

# **TRANS/FORMING CHURCH IN THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION: NARRATIVES OF HOSPITABLE ECCLESIOLOGY BY PHILIPPINE AND TONGAN TRANSGENDER WOMEN**

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Published online: 20 January 2020

## **ABSTRACT**

Transgender Christians in the Asia Pacific region often experience conditional acceptance or even blatant rejection from their churches and faith communities. Confronting such inhospitality, this article proposes a hospitable ecclesiology, or an attitude of doing and becoming church that welcomes all human beings by recognizing, listening to, understanding and including their lived complexity. Thus, “trans/forming church” gestures towards an active affirmation and deployment of the lived experiences and insights of transgender people in ecclesiological construction. In theologizing the testimonies of Philippine and Tongan trans women, I propose that the project of trans/forming church in order to foster a hospitable ecclesiology for gender-diverse people can draw on their emphases on unconditional inclusion, relying on God and the Scriptures for ethical trajectories, and participatory community ministry.

Only ... “LOVE” will conquer everything!!

– Agabe Tu’inukuafe<sup>1</sup>

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,  
for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

– Hebrews 13:2 (RSV)

At the outset of this article, I turn briefly to Hebrews 13:2, which appears above as the second epigraph, as a scriptural articulation of my acknowledgment that many gender-nonconforming Christians experience unrequited love from their faith communities. Some discover that ecclesiastical acceptance is laden with conditions, condescension or trivialization, while others meet with an outright lack of hospitality. Individuals who do not conform to cisnormative and heteropatriarchal systems of self-presentation are often neglected as strangers, even though, as Thomas Hanks avers, “hospitality to strangers [is] the most important expression of Christian love” (2006, 713). These individuals are relegated to the periphery of a perceived legitimate fold, or consigned to its hinterlands. Church-sanctioned estrangement risks missing the opportunity to

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<sup>1</sup> Communication with author, 13th March 2016. Then, Tu’inukuafe was the project officer and treasurer of the Tonga Leitis Association, and graciously participated in my research project through a qualitative survey.



entertain angels—and is the failure to discern the messages and workings of the divine out of misguided notions that God refuses to operate from outside the borders of the respectable and familiar.

For this reason, this article envisages a hospitable ecclesiology, a theologically-informed demeanor in doing and becoming church that includes a welcoming stance towards all human beings because it listens closely and wholeheartedly to their experiences. The main title of this article takes a leaf out of Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood's anthology *Trans/Formations*. In the introduction, Isherwood (2009, 3) speaks of gender-nonconforming people "who defy physical boundaries and so question social sexual roles by their actions." The intent of the volume, she explains, is to spark consideration of greater theological inclusion through the radical thinking of transgender Christians, which reflects the fluidity and transgressive nature of Christianity itself.

Inspired by her words, I use "trans/form" to refer to the recognition, affirmation, inclusion and deployment of the lived experiences and insights of transgender people of God and Christianity. I draw on the lived experiences of two Christian transgender women—one from the Philippines and the other from Tonga—as theological starting points and resources. These two individuals were two out of nineteen participants in a qualitative research project that I undertook in 2016 in collaboration with the international coalition APCOM on Christianity, sexual diversity and access to health services.<sup>2</sup> The project comprised qualitative email surveys, and in-depth interviews in person or through Skype video calls. Surveys and interviews were divided into "grassroots" and "elite" categories. The showcasing of Kahleesi and Mataele's voices here reflects specific rather than overarching transgender experiences of Christianity in the Asia Pacific. Moreover, their mostly benign experiences of church contribute to the largely church-positive narratives that are present in this article.

I conducted a thirty-minute face-to-face interview with "Kahleesi," a Philippine Christian trans woman and member of an inclusive and affirming church, during my fieldwork in the Philippines. I also spoke with Joey Joleen Mataele, the co-founder of the Tonga Leitis Association and the Pacific Sexual Diversity Network (PSDN) via Skype video for forty-five minutes. At the time of our interview, Mataele was the executive director of the Association, established in 1992 "with a focus on improving the rights and celebrating the contribution of Leitis in Tonga" (Tonga Leitis Association 2017).

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) estimates a total of 122,800 and 400 transgender people in the Republic of the Philippines and the Kingdom of Tonga respectively (2019a, 2019b). "Transgender" is itself a contemporary term, the origin of which is often credited to Virginia Prince (Ekins and King 2006). It denotes "an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth" (GLAAD 2011). This term is in contrast to "cisgender" or being "on the same side" and has come to be understood as an antonym to trans (Heinz 2016, 8).

