Fa'afafine: Born a boy, but raised a girl

Photos by ERIK HILL | Anchorage (Alaska) Daily News

Tali Tolealon is fa'afafine, which means she has a male body but lives her life as a female, having been raised in Samoa as a girl. Fa'afafine are seen as having the best qualities of both men and women.

FA'AFAFINE ORIGINS STILL SHAKY

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Fa'afafine: (pronounced fah-ah-fuh-fee-nay) means "like a woman" in Samoan, and describes a third gender, with characteristics both male and female.

Origins: There's disagreement among anthropologists about the origins of fa'afafine, but there's evidence of their presence in Samoa for at least the last century. Some anthropologists believe they were part of Samoan culture for much longer. Many other Pacific island cultures have similar words for a third gender person born male, but seen as female.

Social acceptance and identification: Fa'afafine are generally accepted in Samoa, but their social position has become more complicated with the introduction of Christianity and continuing western influence on the islands. Fa'afafine aren't like American transgender people. They don't identify themselves as women in men's bodies. They are identified as children by mothers or other females close to their family, a decision influenced by their behavior and possibly by a lack of girls in a family to do "women's work."

Sexuality: Sexuality for fa'afafine is complicated. Many see themselves as women and enter into clandestine, short-term relationships with men who see themselves as straight. Some fa'afafine, motivated by social pressure and the wish for children, leave their feminine identity behind and marry women, but many others don't. Occasionally they live openly with male partners.

Lifestyle: Depending on where they live and the expectations of their family, they express their gender differently in cities, some fa'afafine live more openly, dressing flamboyantly, performing in American-style drag shows, having public relationships. In more remote places and in Christian families, fa'afafine are generally expected to be more discreet, maintaining at least a public image of celibacy. Some among the most recent generation of fa'afafine, which has been most influenced by Western culture, have begun experimenting with physically changing their sex, taking hormones obtained from doctors or on the black market, and in rare cases traveling to the U.S. or Asia for gender reassignment surgery.

Fa'afafine:

In Sāmoa, third gender with male and female traits not uncommon

BY JULIA O'MALLEY
Anchorage (Alaska) Daily News

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — "What are you?"

The question came at Tafi Toleafoa from a young woman across the computer lab.

People always want to know, but they rarely ask out loud. Students wear the question on their faces the first day of class. Professors trip over pronouns. It's been that way since Tafi came from Sāmoa two years ago to attend the University of Alaska Anchorage.

"Are you a boy or a girl?"

Now, one more time, Tafi had to explain, to untangle the contradiction of her long thick hair and plump, glossy lips with the masculine tenor of her voice and her tall, substantial body. She had to tell the girl that, no, she isn't a boy, or a girl, exactly. She's something else.

"I'm fa'afafine," Tafi said. "That means I have a boy's body, but I was raised in Sāmoa as a girl."

Tafi could have explained that in the islands, nobody ever asked. She could have told the girl that a Samoan mother with a fa'afafine among her children is considered lucky. Fa'afafine help with babies and cooking, they tend the elderly and the sick. They are presumed to have the best traits of both men and women.

But the girl didn't want to know more. She picked up her things and left, giving Tafi one last look over her shoulder.

NO SIMPLE BREAKDOWN

The way most Americans understand it, gender breaks down simply: There are men and there are women. But across Asia and the Pacific islands, many cultures recognize a third gender with characteristics both male and female. In Sāmoa, when a son or a daughter prefers the work and clothes of the opposite sex, they are called fa'afafine, "like a woman" or, far less commonly, fa'atama, "like a man."

Tafi has a male body, but she lives her life as a female and asks that people refer to her as "she." That's how she will be described in this story.

In the islands, Tafi said, she was more accepted, but her life was still complicated. Many fa'afafine live as women, the maleness of their bodies ignored by those around them.

Outside of the cities, especially in Christian families, they must follow strict social rules binding them to household duties.

