

You belong here: Being Trans isn't the Western concept that is threatening our cultural identity

We're told that 'transgenderism' is a Western concept that goes against our cultural norms. It's not. Here's why.

There's a sense of "otherness" that comes with realising that your outward appearance doesn't align with how you feel inside. The way we were raised to conform to our assigned gender at birth makes us believe that if we fall outside those lines, we're challenging how things are supposed to be. We're bad because we're breaking the system.

This can be confusing and alienating, especially if you think you are the only one who feels that way. You start searching for answers – anything that can make the confusion go away.

The anti-LGBTQ stance adopted by many politicians and echoed by the mass media only makes things worse. You *know* that you've done nothing wrong, but everything around you was designed to tell you otherwise.

"What's wrong with me?"

"Why can't I just be like everyone else?"

"Am I trans because I watch too many queer shows?"

"How can I change?"

These are some questions you might be asking yourself. You're not alone. Take a deep breath, hug yourself, and just be. There is absolutely **nothing** wrong with you. You are a beautiful shining beacon of light in an ocean of misinformation.

Part of our journey towards self-appreciation is understanding our past as transgender folk. We've always been a vital part of our communities. We didn't just suddenly arrive in boats to take over our countries. We aren't trans because our favourite TV shows have hot trans characters.

And, no, transgenderism isn't a nasty Western influence. It's a lost part of our culture, suppressed by waves of deeply misguided propaganda.

Over hundreds of years of cross-cultural exchanges (and colonialism), the little things we adopted from each other have helped build a sort of cultural bridge. We now wear jeans, say things are "lit", and the West has learned that seasonings go beyond salt and pepper.

What we *didn't* adopt from the West is transgenderism. Not because we don't like it, but because we never needed to. It has always been a part of our culture, only we never called it "transgenderism". There was no "trans"; no need to cross any line dividing two opposing sides, because gender wasn't limited to just "male" and "female".

We've been told over and over again that transgenderism is a Western construct that's influencing us, and it's destroying our culture. If that were true, why did transgender folk exist before

colonialism even came to be?

We don't need to thumb through any history books to see that. Our story is told in our language. There are so many names for us that pre-date the arrival of the first colonisers and foreign preachers. *Hijra*, *bhatobyanjanaka*, *calalai*, *fa'afafine*, *to brake tombalang*. These names are little bookmarks in time that remind us of how we were once revered, or at the very least, acknowledged.

For more than six centuries, pre-dating the arrival of Islam, the Bugis people of the Nusantara region have recognised 5 genders: *makkunrai*, *oroané*, *bissu*, *calabai*, and *calalai*. The Toraja people of South Sulawesi recognise a third gender, *to burake tombalang*. Thai culture is interconnected with the beliefs of Theravada Buddhism, which recognises 4 genders, including *bhatobyanjanaka* (kathoey) and *pandaka*. In the Philippines¹, a third gender, *bakla*, *bayot*, or *agi*, was recognised prior to Western colonisation and Christian influence.

Our communities held us in high regard, and we were shamans and priests and advisors to royalty. We blessed crops and babies and kept our villages safe. We were the link to the gods because there was nothing holier in a mortal being than embodying more than one spirit.

The term "transgender" is a recent one, coming into common usage when the West began debating issues related to folks who didn't fit into their assigned gender boxes. The word "gender" itself only began gaining ground in the 1970s, two decades after sexologist John Money coined the term.

Coloniality² altered the fabric of our societies, trapping us in a rigid gender binary system. Social structures were changed to fit into the patriarchal European model, and anything different was seen as backward and barbaric. Politics, new religion and global trade required us to conform to the outside world, so we changed who we were and let go of our roots. We drifted into an in-between pseudo-culture that slowly erased our cultural identity, and with it, our acceptance of transgender folk.

Suddenly, non-gender conforming people became something to be ashamed of. Our once holy names were spoken with disgust, and newer, derogatory ones took their place. We were sick people that needed to be cured and squeezed into the right gender box. Being "other" was seen as a threat to this foreign concept of morality that was forced onto us. We fell from grace.

As our borders opened up, our countries grew wealthier, but we paid a steep price. We pandered to the needs of the global superpowers by adopting laws that were meant to conquer us.

With their Gold, Gospel and Glory conquests, these colonising powers brought transphobia to our sun-kissed shores. Now, the very same countries that colonised us have reversed their colonial-era laws against LGBTQ folk by legalising same sex marriages and recognising trans folk.

Transgenderism isn't the Western concept that is threatening our cultural identity, it's *transphobia*. Yet, here we are, fighting to reclaim our place.

Why should we be afraid of something that has always been a part of who we are? Gender diversity is an integral part of our culture and identity. Your existence is proof that the human spirit cannot be forced into a neat little gender box. You belong here. You always have.

1. The Guardian, *In the Philippines, they think about gender differently, we could too*, V. Patiag, 3 March 2019. [->](#)
2. The Coloniality of Gender, M. Lugones, 2018 [->](#)