In the Philippines, the most common appellation for people who were assigned male at birth (AMAB), but live as women is *baklā*. Martin F. Manalansan IV explains that *baklā* is not an autochthonous version of gay, but an enduring Philippine identity that straddles "the in-between, or *alanganin* [and which] conflates the categories of effeminacy, transvestism . . . homosexuality [and] cross-dressing" (2003, 25; see also Campos 2012; Garcia 2008). In Tonga, AMAB persons who live as women are known as *fakaleitī* or its abbreviated form *leitī*, which translates approximately as "like a lady." The *leitīs* are "a quasi-institutionalized, conditionally accepted gender identity that, while tolerated in most social circumstances, is not completely condoned and

<sup>2</sup> APCOM strives to shift attitudes and sensitize society to the needs of gender-variant and sexually diverse communities, including bridging the gap between faith and the diversity of gender, sexuality and sex. While respecting the freedom of religion and expression, APCOM believes that they can never justify the denial of basic rights among these communities. See <http://www.apcom.org/>.

remains on the margins of mainstream gender sensibilities” (Good 2014, 223; see also Besnier 2004). *Baklā* and *leiī* are thus local subject positions that continue to inhabit the betwixt-and-between of gender and sexual categories in the Philippines and Tonga, while simultaneously negotiating the transnational subject position of “transgender.”

Both Kahleesi and Mataele self-identified as “transgender” and “trans woman,” although the latter also referred to herself as a *leiī*. While it is beyond the remit of this article to undertake a detailed study of the interlocking politics of global, native and glocal identities, I do want to mention that they may have utilized “transgender” for a recognizable (trans)gender category and connected with “transgender movements and issues internationally, potentially building networks of solidarity across countries and continents that are vital to all forms of political activism” (Chatterjee 2018, 313).

Sharon A. Bong (2018, 41) observes that the transgender person often “indexes primordial and alternative worldviews that are premised on ‘sacred gender’ and ‘gender pluralism.’” This observation is often traceable in spiritualities and cosmologies that name gender-diverse people as intermediaries between the material and the spiritual (Garcia 2008; Graham 1987; Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997; Ho 2009). In contemporary times, much has been written about gender-diverse people from religious, spiritual and theological perspectives (Cheng 2013; Childs 2009; Cornwall 2012; Goh 2012; Hero 2012; Hipsher 2009; Kugle 2010).

Despite historical, geographical, ethnic, socio-cultural and linguistic differences, both the Philippines and Tonga are Christian-majority countries. In the Philippines, Roman Catholicism is embraced by 80.9 percent of the population (Index Mundi 2018a) while 64.9 percent of Tongans are Protestant Christians (Index Mundi 2018b). While there are no precise laws which penalise gender-variant or sexually diverse people in the Philippines, sodomy and cross-dressing are criminalized in Tonga. In both countries, conservative socio-cultural norms and Christian principles police and dictate gender and sexual identities and expressions (Conde 2018; Conan 2018), and propel non-cisnormative and non-heteronormative communities towards various forms of vulnerability, discrimination and suspicion, not least being held accountable for the spread of HIV. There are, however, several small churches in the Philippines that unconditionally admit transgender and queer Christians to their ranks (for instance, Open Table MCC 2019; Metropolitan Community Church of Marikina 2019).

This article retains only Kahleesi’s anonymity. Mataele’s narratives in this article make her easily identifiable. Any attempt at anonymity would be counterintuitive and may trivialize the epistemological potency of her position as an important HIV and human rights activist in Tonga (consult Kaiser 2009). My article is a detailed analysis and interpretation of both individuals’ narratives, and my theorizing abides by Kathy Charmaz’s (1995) assertion that knowledge and meaning are always co-constructed between the researcher and research participant. I do not speak *for* transgender people, but *with* them as a respectful trans ally who continues to learn (see Goh 2019b, 6). My own position as a mostly Christian Malaysian gay cisgender man, academic, and ordained minister, is embedded into this article.

I see my interviewees not as individuals with a total sense of “possession, appropriation, self-foundation and power” (Iveković 2010, 53) but as *fluid, evolving and communing subjects* who shape and are shaped by multifarious political, socio-institutional, class, economic, ethnic and faith systems. Such subjects simultaneously evince autonomy, agency, constraint and subjugation. Nevertheless, I admit that as urban-dwelling and educated personages who are respected in their churches and social communities, both my research participants embody a significant measure of privilege, self-empowerment and influence.

## Hermeneutical Tapestry

Edmund Chia's thoughts on a new way of being church in the context of interreligious dialogue are very helpful for this present discussion (1999, 3). A maturing church, he submits, is one that encounters challenge and change, and "begins to see things in a new light and perceives life and the universe from a broader perspective." Still, a deep investment in age-old familiarities that causes the church to become fearful and doubtful of future possibilities thrusts it into a form of liminal precariousness in relation to its purpose and meaning. Chia predicts that "prophets will come by way of persons who dare to address this 'in-between' period with creativity, daringness and foresight" (1999, 4). Such bold prophets, I argue, include transgender Christians who can teach churches to be more hospitable in their theologies and pastoral ministries. As Marcella Althaus-Reid (2000, 4) proposes, "the everyday lives of people always provide us with a starting point for a process of doing a contextual theology without exclusions."

Returning momentarily to what I discussed earlier in this article, it would seem that Christian spaces play a key role in the hardships faced by gender-variant and sexually diverse individuals in the Philippines and Tonga. Holly Devor (2002, 9) says of transgender people that "to be unthinkable, to be unspeakable, to be un-namable is to be socially invisible" – to which I would add "ecclesiological invisible" or considered inconsequential in the theologizing of church.

