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‘They're not as MSM, they're a *bufta*’: Using the categories ‘men who have sex with men’ and ‘transgender’ as technologies in Vanuatu

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Abstract

In Vanuatu, the use of the terms such as 'men who have sex with men' (MSM) and 'transgender' has increased over the past decade. This paper draws on twenty months ethnographic research in Port Vila, the country's capital, to analyse what happens on the ground when MSM and transgender categories are taken up to identify people or to narrate the self. The focus is on who uses these terms, in what ways they are experienced, and what is rendered visible (or not) by their use. This research departs from approaches framing 'non-heteronormative' categories as related solely to gender and sexuality. It argues that MSM and transgender categories are used in various ways to refer not only to sexual practices and/or gender identity, but also to health risk behaviours, transactional sex and LGBT rights advocacy. The analysis offered suggests we view MSM and transgender categories as technologies that, depending on the interactional context, contribute to bureaucratic tasks or to maintaining or, on the contrary, changing established socio-political relations.

Keywords: men who have sex with men, transgender, public health categories, technology, Vanuatu

Introduction

Over the past decade, the terms ‘men who have sex with men’ (very often abbreviated to MSM) and ‘transgender’ have become increasingly used in Vanuatu. During ethnographic research conducted in Port Vila, the capital of this Melanesian archipelago between 2009 and 2018¹, the MSM and transgender terms were mainly used by health stakeholders (such as public health researchers, nurses and educators) in the context of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) prevention. The prevalence of HIV among people in Vanuatu at that time was relatively low. No HIV cases had been recorded among men who have sex with men or transgender people,² despite the fact that MSM and transgender are considered ‘most-at-risk’ populations for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) by international agencies, donors and local prevention organisations (UNICEF 2010).

During my 2011-2012 fieldwork in Port Vila, health surveys targeting or including members of these populations were conducted, peer educators³ worked extensively with MSM and transgender people to share knowledge of HIV, and sexual health workshops (with a focus mainly on STIs) were specifically designed for them. Additionally, a network called the Sisters of Solidarity, bringing together MSM, transgender and female sex workers, was established in 2008⁴.

In Vanuatu, the terms MSM and transgender are also sometimes used by non-heteronormative⁵ persons to narrate themselves, particularly in the context of the struggle for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) rights. Since the country’s independence in 1980, there have been no laws criminalising homosexual practices in Vanuatu⁶. However, violence against gender and sexuality diverse persons remains widespread in the archipelago and there are very few legal protections against discrimination based on gender⁷ identity or sexuality (Kaleidoscope Human Rights Foundation and VPride Foundation 2019). In 2011-2012, I noticed that the MSM and transgender terms were particularly used by non-heteronormative people at Sisters of Solidarity meetings.

According to the terminological guidelines produced by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) in 2011, the term ‘transgender’ refers to gender identity and the meaning of ‘MSM’ to sexual behaviour (UNAIDS 2011, 19, 28; see also online supplemental material). These English language transnational categories⁸ have not been translated into the other languages spoken in Vanuatu. However, they are being experienced in different interactional contexts and interpreted, transformed, reinvented, reworked and reimagined in various ways (Boellstorff 2011; Parker 2019). In December 2011, I met Charlie⁹ at a nightclub in Port Vila. Charlie has sex with men and dresses, wears their¹⁰ hair, speaks and moves publicly in ways that are socially considered feminine in Vanuatu (hereinafter as a ‘feminine man’). I was with Tom, an educator who self-identifies as gay or homosexual. Tom told me in Bislama (an English-based creole language, which I translate here into English): ‘Charlie, they’re not as MSM. They’re a *bufta* [a slur to refer to feminine men]. They act like a woman. But they live [and have sexual relations] with a straight man, an MSM’. In this example, the use of MSM refers not only to sexuality but also to social identity, or the way a person is identified by other people based on certain visible characteristics, such as their way of dressing and movement. Based on research in Port Vila, this empirical paper analyses what happens on the ground when MSM and transgender categories travel or are taken up to identify people or to narrate the self. The focus is on who uses these terms, in what ways are they experienced, and what is rendered visible (or not) by their use.

During my twenty months ethnographic fieldwork, I shared my time between an urban area named Seaside Tongoa and the organisations working on sexual and reproductive health in Port Vila, such as the Sisters of Solidarity network and the Wan Smolbag Theatre¹¹. Most of the data on the use of MSM and transgender terms comes from observations, interviews and collected documents (e.g. reports, booklets) from these organisations and in Seaside Tongoa in 2011-2012, as part of my doctoral research on STI prevention (see Servy 2017a, 17-21, for a description of methods and my position as a researcher). I also collected online local media sources (e.g. newspaper articles, radio programmes, websites, Facebook pages) on LGBT issues published between 2002 and 2019.

