, and at the same time you were also a male and a female and schools. It's quite funny, but then from my own experience it was great.

Life in Samoa – Cinepic circa 1960

[1960 Narrator]: All south sea natives love to dance and the Samoans are certainly no exception. Unlike the Hawaiian hula, the motions convey little meaning or ideas. But are spontaneous expressions of the gayety and exuberates of a race of happy people.

[Narrator]: This US documentary was being made while Tanya was starring at Aggie Grey's hotel but the film never mentions fa'afafines.

[Tanya]: When I was dancing for Aggie's I was the only one doing all the different island dancing like Tahitian and Hawaiian Himalayan you know the lineup. I danced with Marlon Brando I showed him how to shake the hips to the Tahitian numbers.

[Tania Grey – Aggie Grey's grand-daughter]: She was the star of the show here, it was Tanya and grandma. She used to just dance there, you know get up there, she would be announced and away she goes. She just like did something to the audience, got them going, they were fascinated with her. So yeah, she was the star.

[Yuki – Designer]: Traditionally men are the entertainers within Samoa. But the fact that a fa'afafine possesses these two spirits of both sexes, I believe that it is part of their nature, or it is part of our nature to entertain. I think it is what comes naturally really. From my understanding in a pre-Christian time, the two sexes the owamana (sp?) and owaluma (sp?) were both totally strictly divided. The only people that were allowed to interact with the owamana and the owaluma were the fa'afafines. I believe that fa'afafine is a person that comes between two genders. A fa'afafine is a person who possesses two spirits of both genders.

[Cindy]: Hello how are you. Welcome, come in!

[Narrator]: Cindy performs at the Magreyta's Bar, they say she is the Tanya of the new generation.

[Cindy]: Everywhere I go I've always managed to you know, hook everybody. Hahahaha. Usually I tell them because I think it's only fair to tell them. I go out with them and once they ask me oh you know, to bed and I thought, 'oh something you should know. I'm not really what you think I am'. And it's so funny because sometimes men are so naïve you know they go 'you married' and I say, 'no...', 'you a virgin?', 'no...' haha, 'you have a boyfriend?', 'no...'. And then they go all through this and I keep saying no no no, and they go 'tell me!'...I tell them. And then they're sort of like, oh, mmm.

[Jacinta – Cindy's Manager]: The first time I saw Cindy when I was working at Aggie's. And I saw her, came in with a frilly skirt, and she went around like that and I said to the girls, gee what a good looking thing, what a pity that she is not a girl.

Cindy seems to be a niece to me. Always been good friends from the start. And when Cindy was in New Zealand for two years I rang her to come back, she came along and the show started. Just three of them, just Tosi, Blondie and her. She was very talented and I appreciate her and the rest of them.

[Narrator]: Watching the rehearsal is Peter, Cindy's boyfriend. Peter is from Australia in a posting to Samoa, he works for the Australian high commission.

I have this boyfriend, oh my god. I came back from New Zealand after the tour and I went to the office and I saw this shaved head guy in the office and I thought, 'ooh who is

that?' I wasn't even thinking about what I was doing at the office. I went home and I thought, he's nice looking and in the back of my head I was like 'oh I wish he will come to the show I hope he'll come to the show' and it was like half of the wishing, was praying, haha 'please Lord bring him to the show'. That was the Tuesday I met him then Wednesday, Thursday; he was the first one there at the show. And I went back to the dressing room and was like 'oh yes yes yes' haha that means he likes me!

[Narrator]: Cindy lives with Peter in the Australian high commission compound high on the hill overlooking the Samoan capitol.

[Blondie]: Oh she's a house wife now hahaha. She's changed. But nowadays she's staying home looking after Peter you know like a house wife, helping Peter do the washing, like a mother now haha. She's happy she's got someone you know that really loves her and protecting her.

Cindy and her friends are together on the beach reading the newspaper and talking about horoscopes.

[Cindy]: "You have no reason to be jealous of your faithful new love!" Ah! "At work, ask to be transferred to a new department." Hey, it said you should ask to be transferred to a new department.

[Tosi]: It's very nice to see them so close, it's very happy couple. And I believe they're in love and they love each other, which is good. Little things like that can always help it. And I'm so glad that she has finally decided to settle down. And I believe that she will settle down now for real.