Based on her studies of the socio-cultural interactions of young Asian American and Pacific Islander women, Jennifer Yee (2009, 54) insists that "sites of interaction" may serve not only as sites of oppression, but also as "sites of resistance" and "sites of liberation." Borrowing her idea, I hold that while churches can act as locations that spearhead persecution and even diminishment, they can also become stepping-stones that lead to non-compliance, emancipation and empowerment. When sites of denouncement and exclusion are reconstituted as sites of affirmation and inclusion, such places also become nurseries for hospitable ecclesiology.

Hospitable ecclesiology forces churches to ask the question: "How can we become 'more church' in accordance with the mind of Christ by incorporating the embodied experiences of those whom we have long dismissed and excluded?" Hospitable ecclesiology is deeply cognizant that "a church of decent people keeps its doors barred against those who might upset the status quo or insist that the church do the gospel" (Bohache 2013, 275). Hospitable ecclesiology humbly accepts that churches do not and need not possess all the answers, and thus continues to explore, discover, understand and struggle, while clinging resolutely to unconditional love—as exemplified by Christ—as its main premise and goal. Hospitable ecclesiology is thus an attitude of theologizing in which churches radically affirm and incorporate the insights and experiences of gender-diverse people in their theological and pastoral formulations.

## Weaving Hospitable Ecclesiology: Entitlement, Not Privilege

Both Kahleesi and Mataele perceive themselves as trans women, not in spite of being Christian, or Christian despite being trans women, but as people who are *both* Christian *and* transgender. Kahleesi locates this amalgamated identity in God and ecclesiastical spaces:

Interviewer: What does it mean for you to be a Christian transwoman?

Kahleesi: I think the most important thing there is, that you believe in God. That you have Christ as part of your life, and, you go to church . . . pray . . . someone [with a] more powerful being is there. Church is important because I feel the solemnity, communication with God. I mean you can pray anywhere, for me it's a different kind of feeling over there. You're

closer. When I go to church, I listen to the word of God, I mean, make me feel like nearer. It's his house anyway.<sup>3</sup>

In response to my enquiry about the meaning of being both Christian and transgender, Kahleesi first foregrounds her belief in God and the integral involvement of Christ in her life. Her main strategy for upholding this belief and sustaining the divine presence in her lived reality is prayer. Although she believes that one “can pray anywhere,” she experiences a specific connectivity with God when she “go[es] to church,” a space which evokes “a different kind of feeling” and facilitates “communication with God.” I suggest that since it is at church that she feels “closer” and “nearer” to God, the “solemnity” of which she speaks is in actuality *a purposeful disposition of clarity and focus* that she finds absent elsewhere. Church therefore catalyzes her “own spiritual connection to God [as] part of the link that is necessary to spiritual growth, maturity and health” (Hipsher 2009, 101). Her personal spirituality is not detached from church, but is inextricably bound to it.

Kahleesi's inclination to “listen to the word of God” at church may be a reference to the proclamation of scriptural excerpts during services, but may also indicate a heightened sensitivity to the personal relationship that she fosters with God and Christ as a Philippine Christian trans woman. “[God's] house” for Kahleesi is really God's home, a space of familiarity and intimacy with the divine in which she knows that “God as the Creative Designer . . . desires human community without demanding the relinquishment of human diversity” (Goh 2019c, 438). In this space where this bond is continually renewed, God's home transforms into Kahleesi's home.

Mataele's notion of being both Christian and transgender, however, acutely recognizes the transnegative rhetoric that assails Tongan Christian trans women:

We were all brought up by Christian families. But we don't let the Christianity stories that come from men that are printed against us, we don't let that overcloud our knowledge of how to accept ourselves for who we are. . . . I mean, God loves everyone. I keep praying and ask God, why was I made like this? I never get an answer!

Mataele's dual reference to being “brought up by Christian families” and “Christianity stories . . . from men”—with “men” being a metonym for “human beings”—may be indicative of the disapprobation that she and other trans women have experienced in their intimate social circles, as well as in the circulation of anti-transgender literature. In the face of such antagonism, Mataele resorts to prayer in order to find a definitive answer to her gender-variant embodiment. As her orison offers no resolution, she falls back on the magnitude of divine love. Possibly she recognizes deeply that “God exists in the places where the human heart strives for integrity and seeks God” (Tanis 2003, 181).

Perhaps her experience has been similar to that of Joanne Leung (2015, 26), when the Hong Kong Christian transgender activist interrogated the divine with a similar question and received this inner conviction: “God said that if this was my desire then I had to bear all responsibilities [and] that wherever I go and whatever decision I make, God will be with me!” My interpretation is that in Mataele's life, “stories . . . from men” or the transnegative metanarratives that assail her are superseded by God's stories or the workings of God in her life.