The first part of this paper will briefly present the background of the research: the situation of non-heteronormative people and the terms used in Port Vila to refer to them. In the second part, I will describe the ways in which MSM and transgender are used (1) in public health surveys, (2) by employees of sexual and reproductive health organisations (mainly nurses and educators) and (3) by members of the Sisters of Solidarity network.

On the one hand, this paper adds to the growing literature that seeks to understand non-heteronormative categories 'as shifting and complex rather than bounded' (Alexeyeff and Besnier 2014, 9) by examining a society in Melanesia where, so far, little such research has been conducted. On the other hand, in line with Hegarty's (2017) work in Indonesia¹², my research departs from approaches framing non-heteronormative categories as related solely to gender and sexuality, as in the definitions given by UNAIDS. In Vanuatu in 2011-2012, MSM and transgender categories were used in various ways to refer not only to sexual practices or gender identity, but also to health risk behaviours, transactional sex, or LGBT rights advocacy. In conclusion, my paper presents the MSM and transgender categories as technologies, i.e. processes used to achieve certain goals. Depending on the interactional contexts, they may operate as 'bureaucratic technologies' for counting people, measuring risk-taking or writing reports (such as the MSM category analysed by Biruk 2019 in Malawi), but also as technologies that I view as 'socio-political' because they contribute to maintaining or, on the contrary, changing social distinctions and power relations.

Background

Social visibility, criticism, violence and opposition to LGBT rights

As of 2020, the Republic of Vanuatu, which remained a French-British condominium from 1906 to independence in 1980, was home to about 300,000 inhabitants (called ni-Vanuatu) speaking 138 languages, including English and French – the two former colonial languages – and Bislama – the country's lingua franca (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2020, v). This extreme linguistic density reflects a strong cultural diversity that characterises the archipelago and is especially prevalent in the capital Port Vila, where around 16% of the total population resides (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2020, v). In the 19th century, various phases of internal migration led to the establishment of several urban 'communities' in Port Vila, such as Seaside Tongoa, whose 1,000 inhabitants came originally from Tongoa Island, the largest of the Shepherd Islands in Central Vanuatu (see Servy 2017a, 104-117). Despite the diversity of local contexts, non-heteronormative people seem to share relatively similar experiences in Port Vila and across Vanuatu in terms of social visibility, criticism, violence and opposition to their rights.

In the edited book *Gender on the Edge*, several authors highlight the contrast between the hypervisibility of Polynesian non-heteronormative people and the relative invisibility of their Melanesian counterparts (Alexeyeff and Besnier 2014). In Port Vila in 2011-2012, non-heteronormative people remained relatively socially invisible in the media, on the street and even in their communities¹³. In addition, non-heteronormative couples both lack of visibility and are relatively rare in Vanuatu. The masculine sexual partners of the persons socially categorised as feminine men generally aim to stay under the radar, whether or not their relationship is related to transactional sex (see Servy 2020b). They rarely want to build a long-term relationship with feminine men, unlike some of their non-Melanesian counterparts living in Port Vila. As a result of this discretion, masculine men who have sex with feminine men are, for the most part, well integrated into their respective communities. One of them, for example, was an Elder¹⁴ in the Presbyterian Church of his community when I met him in Port Vila in 2011.

During my fieldwork in Seaside Tongoa, I encountered many criticisms of non-heteronormative identities or practices. For instance, in June 2011, one woman in her fifties told me that:

Homosexuality is not good for us. It's good for white people with money! If we don't have children, there'll be no one to take care of us when we get older.

For this woman, it is not non-heteronormative sexual practices that are the real problem, but not having children. One can be a man who has sex with men (or a woman who has sex with women), but have a heterosexual partner¹⁵ and children, and thus be perfectly fine in her eyes. On the one hand, conjugal infidelity is not strongly socially condemned in Seaside Tongoa, especially when it is occasional and committed by the man. On the other hand, having or raising children is a social and political obligation in the community, and more generally in Vanuatu. Giving birth is viewed as an investment in the future in a context of intergenerational solidarity and also as a means to create and maintain links between groups through adoption and marriages (see Servy 2020a). Other criticisms I heard in Seaside Tongoa referred to Christian principles. A man in his thirties, who belonged to the Living Water Ministry, told me for example that the 'woman' (a trans man) described in the Australian magazine that we were reading together, would go to hell because 'she had damaged God's work'.