[Cindy]: Hi auntie hahaha. Where have you been, we have to go and look all over the town for a blender

[Waxing Lady]: Why, why do you need blender?

[Cindy]: I'm on a fruit diet.

[Waxing Lady]: Why do you need a diet?

[Cindy]: Because I've gained weight, I've lost my waist.

[Waxing Lady]: When was the last time you had the waist?

[Cindy]: Haha, you're gonna tell me off.

[Waxing Lady]: Who is Peter anyway.

[Cindy]: Peter...

[Waxing Lady]: Are you now living with him?

[Cindy]: Yeah we are, ow! We now have a relationship.

[Waxing Lady]: And?

[Cindy]: And

[Waxing Lady]: Is he good in bed? Or who is doing all the work? Must be you who is doing all the work.

[Cindy]: Ow! I told him.

[Waxing Lady]: Oh you told him?

[Cindy]: I told him well, and he's really good now, ow!

[Tosi]: Cindy is a very popular person and she has a lot of talent I'm telling you and she is also a million dollar woman both on stage and off stage. And everyone just adores her, she has a beautiful personality as well. Hello?

[Jacinta]: I don't think Cindy ever traveled in town with a flat chest. Maybe when she was little but ever since I know her she was always like (gesturing to chest/breasts) like that. And she's always a female to me and she's 100% female then male. But according to her when you talk to her, she doesn't want an operation. She recons she can do it like that.

[Mishiee]: The way she would look, the way she would walk, what she would have on. How she would sing a song. I mean I say to myself, I wish I had the guts to go on and do what Cindy was doing, sing in public.

[**Dr. Jeanette Mageo]:** Attracting attention to yourself was very much part of the pre-Christian Samoan woman's role or the girls role which was delegitimized by Christianity. The missionaries came to Samoa and gradually over the course of the 19th century and the early 20ths century the girls sort of go off stage. The girls' role was then eventually taken over by the fa'afafines. And it's still okay for them in a way it's no longer okay for girls.

[Dr. Tom Pollard]: I think the influence of Western culture is profound in the fa'afafines. After the Christian missionaries came, women were forced to wear coverings of their breasts and regular dresses and in fact they even banned the flowered lei because they thought that was too sexual. So it really made an influence on the way that women and men behaved and dressed after the coming of the missionaries.

[Tanya]: In Samoa, it's a very good place for a fa'afafine to be brought up you know. Even the religion wise, you know you go to church almost every Sunday, the minister

and the pastor accept what I am. You dress as a woman to go to church, as long as you go to church; they don't care what you are, what you wear but as long as you go to church, you know.

[Andy/Angie – Sunday School Teacher]: I've been teaching at Saint Theresa Parisn; I have no problems. And it's like they give all the responsibilities to the fa'afafines, because they know they can do a much better job. An advantage of being a fa'afafine in the Sunday school teaching, the qualities that I have, those of like a feminine mother and on the other side I can be hard as a harsh father. So there's a balance there, that I can utilize those qualities to better the learning of the students.

[Aiatia]: My name is Aiatia. We've come to spread the Word of God as we are called on to do in these times.

[Haci]: Yes, I belong to that religion. I'm a Mormon as well. But the trouble is, there's my smoking and drinking. But I'm still a Mormon. Because all my family are Mormons. I'm a hanky-panky Mormon.

[Narrator]: But in some parts of Samoan society things weren't quite so relaxed and accepting.

[Vini Peteru – Pastor's Wife]: In the church, in the families we just accept them as they are. We accept them as human beings. We have to accept them in church because that's Christian principles you know I mean love, regardless of what they are, we have to love them. I strongly oppose the fact that they've changed themselves to be fa'afafines because there's no such thing. I mean God made men and women. There was never, I mean fa'afafine was never made as a separate sex in God's eyes, they've changed the whole, you know, creation.

[Kaleka]: Everything is a calling. Perhaps God called me to look after the family. And I testify that only God knows everything. And let me tell you, I would never wear earrings, or paint my lips, or paint my fingernails. No, I refuse to, even though I'm a fa'afafine. If that's the way of other fa'afafine, it's up to them, and some have approached me, and I've told them they'd be better off dead than behaving like that.

[Chief Vaasili Fiji]: There are clear cuts of two types of fa'afafines existing in Samoa. The cultural fa'afafines and the new city kind of fa'afafines.