I admit to feeling a little disconcerted by Mataele's effusive conviction that “God loves everyone.” Hugo Córdova Quero's avowal that “theology has historically invested huge amounts of energy into fitting the *decent* patterns of societies (supported by the so-called *orthodoxy*) and condemning those that are considered *indecent* (related to those classified as *heterodox*)” (2006, 81; original emphases) must not be taken lightly. “God loves everyone” is almost always

<sup>3</sup> Interviews were conducted completely in English, although the research participants spoke the language with varying degrees of proficiency.

accompanied by an assumption that “everyone” loved by God adheres to decent binary, cisnormative, heteropatriarchal and dyadic forms of gender, sexuality and biology. This assumption undermines the notion that the unconditional love of God is extended to each person *in* their gender and sexual particularities, not *in spite of* them.

Another interpretation of “God loves everyone” may lie in the fact that more than a few *leitīs*, including Mataele herself, could have been subjected to narratives that proclaim their exclusion from God’s love due to their gender diversity, possibly from “Christian families” and in transnegative literature. It is possible that such oppositional attitudes are linked to the exclusive ecclesiastical systems that she intends to nullify with this quip.

Speaking personally and perhaps even for her community as a leader and representative, she proclaims her steadfastness in resisting any effort that can “overcloud [trans women’s] knowledge of how to accept [them]selves for who [they] are.” I suggest that “overcloud” refers to an attenuation of inner intelligibility, coherence and confidence with regard to the wholeheartedness of God’s love for trans women. Thereafter, I see Mataele replacing “overcloud[ness]” with an *unclouded theological vision*, or a deep clarity and self-assurance that comes from resolutely adhering to God’s unqualified love. Ignorance about why she is a *leitī* is replaced by an unwavering belief in unconditional divine love that brings her ongoing lucidity and inner peace.

Both Kahleesi and Mataele’s testimonies attest to a mentality that holds intersecting Christian and transgender identities as a rightful entitlement for church membership rather than a privilege to be earned. I thus suggest that they participate in, and contribute to trans/forming church from three crucial but not exhaustive perspectives: (i) insistence on unconditional inclusion; (ii) dependence on God and the Scriptures for ethical trajectories; and (iii) concrete realisation of participatory community ministry.

## Unconditional Inclusion

Kahleesi’s vision of Christianity as instantiated by church is one that foregrounds a cherishing of diversity and a preference for unconditional inclusion. The stand that she takes in this regard may echo a deep-seated desire for Philippine churches to uphold and perform “Christian teachings”—perhaps in reference to both ecclesiastical doctrines and the “raw” principles of Christ—in ways that are more radical than at present:

Churches should be more inclusive. Christianity is for everyone who likes to embrace it. There’s but one race, it’s the human race, and this diversity within this race that makes it even more beautiful to be a part of this Christian community. If you are able to give love, to bring forth peace to your brethren, and if you are able to accept people for who they are, then that is what matters most. These are the Christian teachings that I value the most and that made my experiences in the church community all the more beautiful.

Kahleesi’s distinction between “Christian teachings” and “experiences in the church community,” her underscoring of the need for churches to “be more inclusive,” and her emphatic belief in the attainability of Christian identity and teachings for all who wish to avail themselves of these is striking. She seems to imply that Philippine churches are falling short of their divinely commissioned mandate to be unconditionally accepting and non-judgemental.

I propose that Kahleesi is presenting herself as an embodiment of diversity within the “one ... human race,” and deserving of Christian inclusion. She celebrates her gender diversity by naming it a “beautiful” feature of the “Christian community” or church. She recasts her Christian-transgender identity from an anomalous characteristic to a valuable attribute. That the adjective “beautiful” is used for both human diversity and experiences of church suggests an important nexus.

When human diversity is celebrated instead of condemned or suppressed in church, the doings of church become more meaningful.

Her call for churches to convey love, peace and acceptance to human beings “for who they are” likely points towards the inability of some (if not the majority of) churches to embrace transgender people with unqualified acceptance. According to Patrick S. Cheng (2011, 106), “to the extent that the church is one body that is made up of people of many sexualities, genders, and races, we can understand the church as a place that dissolves the traditional boundaries that divide us from one another.” Kahleesi’s exhortation echoes Cheng’s statement.

Kahleesi’s call for churches to recognise that “diversity” exists in “one race” underpins the reality that “Christian *unity* does not require *uniformity*” (Lowe 2017, 35; emphases added). Kahleesi’s “experiences [of] church community” have been “beautiful” because they ignite within her an appreciation for human diversity that reveals how people “are made in the image of one dazzlingly diverse Spirit” (Mollenkott 2009, 50).

Mataele’s thoughts are very similar to Kahleesi’s, as the following narrative reveals:

I think that the church leaders should actually teach themselves to love everyone, no matter who they are. I think our church leaders should be more open-minded, and they should accept us for who we are. In order for us to move forward, they need to speak our language. And to be us, to know exactly, put themselves in our shoes. If they were transgender, what would they do? I’m sure they won’t want us to hate them. Love is a two-way street. They need to give us space to talk, and to be decision makers.