Many families, including Tafi's, expect they will remain celibate. In a culture that prizes both its tradition and Christianity, fa'afafine are tolerated, but behavior that hints at homosexuality is not.

Still, many fa'afafine, who see themselves as women, do have discreet relationships with men.

In her ideal world, Tafi, who was raised as an oldest girl-child named Alicia, wouldn't have to change her body to be accepted here. She wouldn't have to rearrange her outside to make people accept what she is inside: a straight woman who is attracted to straight men.

CULTURAL PRESSURES

But the world isn't ideal. Since she came to Anchorage, Tafi's family, who loves her as she is, has pressured her to dress like a man. They have decided she needs to fit in to avoid ugliness she isn't used to.

Now, at 23, she's torn between the expectations of her family who accept her as an asexual helper, and American culture that's less accepting but offers her what she wants most: a chance to become physically female, to find a husband and have a family of her own.

Tafi wasn't surprised that the girl in the computer lab didn't know what she was seeing. Sometimes Tafi doesn't know how to see herself — or her future.

Ropeta Toleafoa knew her so was fa'afafine when he was Unlike his brothers, he staye close to her and didn't like ge ting dirty, she said, speaking i Samoan with her son, Taivale oaana "Seven" Toleafoa, trans lating.

"He didn't like going outside and doing what men do," she said.

Tafi's life wasn't like the stories she watched on re-runs of American talk shows as she grew up in Sāmoa. She never felt she was a woman trapped in a man's body. She never felt shame.

A MOTHER'S DECISION

Sāmoa is a tribal, communal society, different from America where individual desires rule. Samoan parents hold a powerful role and commonly influence their children's decisions far into adulthood. Children don't choose to be fa'afafine; their mothers decide for them.

At 5, Tafi, a sweet, outspoken child, began hoisting babies on her hip, filling bottles for her mother and helping with the dishes. Ropeta, a mother of eight, was pregnant or nursing for many years and welcomed Tafi's help.

Tafi wasn't encouraged to dress like a girl, but she gravitated toward her sisters' clothing, playing dress-up in private. "I loved skirts, short skirts to be specific," she said. "I always had to be pretty."

At school, Tafi bonded with girls and other fa'afafine among her classmates and teachers. By third grade, most everyone called her Alicia. Her younger siblings, all girls, saw her as an oldest sister.

Tafi's father, Saunoa "Noah" Toleafoa, is a religious man, an elder in the Seventh-day Adventist Church that missionaries brought to the islands along with Western ideas about gender. Noah had fa'afafine in his family, but he held on longest to the idea that Tafi would be like her older brothers. A boy dressing as a girl is not what God intended, he said.

He tried forcing her to change her clothes and cut her hair like a boy's, but nothing worked. Tafi couldn't be forced.

"This one thing I know," he

Fa'afafine

By the time Tafi reached her teens, the idea of an actual sex change consumed her. Tafi found many examples of adult fa'afafine around her, some of whom had surgery. To each other they spoke a fa'afafine language, a mixture of English and Samoan. Tafi soon caught on.

"It wasn't hard to ask them, 'Hey, how did you get boobs?'" she said.

Out of respect for her father, Tafi dressed "androgynous," wearing women's pants, a T-shirt, and her long hair pulled into a bun. Her one indulgence was glitter.

"Lots of glitter," she said. "I loved shiny stuff."

Ropeta and her daughters insulated Tafi from her father's disapproval, which gradually waned. For junior prom, Ropeta saved two paychecks to buy Tafi the material to make a pink dress.

By 2002, all the Toleafoas had immigrated to Anchorage, following family connections and the promise of better jobs. Tafi stayed behind, her immigration status complicated because she was born in Western Samoa, which is an independent country, different from the U.S. territory of American Samoa. She'd graduated from high school and was working on her associate's degree.

"That's when I started dressing like a woman full-out," she said.