Several of my interlocutors, mainly heterosexual men, openly expressed their willingness to hunt down or physically harm feminine men they might encounter on the street or in their community because, in their view, feminine men do not respect Christian and Melanesian values. In October 2011, an 85-year-old woman, resident of Seaside Tongoa, also warned me about the dangers I could face going to nightclubs with my feminine friends: I could get beaten up or raped myself in their company, she said. However, the risk of (physical, sexual or psychological) violence is not limited to the nightlife areas of Port Vila (see Servy 2017b; 2022). During my fieldwork, some feminine educators working for Wan Smolbag were assaulted in the street in broad daylight. Likewise, some feminine members of the Sisters of Solidarity network have received insults when conducting sexual health education awareness sessions in Port Vila.

According to the submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review on the protection of the rights of LGBT persons prepared by the Kaleidoscope Human Rights Foundation and the VPride Foundation (2019), Vanuatu lacks laws and policies to protect LGBT persons from discrimination, violence or stigma on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or sex

characteristics. Organisations such as the Sisters of Solidarity (now the Vpride Foundation) are trying to promote these rights. However, they face strong resistance, especially from the Vanuatu Christian Council of Churches (VCCC), representing the Churches of Christ, Assemblies of God and the Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Seventh-day Adventist and Apostolic churches of Vanuatu. In May 2014, in an interview for Radio New Zealand International, the Chairman of the VCCC (an Anglican Bishop) stated that Vanuatu's constitution is based on Christian and Melanesian values and that the recognition of rights of 'homosexuals and lesbians' could lead to deep divisions and significant problems in families and communities. The VCCC Chairman added that the committee did not want lifestyles such as same-sex marriage from other parts of the world to develop in Vanuatu. He therefore called on all leaders and churches to work with the government to address this issue which 'will definitely destroy the life of the younger generation' (Dateline Pacific 2014; see also Cullwick 2018).

The comments of the VCCC Chairman, like those of the people of Seaside Tongoa area, revealed a strongly nationalist feeling in their criticism of Euro-American lifestyles and praise of the Christian religion and Melanesian custom. It is not so much non-heteronormative sexual practices that are targeted here, but rather the threat that non-heteronormative couples seemingly pose to the social and political order. Until now, heterosexual marriages and child births have played an important role in Vanuatu in building and strengthening social relations within clans and between families (see Servy 2020a).

While the situation of non-heteronormative people seems to be relatively similar from one community to another in Port Vila, it varies markedly according to their gender presentation. All non-heteronormative people are generally socially invisible. But the people who are most subject to mockery, criticism and violence are those whose physical manifestation is not heteronormative, and in particular feminine men.

Diversity of terms relating to non-heteronormative persons

In Vanuatu, many transnational or locally specific terms are used to refer to (mock, insult, call out) non-heteronormative people or to narrate the self. These terms can be found in the three national and educational languages (English, French and Bislama), in Indigenous Oceanic languages (e.g. Namakura, an Austronesian language of Central Vanuatu) and in languages brought by recent migration (e.g. Mandarin Chinese). My knowledge of these terms is not exhaustive. During ethnographic research in Port Vila, I went to most parts of the capital, but spent most of my time in Seaside Tongoa. In that community, most adult residents are multilingual. They speak Namakura and Bislama, as well as English or French for those who have been to school, and other local languages depending on their life paths. This settlement, mainly composed of sheet-metal houses, is known to be one of the 'poorest' in the capital. While on occasion, in 2011-2012, some of the more educated residents of Port Vila may have used the terms 'transgender' and 'MSM', those in Seaside Tongoa did not.

The feminine men who come to Seaside Tongoa to visit friends or relatives, were called by the inhabitants of this area in Namakura *levav*¹⁶ and in Bislama *haf-haf* (half-woman, half-man) or *fiftififti* (fifty percent man, fifty percent woman). The derogatory and stigmatising English term poofter (*bufta* as spelled in Bislama), which is present in other Pacific islands (see Alexeyeff and Besnier 2014, 6), is also widely used in Seaside Tongoa. The people

mockingly designated by these terms, and which we have seen are also those most prone to criticism and violence, do not necessarily have intimate relationships with other men and do not all define themselves by these terms, but they have a way of speaking, walking and acting that is considered feminine by those around them. This suggests the importance of gender presentation, rather than sexual practices.

In Seaside Tongoa, the terms *haf-haf* or *fiftififti* are androcentric. They are not used by the inhabitants of this area to refer to masculine women. The English term 'tomboy' is used to make fun of women dressing and behaving in a way considered masculine, following groups of young men on their escapades to other districts, for example. However, this term does not imply that these masculine women have sexual relations with other women. The use of tomboy again emphasises the presentation of gender.

In Seaside Tongoa, in 2011-2012, I never heard a specific term for a masculine man having sex with a feminine man or for someone who is sexually attracted to both men and women. According to my interlocutors, the masculine partners of the feminine men are often married with children and are not labelled *fiftififti*, *haf-haf*, *bufta* or *levav*. They have personal and social status as straight men (or *stret man* in Bislama). The inhabitants of Seaside Tongoa thus not only treat feminine men differently from their male partners in terms of criticism and violence, but also distinguish them by the way they call them.