Mataele’s recommendations that church leaders develop the ability “to love,” “be more open-minded” and accepting of human beings, regardless of “who they are,” implies that Tongan churches have not fully exercised unconditional inclusion. She holds the inability of churches to empathize with gender-diverse people as responsible for this ecclesiastical shortcoming. Churches, she avers, have not learned “to put themselves in [transgender people’s] shoes” in order to truly understand the tribulations of transgender communities. Mataele’s poignant question addressed to the same churches, “if they were transgender, what would they do?” is followed by her instant response that churches would not want to be despised merely on the basis of gender-diversity. This response may allude to Mataele’s own experiences of ecclesiastical contempt and rejection for being a trans woman.

Her numerous comments lay bare her exasperation with an ecclesiastical dissonance that occludes opportunities for transgender people and churches “to move forward” towards more productive synergies. Furthermore, by declaring that “love is a two-way street,” she appears to state that love, open-mindedness and acceptance cannot flow unilaterally from Christian trans women to churches. Instead, Christian trans women are entitled to the same treatment from churches. This forms “an alternative vision to a hegemonic belief system [that can overturn] the common standards of worthiness and acceptability” (Astorga 2016, 259). As Justin Tanis (2003, 181) points out, “too many religious institutions support the status quo and preach that the holy is found in the socially acceptable,” thus dismissing the truth that God is also found beyond the decent and respectable.

In this regard, Mataele’s contention that churches “need to speak [transgender people’s] language” and “give [transgender people] space to talk” hints at the fact that churches are ignorant of and/or disinterested in the issues, needs and concerns of transgender people. Churches are thus complicit in the silencing of their voices. Tanis’ (2003, 89) comment that in the United States “the relative rarity of encounters that religious groups have with transgendered [sic] people and the factors that make it difficult for congregations to engage these questions” may also ring true in Tonga.

The lack of expertise in transgender issues among churches almost implies an inevitable exclusion of transgender people from the church, or a belittlement of their experiences and contributions to ecclesiastical life. The amelioration of such an awkward situation, Mataele quips,

lies in a willingness of churches to allow transgender people “to be decision makers” or active and equal participants in church leadership. Despite her frustrations, she acknowledges that there are efforts to foster good relations between churches and the transgender community, namely the Tonga Leitis Association:

Interviewer: Let’s talk a little bit about the Roman Catholic institution or any Christian institution in Tonga. Have there been any official pronouncements on [men who have sex with men] and transgender people?

Mataele: There hasn’t been any real official discussion from any church. But with the Catholics, we work closely with our [church leader]. As a matter of fact, he’s the only church leader who was there for the opening of our office, in our drop-in centre. He’s the only one who’s been ever, approach us for anything, spiritual or accept any of our invitations for any of our events. Even the HIV advocacy and the World Aids Day. He’s the only who’s ever given full support of the work. Apart from him, there’s been support from the other churches, because they know we’re the drivers for the work of prevention of HIV. . . . There’s only one particular church here . . . preaching against us.

Mataele’s claim of an absence of “any real discussion from any church” describes the inability or unwillingness of faith communities to engage in thorny issues of gender and sexuality. Her brief mention of a church that is “preaching against [trans women]” demonstrates how “transpeople are sensitive to the injustices and oppressions that arise when some people are considered more sacred, more perfect and more entitled than other people” (Mollenkott 2009, 50). Nevertheless, Mataele highlights a relationship that exists between a “Catholic [church leader]” and “other churches” and the Association, due to the latter’s efforts in “HIV advocacy and the World Aids Day.”

On the one hand, it appears as though the amenability of the church towards trans women is purely for utilitarian purposes. In this sense, the worth and acceptability of *leitīs* is contingent on their contribution as “drivers for the work of [HIV] prevention.” There is a possibility that the Association is perceived as a buffer between less respectable HIV issues and more respectable ecclesiastical hierarchies that feel obliged, but are hesitant or lack the know-how, to engage in HIV-related outreach.

Crudely put, churches offer “spiritual” support and graciously accept “invitations [to] events” in exchange for the *leitīs*’ involvement in such controversial grassroots efforts. *Leitīs* are “outsiders-within their faith communities” (Kwok 1992, 105) accorded the status of *temporary insiders* due to their functionality. Consequently, while both parties seem at peace with this arrangement, more transgressive and potentially volatile issues of gender and sexuality appear to be deliberately overlooked or simplistically ignored.

On the other hand, issues of sexual health that hold concern for both churches and transgender HIV advocates may be the ideal shared space, allowing two parties that are seemingly doomed to perpetual enmity to forge a relationship based on commonality rather than difference. The Association and the church may be leveraging this relationship to maintain friendly ties with each other. The situation may be such that both parties have elected to focus on commonality rather than difference.

I have suggested variously in other works that a pivotal dialogue point for churches and transgender and queer communities could well lie in shared humanitarian projects (for instance, Goh 2019a; Goh, Meneses, and Messer 2019). As such, the relationship between the church and the Association may be one that is forged with mixed intentions on both sides. That which commands the most important consideration, I submit, is the possibility for such tentative relationships to act as trans/formative stepping-stones to radical inclusion in the future.