[Cindy]: They keep saying that I should tone it down and they think I'm too much. Well they've had their day.

[Tanya]: Cindy's very young, she's got a little bit of an attitude and I always lecture her, the only advice that I've been giving to her is don't over do it. If you want to be a lady, act like one.

[Cindy]: This is what we are, we are just a bunch of bitches. Bitching about other bitches. Hi Blondie, is Tanya coming tonight?

[Blondie]: Whose Tanya?

[Cindy]: Tanya!

[Blondie]: There are many Tanyas in town.

[Cindy]: Okay the old bag Tanya haha.

[Blondie]: Hahaha, the old lady.

[Cindy]: Yeah with the floppy boobs.

[Tanya]: I don't think I'll make it because I'm going to play bingo and I love gambling, that's me. Pass me my cigarettes over there.

Bingo!

[**Dr. Tom Pollard**]: I think the western culture has really transformed the fa'afafine culture in Samoa form what it was in the past to what it is today which is something that is very showy and very entertainment oriented and that's because in part of the western emphasis on individuality and creative self-expression and competition; the fa'afafines of today are in competition with each other, who is going to be the queen of all the fa'afafines? And I think that was unheard of in the ancient times.

[Narrator]: Chief Leutele is Tosi's uncle. He has noticed the westernizeation of the fa'afafine too.

[Chief Leutele M. Tupua]: The way that they act sometimes I don't like it. You know, the actions, I don't like it because I sure know that some of the fa'afafine they're wearing skirts around in the public; the skirt. But I don't like Tosi too; she's too much on the side that I hate. Because she's making up you know, a hairstyle and painting on himself.

[Narrator]: Mishiee, Haci and Angie from the Sunday school are all heading in to town for the big net ball game.

[Chief Leutele M. Tupua]: Doing the washing, that's why I like the fa'afafine just like there's another (?) at home, responsible for the washing, the kitchen utensils and the laundry and so forth and the ironing but it's alright. If a fa'afafine can be a fa'afafine but still don't wearing any clothes or anything that will make him more fa'afafine.

[Dr. Jeanette Mageo]: If you want to understand transvestism in Samoa you have to take a step back and you have to think about how gender is constituted in society and really how identity is constituted in societies. There are some societies that are egocentric in

orientation and there are others that are sociocentric. Egocentric sorts of societies, your identity is inside, you know it's that true inner self. In sociocentric societies identity is really based in a social role. But in a sociocentric society, gender is not something inner, gender too is a social role and so that means you know that men play one role and women play another role. If gender is just a role, well you can play your gender's role or you can play the other gender's role.

[Michelle – New mom]: Now this is the son. I adopted him when he was 3 months old, I adopted him fro my cousin. Well this is what I always wanted, I wanted a baby for over 10 years or more. And then I had the chance with my cousin, so I have everything legaled.

[Maxine – Michelle's fa'afafine cousin]: She can show to others, other fa'afafines here that you know, a fa'afafine can raise a child too. So I think that's a good idea for her to adopt Michael, and she really loves the baby.

[Michelle]: This is Maxine, she is my cousin. And she's here staying with us, helping out with the baby. I'm very sure he's going to call me 'mom'. I'll tell him what I am and what I want to be called. Would it confuse him? Haha, I don't think so.

[Basketball Coordinator]: All our coaches are fa'afafines and we've been training the girls in the last couple of months.

[Blondie]: She's playing now. Mishiee, GD. Mishiee, she's a very coordinated player you know she helps the girls a lot. She's very good, very good person. Very good personality and she's put on weight; she's put on weight haha.

[Tosi]: This is the sea wall and the sea wall is like a place where everyone meets after the clubs and that's where you see the queens and we get picked up on the sea wall a lot of times. Sea wall, getting a guy like that is very easy. I'm not saying that all majority of the men are gay but I have to say that it's just different. We can attract men just like that. I recon that some men are very strong and very well-built, and of course I like that but not all of them.

[Narrator]: What is the relationship with Samoan guys and the fa'afafines?

[Tosi]: The relationship with the Samoan guys, I have to say that some are sweet and some are not. Some they just want to do you just for one night and some they just want to let it go on until, for a period of time.

[Maxine]: If I put the percentage of men here that being with a fa'afafines, here in Samoa, it's like 99.7 and I'm telling you the truth.