During fieldwork in Port Vila, the ways in which non-heteronormative people narrated themselves was also strongly informed by gender presentation. Masculine men who had sex with men did not use terms related to their non-heterosexual practices to refer to themselves. These persons whom I met at STI prevention workshops, such as the Presbyterian Elder mentioned above, simply described themselves as 'men'.

My more feminine interlocutors usually introduced themselves to me as gay or homosexua'. But they also used other terms, such as MSM, transgender, trans-woman, *haf-haf*, *fiftififti*, or even *bufta* and *levav*. The use of these terms by my interlocutors varied according to their gender identity, but also to the contexts of interaction (i.e. mainly where, with whom and why they communicate). For example, in July 2012, Nicky introduced themselves as 'gay' at the monthly meeting of the Sisters of Solidarity, but as a 'trans woman' in June 2016 in an interview for the website of Sista (2016), a feminist organisation based in Vanuatu. In many societies, including in Pacific Islands countries, researchers have shown that gender identity is more related to interpersonal relationships than inherent in individuals (Alexeyeff and Besnier 2014, 5). The experiences of non-heteronormative terms and categories, hence, are 'instable across time, context and place' (Alexeyeff and Besnier 2014, 6). In Samoa and Tonga, Serge Tcherkézoff (2014) and Sue Farran (2014) have shown, for example, that people may assume different identities when they are in the islands and when they have migrated.

In Port Vila, the ways in which non-heteronormative people are referred to and narrate themselves are thus mainly related to their gender presentation rather than their sexual practices. On the one hand, masculine men who have sex with men see themselves and are socially seen as straight men. On the other, feminine men are labelled or talk about themselves with various terms and categories, local or not, more or less recent (Alexeyeff and Besnier 2014, 17), including MSM and transgender.

Findings

In 2011-2012, the MSM and transgender categories were mainly used as bureaucratic or socio-political technologies, by public health researchers, nurses or educators in the context of HIV prevention and by non-heteronormative persons in the context of the fight for LGBT rights led in particular by the Sisters of Solidarity network. These categories were used to refer not only to sexuality or gender, but also to HIV risk behaviours, transactional sex or LGBT rights advocacy.

Public health surveys: making HIV risk behaviours visible

Since the first case of HIV was reported by the government of Vanuatu in 2002, the reported prevalence of infection has remained very low. In November 2020, the country recorded only ten people living with HIV (Malapa 2020). Nevertheless, a relatively well-developed prevention system has been put in place to prevent the emergence of an HIV epidemic and to try to reduce the prevalence of other STIs, which are widespread in the archipelago¹⁷. Vanuatu was classified by the United Nations as one of the least developed countries until 2020 (United Nations News 2020). The Republic is dependent on official development assistance and foreign technical expertise and has signed transnational agreements that, in my opinion, largely explain the influx of overseas funding for HIV prevention, the presence of several international stakeholders (especially NGOs), the implementation of many activities, including public health surveys, and the focus on 'key populations' for the prevention of HIV and other STIs in Vanuatu (see Servy 2017a, 26-55).

MSM and transgender, as well as female sex workers (Servy 2020b), are considered high risk groups for HIV and other STIs. Between 2008 and 2011, three public health surveys voluntarily incorporating MSM (including transgender people) as respondents, or specifically targeting them, have been conducted in Vanuatu: the *Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices* (KAP) survey carried out in 2008-2009 among 510 young people aged 15-24 (UNICEF 2010), the 2008 *Second Generation Surveillance Survey* with 155 young men interviewed (SPC and Vanuatu MoH 2008) and the *Vanuatu Integrated Bio-Behavioural Survey and Population Size Estimation with Men Who Have Sex with Men and Transgender People*, featuring 52 interviewees (Van Gemert *et al.* 2013). The Bio-Behavioural survey is the only one that distinguishes between MSM and transgender people (abbreviated in it as 'TG'). It was led by a team from the Burnet Institute, an Australian public health research institute, and conducted in partnership with Wan Smolbag (who provided the in-country study coordinator, research nurses, and field researchers). The results of these studies have been disseminated on a national and international scale via reports published by the public health institutions. Most of the reports are also available online.