### Ethical Trajectories



The concomitant living out of gender and faith for Kahleesi and Mataele is, as discussed, an unsteady enterprise that requires clarity and guidance. Their views suggest that they draw on their relationship with God and engagement with the Scriptures for this purpose. The following narrative occurred immediately after Kahleesi intimated her connection with the divine that was amplified in church:

I think he looks at me as a transwoman like anybody else, I mean, what have you been doing? Gauging on me at the good things, the bad things that you've done, based on his teachings, the teachings in the Bible, frail in nature, capable of doing good and bad, like any other human being . . . In all of my prayers . . . I consider him as the guiding, ultimate being, because every time I pray, I have to ask him to . . . always bring me to the right path, to always bring me home. . . . It give you a peace direction . . . will help guide you to become a better person.

Kahleesi imagines God engaging with her in a sort of biblically-framed interrogation of the “good things” and “bad things” that she has experienced in her life. This suggests she perceives the divine as a sort of Moral Arbiter in her life. While this statement may be one that circumvents gender nonconformity, I am drawn to her mention of “frail[ty] in nature” and the capacity for making both life-giving and death-dealing decisions “like any other human being.” Therefore, while gender identity may be a major identity marker for Kahleesi, she seems convinced that identity alone is insufficient in “human–divine interrelationality,” or that which “reflects and images God’s own desire for the continuous un/becomings and un/doings of gendered and sexually identifiable subjectivities . . . towards greater human thrivings and realisations” (Goh 2018, 87). Instead, *it is what she does with her gender-diverse identity* that determines the quality of her relationship with God.

This astuteness prompts her to pray for guidance concerning “the right path” from the “ultimate being.” Furthermore, I propose that her understanding of her relationship with God is extremely significant, because God is the One to whom Kahleesi is ultimately accountable in her ethical deliberations. By conversing with and listening to God, she receives definitive ethical trajectories. At this juncture, I am reminded of D. Simon Lourdasamy’s stance “that every communion [with God in prayer] carries with it a prologue, a conversation and a dialogue with a personal God Who listens to us, and at the same time speaks to us and gives us His [sic] gift, all within an atmosphere of friendship” (1978, 4–5).

Therefore, prayer acts as interior signposting that brings Kahleesi “home”— perhaps an allusion to her earlier reference to “God’s house.” It is here that she feels an unparalleled connection with God as a Philippine Christian trans woman and which then bears fruit in “peace,” “direction,” and “becom[ing] a better person.” Kahleesi’s experience corroborates Tanis’ belief that “of all the spiritual resources available to trans people, the most powerful are the times when God speaks directly to us of the freedom to be ourselves and to follow the path that God sets before us” (2003, 129).

Mataele finds the Bible shepherds her and Tongan Christian trans women through what she considers the superficialities of life:

As a matter of fact, the Tonga Leitis Association has their own little programme, we call it the bible sharing, every Friday evening. . . . It hasn’t been easy. But at the same time, the reason why we do it is to actually uplift the spiritual life of each of our members, to balance their lives. Not just stay in the materialistic side. And to remind them that they are who they are today because of the Man above, you know. In a way, we’re trying to make sure that it’s not just about parties, it’s not all about drinking, there’s something ahead of them that’s better.

I find it noteworthy that Mataele refers to the Association's weekly "Bible sharing" evenings as a "little programme." This could be little more than an effort to express modesty or affection through use of the diminutive, but it could also signal a sense of disenfranchisement. "Little programme" is possibly a cry for rightful legitimacy in reading and sharing the Scriptures as trans women, given that gender-variant people are often touted as ineligible to participate in such devotions. Moreover, as the *leitīs* are neither scripturally nor theologically trained in any formal manner, their Bible sharing can easily collapse in deference to hierarchical dominance. Yong's (2009, 50) experience of church as fostering "self-alienation, submission, the blind 'trust and obey' faith among its women members" is, I believe, also true of its trans women members in this context, and I return to this matter in the following section.

I understand Mataele's remark that "it hasn't been easy" as representing ambivalent feelings that straddle possible struggles with thoughts of unworthiness in creating a trans-based Bible-sharing programme and sustaining the interest of trans women who are more partial to entertainment. That such efforts are meant to "uplift the spiritual life" of *leitīs* in order to create some "balance" could be understood as the consistent wielding of biblical teachings for the purpose of revitalising a sense of Christian morality, given the Association's members can be prone to overindulgence in "parties" and "drinking." Akin to Kahleesi's Moral Arbiter, who guides her towards a more life-giving existence, Mataele's "Man above"—despite rehearsing an androcentric reference to the divine—becomes the stark reminder of "something ahead ... that's better," or of more meaningful human experiences beyond the pale of pure amusement. The praxis of trans/forming church must be accompanied by serious consideration of the nuanced ways in which transgender people relate to God and the bible.

## Participatory Community Ministry

Within their respective faith communities, Kahleesi and Mataele take up the task of "participatory community ministry" by immersing themselves in ecclesiastical programmes to share their faith and offer presence, companionship and solidarity to others. As evident from the following narrative, Kahleesi is enthusiastic about her involvement in church:

Interviewer: What are some of the most meaningful experiences for you as a transwoman in a church?

