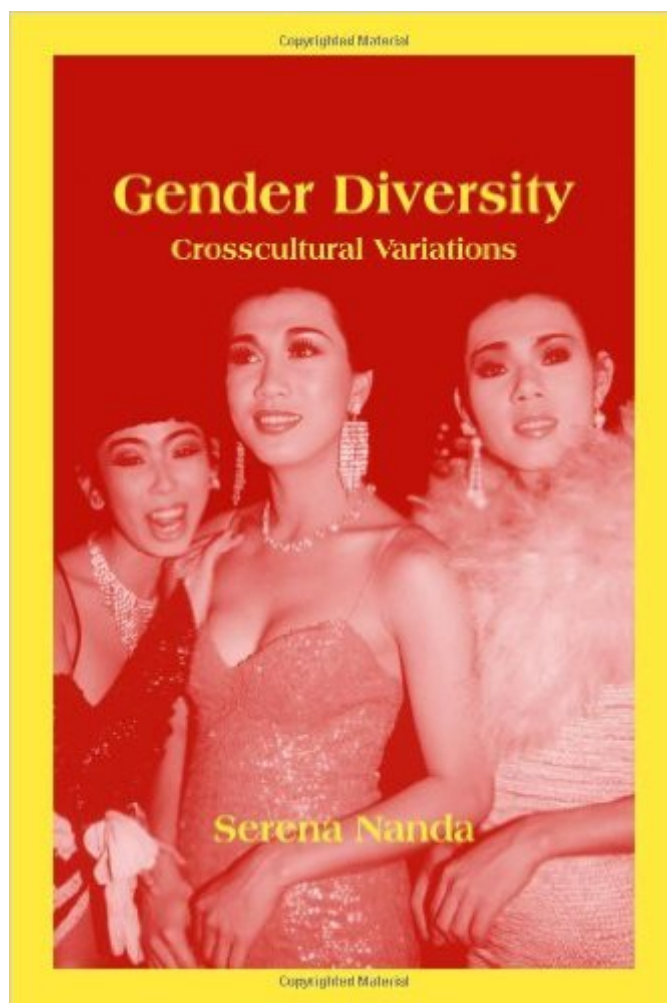


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# Gender Diversity: Crosscultural Variations



## Synopsis

How can we gain new understandings about sex, gender, and sexuality? What are the relationships between culture and gender diversity? How has the diffusion of Euro-American culture affected the sex/gender ideologies of non-European cultures? This eye-opening account of the differences in how sex/gender diversity is experienced in seven cultures raises our consciousness and challenges our intellectual understandings and attitudes about what we consider natural, normal, and morally right. Nanda's examples, which reveal the complexity of social responses toward sex/gender diversity, are ethnographically well documented and represent various geographical areas and sex/gender ideologies. In classic anthropological fashion, Nanda's text enables us to cross the barriers of cultural difference to a recognition of a greater shared humanity.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In this lean book, Serena Nanda uses ethnographic accounts to illustrate how diverse cultures construct their sex/gender systems. By doing so, she reveals that these systems are not always binary; male and female, man and woman. Her descriptions of masculinity and femininity in India, Brazil, Polynesia, Thailand, the Philippines, within some Native American tribes and in contemporary Euro-American cultures challenge what some believe is "natural" about gender and, by extension, sexuality. By presenting gender variations historically and as they are currently understood and displayed, Nanda reveals the social, historical and cultural forces that have created changes in these sex/gender systems. This engaging book has eight short chapters. The introductory chapter lays the foundation for Nanda's argument by defining key terms (e.g., gender

diversity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, transgendered, sex/gender identity, etc.) with which readers must be familiar to understand gender variation. Chapters 1 through 5 provide ethnographic accounts of multiple genders among North American Indians, the hijra and sadhin of India, the travestis, bichas, and viados of Brazil, the mahu in Polynesia, the kathoey of Thailand and the bayot/bantut/bakla in the Philippines. What some readers will find most interesting and provocative are accounts of how contact with Western cultures influenced existing gender constructs in these cultures. For example, North American Indian men who dressed like women, did "women's work" and were sexually intimate with other men were called "berdache" (an Arabic term for a male prostitute) and demeaned by early Spanish explorers on religious grounds.

Serena Nanda's short book (only about 100 pages) is an excellent introduction to the subject of "gender diversity". We get to know "berdaches" among North American Indians, a caste of emasculated transvestites in India, effeminate male transvestites and macho gay men in Thailand, and celibate women living like men in Albania. There are also chapters on the Philippines, Polynesia and the contemporary West. The section on the Western world is the shortest one, presumably to emphasize that "gender variants" aren't uniquely Western or modern. There are a few illustrations, including a photo of a transvestite Crow Indian warrior named Fins and Kills Them. The book ends with a bibliography and a list of movies about gender variants. I suspect Serena Nanda's intended audience are freshmen anthropology students, but "Gender Diversity" could be read by the general reader as well. However, I also have some criticism of this book. Nanda claims that gender diversity proves that binary thinking (male/female) isn't universal. I beg to disagree. Most of the gender variants described in her book presuppose an already established binary opposition between "male" and "female". Why else would the most common gender variant be a male wearing women's clothing? Why are such persons expected to do traditional women's work? Why do they establish sexual relations with other men, who don't cross-dress and hence act as typical males? Obviously because the whole point of the gender variants is to reinforce the dichotomy between "male" and "female" identities. Indeed, the transvestites described in the book don't look like a "third" sex or gender, despite Nanda's analysis. Rather, they simply look like a combination of the two main genders, men and women.

I read the original 2000 edition. It is an introductory booklet on gender studies and quite a good one at that. Even though or maybe exactly because it features just 108 regular text pages, including 14 monochrome pictures. Intended for mainly college students (but readable for anyone), it features

seven additional reference pages for more in-depth material + 11 documentary references. The booklet itself introduces gender concepts in Native North America, India, Brazil, Polynesia, Thailand, the Philippines and in Euro-American cultures. The last of which include the sworn virgins of Albania, which I personally had never heard of before. For an entire book on the latter read the very recommendable *Women Who Become Men: Albanian Sworn Virgins (Dress, Body, Culture)*. Like many anthropological books, "Gender Diversity" is written with a Western mindset. Which might be important in setting the standard against which other societies' gender concepts are measured. However, the author invites the reader to question those Western constructs. It provides for a fast, easy, informative and thoughtprovoking reading. Not intended to stop with it, but instead to open further doors. Some of these doors may be the following books: *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety*,

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