In a snapshot from that period, posted on her MySpace.com site, Tafi glows, her chest full under a black blouse.

"It felt right," she said. "Perfect."

SINGLED OUT

In 2005, on her way to Anchorage to start at the University of Alaska Anchorage, Tafi took her first step on U.S. soil in Hawai'i, wearing platform sandals and short-shorts. She always imagined Americans, with their gay celebrities and liberal attitudes, would accept her. She remembered RuPaul and the movie "To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar," a drag queen comedy she'd watched in high school.

"I thought, 'OK if there's people like that, then probably I don't have to explain myself,'" she said. "I didn't know that it was going to be like there's nobody that dresses like that in a real everyday life."

When she showed her passport, which said she was a man, customs officials singled her out for two special searches. Standing in the Honolulu airport, she felt the disapproval of strangers.

The first day of her liberal studies class, when she answered a professor's question, she heard whispers. Her voice betrayed her.

"When they look at your face and you have earrings on and you have makeup on and you have long hair, then automatically you're supposed to have this kind of voice," she said. "If you are not going to have that voice, then you are kind of like an alien or something."

After her first two weeks of school, her father sat Tafi down. He had four fa'afafine on his mother's side, he said. One of them came to America 10 years ago, to California. People didn't understand her there, he said. At a party, Americans beat her and threw her from a window. She was killed.

"He said he's concerned about my life and my safety," Tafi said. "That's why he advised me that I should change my style to kind of like, umm, androgynous sort of like professional."

There would be no more short-shorts or glitter. Instead, it was T-shirts and slacks. And if her professor asked about pronouns, she'd go by "he." But, even in her toned down outfits, Tafi seemed feminine. Her professors struggled with what to call her in class.

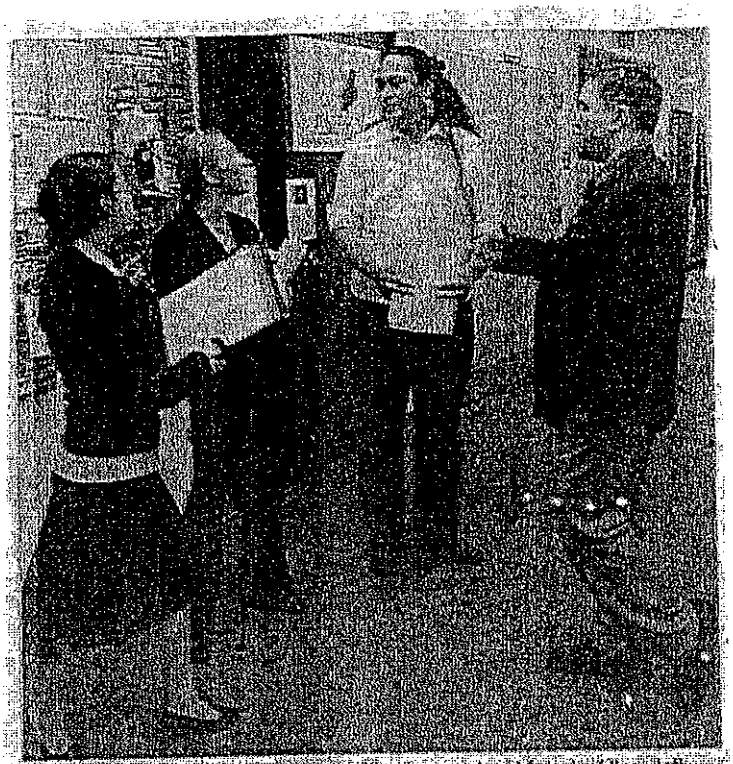
"Even the most inclusive people do not know what this is," said her professor Ann Jache. "They don't know how to talk about a person that is both male and female."

Tafi took her classmates' judgment as a challenge. A gregarious "he," she excelled in class, tackling complicated literature, winning a seat on the student senate, making a loyal group of friends in the school Polynesian association.