One objective of these surveys was to quantify and make visible (on a national and international scale) the number of MSM (including transgender people) in Vanuatu. To do so, they used definitions of this category based on sexual behaviour rather than individual or social identity. The report on the Burnet Institute's Bio-Behavioural survey, written mainly by a non-ni-Vanuatu epidemiologist, is the only one to express concerns about the use of the MSM category in Pacific Island Countries 'as it does not reflect the complex way in which gender and sexuality is expressed' (Van Gemert *et al.* 2013, 2). A footnote states that the term 'transgender' is used to 'reflect self-identified gender' (Van Gemert *et al.* 2013, 4). However, the criteria for selecting participants, including transgender people, were: sex ('male'), age ('over 18 years'), location ('Port Vila and its surroundings') and whether or not

they had had 'anal sex with a man in the last 12 months' preceding the survey (Van Gemert et al. 2013, vii; see also SPC and Vanuatu MoH 2008, 30; UNICEF 2010, 102). These criteria, echoing the definition given by UNAIDS, do not consider the gender presentations or self-identified gender identities of the respondents. In addition, the category 'transgender' is used here in an androcentric way. The Burnet Institute's survey estimated the number of MSM and TG at 327 in 2011 in Port Vila (Van Gemert et al. 2013, 24).

Another objective of these surveys was to describe and make visible people's risk behaviours in relation to HIV and other STIs. These behaviours include the rate of partner change and the rate of condom use, but also the age of sexual debut, the level of forced sex, STI testing and treatment rates and the transactional sex rate (Van Gemert et al. 2013, viii; UNICEF 2010, 30; SPC and Vanuatu MoH 2008, 30). If these surveys make these practices visible by quantifying them and publishing the results, the evidence to associate MSM and transgender people with HIV and other STIs sometimes lacks validity in Vanuatu. Indeed, in a context of low prevalence, no HIV case has been recorded in these studies¹⁸.

On the one hand, these public health surveys tend to make people who are labelled as MSM (including transgender) and their practices more visible on a national and international scale. They seek to quantify the number of MSM and their sexual behaviours in Vanuatu and they disseminate the results via reports. On the other hand, these surveys associate MSM with HIV and other STIs. Public health researchers do not use the category MSM to refer to gender identities or gender presentations, but rather to sexual behaviours considered risky in relation to the transmission of HIV and other STIs. The category here is not only related to sexuality, but also to sexual health risks. MSM therefore operates as a bureaucratic technology to count people, measure their risk-taking and write reports.

Nurses and educators: differentiating non-heteronormative social identities and focusing on transactional sex

These surveys, using the MSM and transgender categories, making their number visible and linking HIV and other STIs with them in Vanuatu, enable NGOs such as Wan Smolbag, to obtain funding to develop prevention activities for these populations¹⁹. In 2011-2012, peer education activities, sexual health workshops and medical consultations in sexual health clinics were carried out in Port Vila by nurses or educators, including some peer educators working exclusively with people captured within the MSM and transgender categories. These employees of STI prevention organisations do not come from backgrounds that are fundamentally different from those of the people they work with²⁰. And some of them were involved in administering questionnaires of the public health surveys on MSM as field researchers and research nurses. During my fieldwork, nurses and educators used the terms MSM and transgender extensively in their daily professional activities. However, their definitions of these categories varied from that proposed by the survey reports and the UNAIDS guidelines. In addition, interpretation could differ from one employee to another.

In the NGO Wan Smolbag, I identified two ways of appropriating the MSM category. When talking to each other, educators and nurses did not use the term to refer to all 'men who have sex with men'. On one hand, some call MSM only feminine men and call 'MSM clients' the straight men (*stret man* in Bislama) who have sex with feminine men, very often transactional sex. In Port Vila, transactional sex practices are relatively widespread, among both men and women, and relatively well tolerated by the people around them (see Servy

2020b). On the other hand, some other educators and nurses reserve the term MSM for the masculine partners of feminine men, whom they call *bufta*, as we saw in the example in the introduction. While UNAIDS's definition of MSM focuses attention on sexual practices in the context of HIV prevention, the uses of the term MSM among Wan Smolbag employees, in a context of low HIV prevalence, refer mainly to social identity and gender presentation, and also in some cases to transactional sex.

In the Burnet Institute definition of transgender persons, self-identification is an important component. Nevertheless, the administration of questionnaires by Wan Smolbag's employees, as part of this survey, reveals other understandings of the transgender category. On the Bislama questionnaire used in the Burnet Institute survey, the word 'transgender' is translated as *haf-haf* to refer to both men and women (whereas we have seen that in Seaside Tongoa the term *haf-haf* refers only to feminine men). One of three boxes had to be ticked: 'woman', '*haf-haf*' and 'male'. The Wan Smolbag employees who conducted the interviews as field researchers explained to me that this was not done by the participants, but the researchers themselves, who picked one of the boxes depending on the physical and clothing appearance and sexual practices of the participants. A female educator explained to me that she knew most of the participants in the survey and was therefore aware of whether they were 'tomboy', 'gay' or whether they were *stret* men and women. However, when she met a new person, she only ticked the *haf-haf* (transgender) box if the masculine woman (tomboy) reported having sex with other women or if the man having sex with men was feminine. A man who had intimate relationships with other men was therefore not necessarily labelled *haf-haf* by educators, while a woman who had sex with another woman was systematically labelled in this way, whether or not her appearance was masculine. Men or women respondents were therefore not labelled transgender by Wan Smolbag employees on the same criteria: sexual practices were a common element, but social identity determined by external appearance was also an important point in naming persons as *haf-haf*. Nevertheless, in either case, the way respondents self-identified was rarely considered by Wan Smolbag employees who worked as field researchers for the Burnet Institute survey.