[Friend of Cindy]: I think a lot of women know too, a lot of women know too.

[Cindy]: A lot of women know, they know for sure fa'afafines suck cock better than they do.

[Friend of Cindy]: Hahaha. That's all they ever do is suck cock, that's the problem.

[Cindy]: No, no there's a lots of things we do, huh Blondie? Don't you forget that out of the whole body there is more than one hole.

[Friend of Cindy]: I just heard they have four; I know there's two.

[Tosi]: In Samoa, of course we still classify ourselves as women. We don't call ourselves gays, there is no gay community in this country.

[Mishiee]: We only get to go out and look for straight men you know. And say, 'Hi darling, you know, how are you?' but never towards another gay because in Samoa, a gay friend would be like a sister to you.

[Tosi]: Queens living with queens. That's, I've never seen a queen sleeping with another queen in this country. I mean it's funny when people ask that to us you know ask those questions you know, 'oh do you sleep together? Do you make love with each other?' and I say, 'Oh please, you know, she's my friend she's actually like a sister to me, I would never do that'. It's just that it's so hard to explain how we, because we were brought up in Samoa, now Samoan way of life, it's very very strong. Even in other countries of the world, gay men sleep around, I mean they do sleep with each other but over here in Samoa, we don't do that. No we are very much attracted to straight males. But we don't sleep around with, imagine sleeping with another queen I mean, it won't give you any feelings at all, that won't make you horny or haha. Well of course I'm speaking on my own self because I've never slept with one before. And it's something that I would never want to do in my life.

[Cindy]: I haven't been with anybody else since I've been with Peter. I don't know what's wrong with my sex organs, it's not fancying anybody anymore.

I'm going to go in to class alright?

[Narrator]: Peter was starting to get nervous about being in the film. He was worried it might affect his position at the Australian high commission. The next day, Peter got some bad news.

[Cindy]: Apparently I have to move out of the house sometime tomorrow, and check back into my dressing room until the film crew leaves.

[Stranger]: Hello Cindy!

[Cindy]: Hello!

[Tosi]: Is she moving out? Why? Something that I have to find out. No she never said any word about it, not that I know of.

[Narrator]: That night, Cindy moved back into her dressing room at Magreyta's Bar.

[Cindy]: This is where I used to live and this is where I'm coming back believe it or no. That's my bed you're standing on. That's going to be my bed again. Now I'll have to make this place again a little home for me until you guys leave. They're trying to tell me it's not my sexuality that matters but what else, why else would they? If it wasn't my sexuality why would they – why would it even matter?

[Narrator]: One week later, peter was transferred back to Australia.

[Yuki – Designer]: If a fa'afafine like myself goes overseas not only am I confronted with conformity but also I am confronted with racism and homophobia. The western country is constantly analyzing and trying to define what the subject is, and then that sort of analyzing is quite a threat to the fa'afafine. Actually to label a fa'afafine gay, transvestites and transsexuals does not fit what a fa'afafine is.

[Mishiee]: I went to Australia on a free ticket that was from the pageant that I won, the (?) queen pageant and that was my prize, a free trip down to Sydney. And I've got a couple of queen friends down there who didn't tell me what it was like to be a queen down in Sydney. They said, when you walk in the streets you have to be very careful. So I said to myself, 'mm no, I don't think I belong there I belong home, I belong here'. This is the evening gown that I wore in 1984. See how far back it was? And this was my little belt that I used. If I were to try and put this back on again, ooh pretty embarrassing to be honest. Hahaha. Lala! Haha, see? See how big I've grown? Oh heavens, oh, it's so degrading it's so embarrassing.

[Narrator]: We went to see how Cindy was going in the dressing room.

[Cindy]: My life is miserable at the moment. Everything does not have a happy ending. Full stop.

[Narrator]: But the show had to go on. It was to be a fitting finale to our stay in Samoa. An event full of ambiguity and emotion. Now as we were leaving we were starting to see things the Samoan way. And we knew we were as close as we would get this time to understanding the complexities of life facing the fa'afafines in paradise. Blondie led the cast in the usual prayer. As usual for Cindy's show the house was packed but the mood backstage was a bit somber. Cindy was getting ready for the number everyone was waiting for.

Peter resigned from the Australian High Commission and returned to Samoa. He now lives with Cindy in her dressing room.