Kahleesi: I think the opportunity to get involved with the activities, or the programmes, that we had in our church ... like going out with the youths, and other programmes promoting our Christian faith, you know with the young people. So we go to different places, different municipalities and provinces, and we have Bible studies, camping. I also had the opportunity to be one of the leaders in our locality back then.

For Kahleesi, participatory community ministry involves church-based events such as "going out with the [youth]," engaging in evangelization efforts "to different places ... municipalities and provinces," "Bible studies [and] camping." Her eagerness to participate in such youth-oriented ecclesiastical activities may be driven by an unconditional acceptance of her twofold identity as transgender and Christian that she experiences from her fellow church members. A supportive ecclesiastical environment and multiple opportunities to take part in church activities without fear of rejection or discrimination fortifies both her transgender identity and her faith.

Kahleesi is not merely tolerated or simply even accepted as a Christian trans woman—she is acclaimed as a full member of her church through unconditional participation and a leadership role. Not unlike the spiritual strategies of Queer Asian Pacific Americans (QAPAs) which Cheng (2006, 238) observed, Kahleesi "redefine[s] spirituality by reclaiming the idea of 'sacred space' to include any place where [she]

experience[s] Ultimate Reality with others in community.” During the course of our conversation, she constantly repeated both her keenness to accompany the youth of her church and her pleasure in being “involved” as “part of the church’s community”:

More importantly, I got involved, I was there, and I felt I am part of the church’s community. So it doesn’t matter if you are a trans woman or not, or whatever your gender orientation is, for as long as you can become a role model to your fellow Christians and be able to touch their lives and be able to bring forth positive changes to their lives, then that’s what matters to me.

The crux of Kahleesi’s involvement is her ability to “become a role model,” who helps to bring about “positive changes” in the lives of the church’s younger members, buttressing her inclusion within her Christian community. Her remark that her transgender identity is irrelevant in this regard is significant. It seemingly glosses over the particularities of transgender identity that are crucial to pastoral, spiritual and theological conceptualizations. Tanis (2003, 164) posits that “the concreteness of the specific body creates a unique experience and manifestation of God, and the experience of a transgendered body is necessarily different from one that is not transgendered.” The transgender body can lend a critical hermeneutical lens to challenge universal and essentialist “one-size-fits-all” Christian metanarratives that are often unconsciously transnegative and queernegative.

It is very likely that Kahleesi is attempting to subsume her transgender identity under an overarching Christian identity. Such a “gender-neutral” perspective can be problematic, as Christian pastoral, spiritual and theological discourses are conditioned and limited by a shifting rhetoric in favour of or against gender variance. Kahleesi’s opinion implies that Christian participation provides an exemption from an otherwise biblically and ecclesiastically disagreeable gender identity (see Winter 2006, para. 22), rather than the idea that both Christian and gender categories can operate synergistically within a transgender embodiment.

Mataele shares strikingly similar gender-neutral ideas of church:

We’ve had ministers and pastors coming to our bible study, we invite one priest this week, one from another church the next week, to come and share, and also to see where the bible says, or where we can share something in the bible that links to the work that we do, and for whatever gender we are. . . . And for us to actually share and teach to our younger ones, to be comfortable on who they are.

It is possible that the presence of “ministers and pastors” at the Tonga Leitis Association’s weekly Bible-focused gatherings acts as both a crowd-puller and an authoritative voice on the biblical insights and imperatives for the Association’s work. It is unlikely that these church leaders encourage the Association’s members to queer or “to complicate, to disrupt, to disturb all kinds of orthodoxies, including . . . those that take [the] current sex/gender regime as natural and God-given and those that posit ‘the Bible’ as a flat, transparent window into the divine mind” (Armour 2011, 2). What is more likely is that the *leiitis* are exposed to more pastoral forms of biblical understanding that restore the power of interpretation to the hands of ecclesiastical hierarchies. The forging of “links” between scriptural interpretation and the Association’s “work” indicates an intentional centering of Christianity in the latter’s activities, which can then be interpreted as a divine mandate.

Mataele’s words, “whatever gender we are,” resonate with Kahleesi’s views. She also appears to supplant her transgender identity with a perceived supernumerary category of Christian inclusion. In other words, as long as the Association’s members remain faithful to the intertwining of faith and HIV outreach, the issue of transgender identity diminishes. I find her statement somewhat troubling as it detaches the importance of gender from the deliberately faith-inflected work of the Association. If a chosen gender identity is indeed integral to the embodiment of Tongan

trans women, this core category must figure extensively and unapologetically, and certainly not incidentally in their “Bible study” and consequent “work.”

Nevertheless, I put forward another interpretation of both these individuals’ narratives, and one which appropriates an additive rather than subtractive angle. The “does not matter” and “whatever” dispositions are actually adamant self-assertions that being trans women should not in any way invalidate their Christian identity and church participation. Declarations that a person cannot be transgender, Christian and active in ecclesiastical ministry at the same time are hardly surprising, as “too many have been told that God condemns and rejects them [and] have walked away from either their religious practice or their dream of living as a fulfilled transgendered person” (Tanis 2003, 185). Yet, as Mataele explains in the following narrative, Tongan *leiīs* have also taken on specific church ministerial and leadership positions:

Some of them have even become pastors. Some of them have gone to the missionaries and dedicate their lives to helping, to work on, to serve the poor and all that. I’m only talking about the ones that are Catholics that I know of. Some of them have become leaders as a transgender of the youth at the rural areas. And they dress like me every day, like a woman!

