

French-Polynesia (Tahiti): How a island can have a third gender for generations.

In recent decades, global awareness of gender identity and sexual diversity has increased significantly. Terms such as non-binary, pansexual, and transgender have become more widely known, partly due to the growing visibility of the LGBTQIA+ community.

For many people in Western and some other societies, this may feel like a relatively new development. However, various cultures have recognized gender identities that exist outside the traditional binary understanding of male and female for centuries. A well-known example is the concept of Two-Spirit within certain Indigenous communities in North America.

In this article, we focus on another fascinating example: the Māhū, a gender identity found in Polynesian cultures, particularly in Hawai'i and Tahiti.

Where does this identity originate from? What role did colonization play in shaping attitudes toward the Māhū? And has the meaning of Māhū changed throughout history?

These questions are central to this article.



Flag French-Polynesia. Source:

wikipedia.org



What is a Māhū?

The Māhū within the cultures of Hawai'i and Tahiti is sometimes compared to the concept of Two-Spirit, but it is important to understand that these are different cultural identities, each with their own meanings and traditions.

Māhū refers to people who embody both masculine and feminine qualities. Often, this applies to individuals who are assigned male at birth but take on feminine roles and characteristics — although the opposite can also occur. The concept is not based on strict categories, but rather on a fluid combination of gender roles within Polynesian society.

Before the arrival of Europeans and Christianity, Polynesian cultures were generally more accepting of this identity. Māhū were not seen as “different” or abnormal, but instead held respected and important positions within their communities.

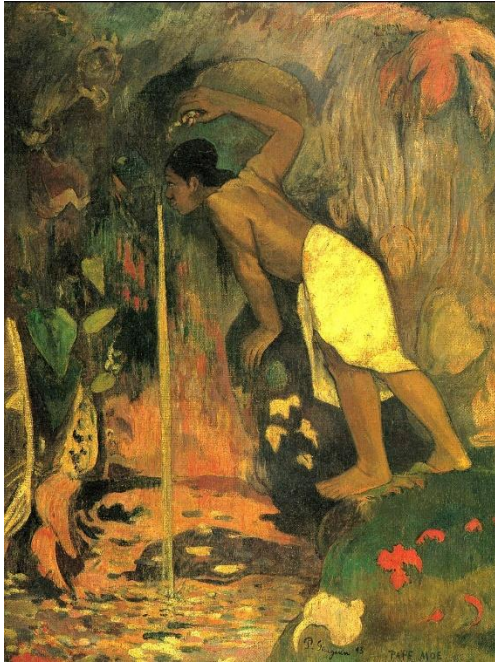
Māhū often served as:

- teachers, for example in traditional dance forms such as hula
- caregivers for children
- knowledge keepers of healing practices and spiritual traditions

With the arrival of European colonizers, this perception changed significantly. Based on their own cultural values and religious beliefs, Europeans viewed gender and sexuality differently. Māhū were often misunderstood and incorrectly labeled as homosexual or deviant, which led to stigma and a decline in their social status.

Despite this negative influence, Māhū continued to hold a valued role within Polynesian culture. In some communities, it was even considered something special when a child was recognized as Māhū, precisely because of their cultural and social importance.





The painting *Papa Moe* made by French artist Paul Gauguin in 1893, here we see a Māhū drinking from a tiny waterfall. Source: wikipedia.org

Within the cultures of Hawai‘i and Tahiti, Māhū was not a formal “title” granted by any institution. Instead, it was a social and cultural role that someone could fulfill when they displayed characteristics and behaviors that combined both masculine and feminine qualities.

In principle, anyone within the community could be recognized as Māhū, as long as they embraced this role and were acknowledged by society. It was therefore less about ancestry or origin and more about how someone positioned themselves and contributed within the culture.

However, it is important to be cautious about the idea that outsiders could simply be considered Māhū. For example, it is sometimes suggested that the French painter Paul Gauguin — known for works such as *Papa Moe* — was viewed as Māhū by the local population because of his appearance and lifestyle.

Although Gauguin did distinguish himself through his appearance, including long hair and unconventional clothing, there is little concrete historical evidence that he was actually recognized as Māhū within Polynesian culture. However, his work, including *Papa Moe*, does show that he had an interest in the concept of Māhū. What is clear is that Māhū represented a deeply rooted and respected role within Polynesian society — a role that was not determined simply by appearance, but through cultural recognition and social function.