If there are internationally disseminated definitions of the MSM and transgender public health categories, educators and nurses working in STI prevention organisations in Port Vila appropriate them. In the context of the 2011 Burnet Institute survey, the transgender category was used by field researchers to refer not only to gender, but also to sexuality. And in their daily professional activities, nurses and educators appropriate the term MSM in order to distinguish feminine men from their masculine partners or to distinguish sex workers from their clients. Moreover, while UNAIDS's definition of MSM focuses attention on sexual behaviour, the uses of the term MSM identified among Wan Smolbag employees mainly referred to the person's social identity. Within this context, therefore, the MSM category seems to function as a technology for maintaining social distinctions based on femininity and sexual transactions.

The Sisters of Solidarity: giving visibility to non-heteronormative identity claims and defending LGBT rights

During my research in Port Vila, non-heteronormative people, including feminine men, remained relatively socially invisible to avoid negative attitudes, such as mockery, towards

them. However, non-heteronormative identities claims and advocacy for LGBT rights were beginning to develop, particularly through the activities of the Sisters of Solidarity.

In July 2012, this network of MSM, transgender and female sex workers was relatively active. I was allowed to attend one of the monthly meetings, which was held at Shakers, a nightclub located in Port Vila. Ten people attended. While the majority worked for Wan Smolbag as cleaners, educators or actors, two high school students were also present. The participants explained to me that Nicky, one of the two founders of this network, had been elected president a few years earlier because of their ability to 'embrace' their non-heteronormative identity: Nicky dressed, talked and walked down the street in an ostensibly feminine way. The members of Sisters of Solidarity explained to me that they used to be in a hurry to disperse after their meetings, for fear of being seen together, but that now, thanks to the network, they would stay in a group. When they went out on the street at the end of this July 2012 meeting, I saw them kissing each other twice on the cheek, laughing and loudly calling each other out, using terms such as in Bislama, *sista* (sister), in English 'she', 'girl' or 'lady', or in French *soeur* (sister) or *salope* (bitch).

During the meeting, several members spoke of their fears and recent experiences of compliments, insults or questions from people they met on the streets. For example, two feminine young men explained that last month, after leaving the Sisters of Solidarity meeting, they did peer education on HIV and other STIs with two men sitting near the waterfront. As they left them, the two men complimented them on their physical appearance and greeted them with a '*Gud naet ledis*' (good night, ladies). Nicky reacted to this story by saying: 'We talked about this last time! When someone calls you lady or sister, you have to take it positively.' A member, working at Wan Smolbag, added:

These two men came to the clinic to pick you up. They asked to see the men with beautiful hair. You weren't there. But they still went to see the nurse. Another member added: You see, it's positive work. It proves that peer education is useful.

The Sisters of Solidarity was thus trying not only to deliver messages about STIs (including HIV), but also to make non-heteronormative social and individual identities visible in Port Vila and provide support for them, by teaching its members to perform and react in public in ways that highlight their femininity.

At the meeting I attended, participants also talked about their network mainly using the term MSM. The Pacific Sexual Diversity Network, to which the group was attached, defined itself as 'a network representing the interests of men who have sex with men (MSM) in the Pacific region'. The Pacific Sexual Diversity Network, funded by the Netherlands-based international organisation Hivos, was working to 'build an effective regional response to the current or potential threat that HIV and AIDS pose to MSM and TG in the Pacific' (Pacific Sexual Diversity Network 2014). As mentioned above, the MSM category is now widely recognised by HIV prevention organisations, which probably explains why the category is used by the Pacific Sexual Diversity Network, as well as by the Sisters of Solidarity in Port Vila.