Mataele’s reference to Roman Catholic trans women whom “[she] know[s] of” and who have “become pastors [and] missionaries” needs to be unpacked. The Vatican’s Congregation for Catholic Education (2005) officially forbids men “who practise homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so-called ‘gay culture’” from entering the priesthood, a policy which Andrew K. T. Yip (2008) sees as the Vatican’s pathologizing of sexually diverse people. Although the descriptions of such illicit subjects are at best nebulous, a proscription exists. There is, however, no official prohibition or concession in the Roman Catholic hierarchy for gender-nonconforming persons to take up presbyterial ministry (Blondiau 2019). Nevertheless, trans women who “dress ... like a woman” are often seen as feminine-acting “homosexuals” and who may thus be disqualified from the priesthood on the grounds of sinful recalcitrance.

Those to whom Mataele refers may be lay trans women who “dedicate their lives to [serving] the poor” and who “become leaders ... of the youth.” The “missionaries” she mentions may indicate those who become members of lay apostolate organizations rather than sacred orders—not unlike Kahleesi’s evangelizing efforts as previously discussed. In speaking with more than a hint of pride and dignity that *leiīs* are provided with opportunities to be at the forefront of Christian ministry and leadership, Mataele demonstrates that participatory community ministry becomes a trans/formative gateway to integral ecclesiastical membership for those who would ordinarily be relegated to the margins of church life. The committed *leiīs* embody the reality that “God’s mission may have to be conceived as much wider in scope compared to a possible understanding of Christian mission” (Aleaz 2010, 199), particularly as Christian mission is often seen as the sole province of the cisnormative and heteropatriarchal.

## Concluding Threads: Tied and Otherwise

Kahleesi and Mataele offer insightful imaginings of a hospitable ecclesiology that bears the hallmarks of unconditional inclusion, ethical resources and participatory community ministry. That these trans/formations draw on the complex lived realities of Christian trans women reflects the contingencies, multiplicities and resistances that have marked Christianity since its inception and contributed to its survival. As Kwok Pui-lan (2005, 161) observes, “the relation between gospel and culture has never been simply wholesale borrowing or outright rejection, but full of negotiation and contestation, as well as accommodation.”

The inclusion of trans women’s narratives as theological conversation starters and resources mirrors the testimonies of early Christians who were also thought of as counter-normative,

subversive and irrelevant by the societies of their time. Such an inclusion resonates with Pearl Wong's (2015, 23) exhortation to Christians to "avoid homogenizing experiences and contexts when doing theology [and] practice humility by accepting experiences that are different from [one's] own."

Both churches and transgender Christians must overcome the urge to bypass uncomfortable and complicated discussions that need to take place at the intersection of gender, sexuality, theology and pastoral ministry. Such a course of action, which replaces real issues with simplistic overtures, such as "God loves everyone," imprudently circumvents and disguises what lies at the heart of relations between churches and gender-diverse people. For the latter, as is the case for most human beings, gender is integral to a meaningful embodied life, rather than merely a superficial auxiliary characteristic. Collaborative practices between churches and transgender communities, such as community outreach and evangelization efforts are important, but they need to be recognized as starting points that must lead to more profound conversations.

The process of trans/forming church is a long and arduous one, but I believe that it is necessary for the pursuit of theological and gender justice. However, this process will remain dormant as long as churches continue to assign an *a priori* status of sinful anomaly for gender-diverse people, as well as other communities that are perceived as disoriented from the legitimate path. Continual opposition to gender-nonconforming and sexually variant communities on the grounds of preserving tradition, authenticity and purity, can only serve to portray churches as antagonistic and thus tangential to real life.

Those with transnegative attitudes forget how the nascent church grew in relevance because it provided a home to the counter-cultural, just as it was itself counter-cultural. As aptly expressed by Christina Astorga (2016, 259), "resistance is rooted in our faith tradition." I wish to reiterate the imperative for an ongoing *aggiornamento* in ecclesiology, which will repeatedly throw the doors and windows of churches wide open to the gust of the Spirit. Borrowing from the words of Kenan B. Osborne (2007, 106), I implore churches to "rehear the gospel message but with new ears, new eyes, and new minds"—indeed, with new hearts. It is only then that churches can (re)imagine and (re)realize unprecedented vision, equitable dialogue, radical inclusion, mature development and unfiltered love for the world.

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## Dedication

To the memory of Kenan B. Osborne OFM (1930-2019), who taught me to be wilful and disruptive in theology; to go towards what was truest to me in life; and to always appreciate Asian cultures and theologies alongside Aristotle, Chauvet, Ricoeur and Aquinas; and to my IASACT 2015 peers whom I hold in great esteem.

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