Tafi didn't want to hide, Jache said, she wanted to explain. Jache and Tafi crafted a project on fa'afafine over the generations. Tafi gave a presentation to her class, and then to the campus, and then to a Unitarian church. Each time, she grew more confident.

Tafi began to see it as her job to inform the campus about fa'afafine.

"I knew that they are not educated about it. They wouldn't be mean like that if they knew. ... Fa'afafine are all coming to Alaska," she said. "If they are running into the same problems, I have to do something about it."



Tafi Toleafoa, center right, chats with classmates Melody Allen, left, Lacy Jensen, and Denny Hickerson at the University of Alaska, Anchorage. Toleafoa is constantly asked about her gender.

The Wizard Stones of Kapaemahu at Waikiki

James H. Boyd

In Hawai'i are many places which give ocular proof of the supernatural tales of mythical beings who are credited with a personality equal in lore to the celebrities of ancient Greek mythology, and the doings of the dr̈ëäded gods of Hawaii have been recounted among the Hawaiian people for successive generations. The doings of four sorcerers, who have prestige among the mele singers and recounters of ancient Hawaiian lore, were revived a few years ago by the unearthing of long concealed monuments on the Waikiki beach premises of Princess Ka'iulani. These discovered relics of ancient days have brought out the tradition of their existence, to the following effect:

From the land of Moa'ulanuiakea (Tahiti), there came to Hawaii long before the reign of Kakuhihewa, four soothsayers from the court of the Tahitian king. Their names were: Kapaemahu, Kahaloa, Kapuni and Kinohi. They were received as became their station, and their tall stature, courteous ways and kindly manners made them soon loved by the Hawaiian people. The attractiveness of their fine physique and gentle demeanor was overshadowed by their low, soft speech which endeared them to all with whom they came in contact. They were unsexed by nature, and their habits coincided with their feminine appearance, although manly in stature and general bearing. After a long tour of the islands this quartette of favorites of the gods settled at Ulukou, Waikiki, near the site of the present Moana Hotel.

The wizards or soothsayers proved to be adepts in the science of healing, and many wonderful cures by the laying on of sands are reported to have been effected by them, so that their fame spread all over this island of O'ahu, as the ancients say, "from headland to headland," And their wisdom and skill was shown by many acts which gave them prestige among the people.

In course of time, knowing that their days among their Hawaiian friends were drawing to a close, they caused their desire for recognition for past services to be remembered in some tangible form, or manner, so that those who might come after, could see the appreciation of those who had been succored and relieved of pain and suffering by their ministrations during their sojourn among them. As an enduring reminder, the wizards agreed among themselves that the people should be asked to erect four monumental tablets, two to be placed on the ground of the habitation, and two at their usual bathing place in the sea. They gave their decision to the people as a voice from the gods, and instructed that the stones be selected from among those in the "bell rock" vicinity of Kaimuki.

The night of Kane was the time indicated for the commencement of the work of transportation, and thousands responded to aid in the labor. Four large selected boulders, weighing several tons each, were taken to the beach lot at Ulukou, Waikiki, two of which were placed in position where their house stood, and the other two were placed in their bathing place in the sea. Kapaemahu, chief of the wizards, had his stone so named, and transferred his witchcraft powers thereto with incantations and ceremonies, including a sacrificial offering, said to have been that of a lovely, virtuous young chiefess, and her body placed beneath the stone. Idols indicating the unsexed nature of the wizards were also placed under each stone and tradition tells that the incantations, prayers and fastings lasted one full moon. Tradition further states, as is related in the old-time meles of that period, that, after the ceremonies, by each of the wizards transferred all his powers to his stone, they vanished, and were seen no more. But the rocks having lately been discovered they have been exhumed from their bed of sand and placed in position in the locality found, as tangible evidence of a Hawaiian tale.