In other parts of the world, some non-heteronormative persons have expressed strong resistance to being labelled or talking about themselves with categories that they see as externally imposed, such as MSM or transgender (Young and Meyer 2005, 1144-1147; Seckinelgin 2009, 112-113). However, in 2012, to my knowledge, there was no such resistance in Port Vila. The members of Sisters of Solidarity showed a certain willingness to

use the MSM category to refer to each other and express their position as an individual. It is possible however that their eagerness to use the MSM category was linked to the doors that identifying with this category could open for them. At the July 2012 meeting, Nicky announced, for example, that they would shortly attend an international HIV conference in the USA, with funding from the Pacific Sexual Diversity Network. In November 2014, the Pacific Sexual Diversity Network's website described them as the treasurer for this regional network, while in July 2012, a couple of years earlier, Nicky had been working as a waiter at the Rumours nightclub (Pacific Sexual Diversity Network 2014). In other countries, researchers have also argued that the globalising acronyms MSM or LGBT are used strategically by local activists. Being visibly associated with these categories is necessary to receive funds, scholarships, secure jobs or travel (Hammar 2008, 78; Seckinelgin 2009, 114; Alexeyeff and Besnier 2014, 19; Stewart 2014, 327).

During my research in Port Vila, on the one hand, most people who self-identified as gay or homosexual wanted these gender identities to be kept secret. On the other, members of the Sisters of Solidarity made their non-heteronormative individual and social identities visible, at least at their monthly meetings. The MSM category was originally created to describe behaviours in the context of HIV prevention. However, the members of this network, receiving international funding associated with HIV, tended to use it as an identity category; but also as a bureaucratic and socio-political technology that made them visible and enabled them, for example, to network nationally and internationally, to advocate for LGBT rights, to have financial opportunities, to access sexual health services and to perform an extravert femininity. Importantly, visibility does not only have a visual dimension. Visibility is also related to politics and in particular to the politics of recognition (Brighenti 2007, 324, 329).

Conclusion

Men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgender are categories that circulate worldwide, including in Pacific Island Countries, as part of global health programmes to prevent and respond to HIV. According to UNAIDS terminological guidelines, the definition of transgender refers to gender identity and the definition of MSM refers to sexuality (UNAIDS 2011). However, these non-heteronormative categories are not fixed in time and space (Alexeyeff and Besnier 2014). They are interpreted and transformed in different ways depending on the context of interaction (Boellstorff 2011; Parker 2019) and they not only relate to gender and sexuality (Hegarty 2017).

This paper has addressed the question of who uses the terms MSM and transgender in the capital city of Vanuatu. In Port Vila, these terms are mainly used by health stakeholders (public health researchers, nurses or educators) in the context of HIV prevention and by non-heteronormative persons in the context of the struggle for LGBT rights. In public health reports, the category MSM (including transgender) refers not only to sexuality, but also to sexual behaviours considered risky in relation to the transmission of HIV and other STIs. The association of MSM with HIV/STIs may contribute to their stigmatisation (see George 2014). There is little or no consideration of gender identities in these reports. Wan Smolbag's nurses and educators focus on the social identity or transactional sex practices of the non-heteronormative people they meet in their daily work activities. In the 2011 Burnet Institute survey, the use of the category transgender reflects the attention given to sexual practices as well as social identity. Although non-heteronormative people use several terms to narrate

themselves in Port Vila (such as gay, homosexual or trans-woman), members of Sisters of Solidarity tend to use the MSM category to express their individual identity, at least during their meetings.

On the other hand, this paper has shown that depending on the context of interaction, what is rendered visible by the use of the MSM and transgender categories varies: gender identities, sexuality, but also HIV risk behaviours, transactional sex or LGBT rights advocacy. It is interesting to note that in a context where no non-heteronormative people are officially living with HIV in Vanuatu, the MSM and transgender categories are not used, for example, to make visible the suffering associated with the HIV experience (Benton 2012). Instead, in Port Vila, MSM and 'transgender' were used in certain contexts as 'bureaucratic technologies' (Biruk 2019), when public health researchers count individuals in key populations or seek to measure their risk behaviours and exposure to HIV and other STIs through surveys, and receive funding for health promotion activities. However, I argue that these categories can also be analysed as socio-political technologies when they are used by activists to create or join national or international networks in order to fight for LGBT rights, or by nurses and educators to maintain the social distinctions between feminine men and *stret men*, and between those who sell sex and those who pay for it.

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Notes

1. Between 2009 and 2018, I conducted twenty months of fieldwork in Vanuatu (five trips of 1 to 8 months). My doctoral thesis in anthropology analysed the relations between global and local forces at work in the context of the prevention of STIs in Port Vila. The research was approved by the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (the body responsible for research ethics in Vanuatu at the time of my fieldwork) and the Vanuatu Ministry of Health. All the individuals mentioned in this paper provided oral informed consent. Oral informed consent was also obtained from community leaders and leaders of organisations where I did my fieldwork. My thesis explains and justifies the approach to research ethics which underpins this paper (Servy 2017a).
2. Nevertheless, a relatively large proportion (80%) of MSM in a 2011 public health survey declared that they had been tested for HIV in the last 12 months and knew the result (Van Gemert et al. 2013, 18, 22). The most common mode of HIV transmission identified in Pacific Island Countries (excluding Papua New Guinea) was unprotected 'heterosexual' intercourse (Van Gemert et al. 2013, 2).
3. A peer educator is a volunteer trained to help a group of peers change their behaviour, for example, with regard to sexual health.