Paul Gauguin. Source: wikipedia.org

Influence France

France was not the first country to make contact with Tahiti. One of the earliest European descriptions of the Māhū comes from the logbook of William Bligh in the late 18th century. He described being introduced to a person identified as Māhū: biologically male, but with clearly feminine characteristics and appearance. This demonstrates that this gender identity existed before later European colonization.

French influence in Tahiti officially began in 1842, when the island became a French protectorate. After internal conflicts and the expansion of French power, Tahiti was formally annexed in 1880 and became part of France. To this day, the territory, known as French Polynesia, remains part of the French state, although it has a degree of autonomy, with its own government and parliament. At the same time, France continues to retain influence, particularly in areas such as defense, foreign affairs, and administration. French is the official language, and residents hold French nationality.

As in many colonized regions, this foreign rule had a major impact on local culture. In particular, the introduction of Christianity — both Catholicism and Protestantism — often conflicted with existing cultural and gender traditions.

Although Māhū were not systematically eliminated, their position within society changed significantly. Under the influence of Western values and religious beliefs, they were increasingly oppressed, misunderstood, and viewed negatively. Whereas Māhū had previously held respected and often spiritual or social roles, they were increasingly interpreted through



a Western framework — for example, being categorized as homosexual or transgender, concepts that do not fully correspond with the original meaning of Māhū.

Additionally, stereotypes developed in which Māhū were sometimes unfairly associated with prostitution. As a result, their position shifted from a respected cultural role to a more marginalized and, in some parts of society, stigmatized identity.

Māhū vs. Rae-Rae

With the growing influence of the Western world in areas such as French Polynesia, and especially Tahiti, a clearer distinction emerged during the 20th century between traditional and more modern gender identities.

While Māhū are deeply rooted in Polynesian culture, another group became more visible from the 1960s onward: the Rae-Rae.

The emergence of Rae-Rae is connected to the changes brought by colonization and Westernization. Due to the influence of Christianity and European social norms, the position of Māhū changed significantly. Many of their traditional roles — such as involvement in dance, healing, and child-rearing — disappeared or became less valued. At the same time, they increasingly faced rejection, both from wider society and, in some cases, from their own families.

Because of this social pressure and limited economic opportunities, some people entered the informal economy, including sex work. However, this was more a result of social exclusion and limited opportunities than of their identity itself.

Within this changing social context, the Rae-Rae identity emerged. Rae-Rae generally refers to people who identify more strongly with a feminine gender identity and who also express this identity physically and socially. Unlike Māhū — who often represent a more fluid combination of gender roles — the Rae-Rae identity is more closely aligned with Western concepts of being transgender.

It is sometimes suggested that the first Rae-Rae developed from Māhū who, partly due to social and economic circumstances, became increasingly feminine in appearance and identity. While this may have played a role, it is not a complete or universal explanation — the



development of Rae-Rae is complex and cannot be attributed to a single cause.

What is clear is that a social distinction developed between the two groups:

- Māhū are more often viewed as part of traditional Polynesian culture
- Rae-Rae are more often associated with modernity and Western influences

This distinction has also affected how both groups are perceived and treated. In general, Māhū continue to enjoy greater cultural acceptance, while Rae-Rae are more likely to experience stigma, discrimination, and vulnerability, including a higher risk of exploitation.



Examples of a Rae-Rae (left) and a Māhū (right) Source left: radio1.pf. Source right: Abc.net.au

Conclusion

The beauty of stories like this is that they introduce us to cultures and traditions that we might not normally think about. The concept of a third gender is not a modern invention — it has existed for centuries and can be found among various societies that historically had little to no contact with one another before the arrival of colonial powers.

The influence of colonial rule on places such as Tahiti was greater than it may appear at first glance. Through the introduction of Western and Christian values, Māhū were marginalized and often misunderstood for a



long period of time. In some cases, this led to social exclusion and limited opportunities, forcing some people to find alternative ways to survive — a difficult legacy that still affects perceptions of this history.

At the same time, there is also an important positive aspect: the Māhū identity never disappeared. Despite periods of oppression and cultural change, it remained deeply rooted within Polynesian society and is still recognized today, with growing efforts to restore and celebrate its cultural importance.

For those interested in exploring this topic further, an interesting documentary by ABC examines both Māhū and Rae-Rae and their place in modern society:

<https://www.abc.net.au/abc-international-development/tahiti-mahu/13626922>

As many local people themselves emphasize: Māhū is and remains a part of their culture. This perhaps highlights the most important lesson of this story — that culture, even when placed under pressure from outside influences, does not simply disappear.

Tahiti demonstrates that societies have, for centuries, been capable of recognizing identities that exist beyond the traditional understanding of only male and female.

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