4. The Sisters of Solidarity was established after two Wan Smolbag employees attended a meeting in Samoa organised by the Pacific Sexual Diversity Network. One of these employees told me that she had been 'pushed' by this regional network to create a network independent from Wan Smolbag to conduct information workshops, peer education sessions and discussions on the daily issues faced by MSM and transgender members. In 2016, the Sisters of Solidarity became the VPride Foundation (Sista 2016).
5. Following Alexeyeff and Besnier (2014, 2), I use the term 'non-heteronormativity' (and its derivatives) to refer to practices, categories and identities that do not correspond to hegemonic (or heteronormative) sexualities and gender relations. This term is useful because it is vaguer than terms such as 'non-heterosexuality' which focuses on practices. The concept 'non-heteronormativity', as employed by Alexeyeff and Besnier (2014, 2), underlines the dynamic nature of gender, sex and sexualities.
6. In Vanuatu, a 'homosexual act with a person of the same sex' is criminalised only if one of the partners is under 15 years of age. Since 2007, the age of sexual consent has been the same regardless of the sex of the partners (Vanuatu Sessional Legislation 2007).
7. In the book *Introduction aux études sur le genre*, the term gender is defined as a "hierarchical system of bicategorisation between the sexes (man/woman) and between the values and representations associated with them (masculine/feminine)" (Bereni et al. 2011, 10). In this paper, I use the terms 'woman' and 'man' to refer to the social categories produced by this system.
8. I present these terms as categories when I want to emphasise that they are used to classify people.
9. For reasons of confidentiality, the names used in this paper have been changed.
10. In this paper, I use 'they', 'their' and 'themselves' to refer to a person whose gender identity does not need to be mentioned or is not known. In Bislama (the Vanuatu's lingua franca), pronouns are gender-neutral.
11. Wan Smolbag Theatre was initiated by a small group of actors and has developed into a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) with a wide range of activities and services, including health services.
12. In Indonesia, the category 'transgender' is used by *waria* not to refer to a stable identity related to gender presentation, but to refer to a particular period of their life (from mid-teens to late twenties) often marked by national and transnational migration related to sex work. Hegarty (2017) therefore argues that migration and youth are as central as gender and sexuality to the ways in which the category 'transgender' is used by *waria* to describe their experiences.
13. When public health researchers at the Burnet Institute first set out to interview 150 MSM (and transgender people) for the Bio-Behavioural survey conducted in Port Vila in 2011, only 52 agreed to participate. This low response rate was mainly due to fear that their non-heteronormative sexual practices or identities would be revealed (Van Gemert et al. 2013, 10).
14. In the Presbyterian system, an Elder is a person elected by the assembly of members of a church to maintain church discipline.

15. In the Burnet Institute survey, 88.9% of 'MSM' (compared to 31.8% of 'transgender' people) reported ever having sex with a woman (Van Gemert et al. 2013, viii).
16. My interlocutors presented the terms '*levav*' and '*hafhaf*' as synonyms. They did not give me any indication of where the term '*levav*' comes from, but it is possible that it is related to the term '*vavin*' (woman) in Namakura.
17. According to a public health survey conducted in 2008, 25% of pregnant women tested at the Port Vila Central Hospital suffered from a urogenital infection caused by *Chlamydia trachomatis* (SPC and Vanuatu MoH 2008, 33).
18. In addition, according to the Bio-Behavioural survey conducted in Port Vila in 2011, the prevalence of *Chlamydia* infection was only 17% among the 'MSM' and 21% among the 'TG' (Van Gemert et al. 2013, 22), compared for example to 25% of pregnant women surveyed at the Port Vila Central Hospital in 2008 (SPC and Vanuatu MoH 2008, 33). Moreover, 42% of 'MSM' and 25% of 'TG', interviewed by the Burnet Institute, reported using a condom during their last sexual intercourse session (Van Gemert et al. 2013, ix), compared to 35% of men and 20% of women surveyed in Vanuatu in the 2013 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) (Vanuatu MoH et al. 2014, 191-192).
19. Various foreign charitable organisations and several UN agencies provide financial support to Wan Smolbag's activities. The Australian and New Zealand governments, through the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) and the New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAID), are the two main donors.
20. Wan Smolbag's nurses and educators are almost all Melanesian. Some of them live in the so-called 'poor' areas of Port Vila. The educators' level of education is no higher than the national average. However, each year, they attend a few days of sexual and reproductive health workshops led by senior educators.

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