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The Nuances of Sub-Cultures

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What's in a Name?: The Importance of Two Spirits Past and Present¹

Berdache is a term that was used by French explorers to describe the indigenous people they encountered who occupied a third gender role, today known as two spirits. In France, this term had traditionally been used to describe the more submissive male in a homosexual relationship². In some indigenous societies, people holding this intriguing, yet integral role, held a sacred position, yet it was seen as unholy by the European conquerors.³ Being a minority with a culture of deep ancestral bonds, but living in a place where that culture is shunned as savage and outdated is unbelievably difficult. Living in a time when those who were different, such as transvestites and homosexuals, were beaten and murdered or discarded by family for religious reasons is virtually unimaginable.⁴ Yet, modern two spirits who honor their ancestors with their natural urges have seen a way to connect with this sad and largely ignored past. A modern two spirit is a person who finds pride and a personal relationship with those who came before them, regardless of the nonindigenous' populations misconceptions and political or religious desires.⁵ With the legal passing of same sex marriage and a shift in the United States' cultural identity,

¹ This paper began as a research assignment for the History of the Indian Tribes of the United States at Murray State College during the Spring 2017 semester. Additional research was conducted at the Bizzell Memorial Library and the Western History Collections at the University of Oklahoma.

² Carolyn Epple, "Coming to Terms with Navajo 'nádlee'hi': A Critique of 'berdache,' 'Gay,' 'Alternate Gender,' and 'Two-Spirit,'" *American Ethnologist* 25, no. 2 (May 1998): 273-4.

³ For example, see Will Roscoe, "Encyclopedia of the Great Plains," University of Nebraska, accessed November 1, 2017, Plainshumanities.unl.edu and Maurice Kenny, "Tinselled Bucks: A Historical Study in Indian Homosexuality," in *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology*, edited by Will Roscoe (New York City: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 19-20.

⁴ Randy Burns, "Preface," in *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology*, 1-2.

⁵ Epple, 273-4.

and the rediscovering of a largely ignored and forgotten past, these modern two spirits are making a cultural comeback and finding comfort and pride in their ancestor's lead.

Different tribes have different stories to explain two spirits. One origin story that explains the transvestite aspect of two spirits within the Mohave tribe, "A Desire in the Child's Heart," tells that ever since the world had begun, there were transvestites. The God Matavilye died and when he died, he told mankind that he loved them so much and because he loved them so much there would be transvestites. The process started before the child was born and when the child became old enough, they were to be given toys and clothes of their birth gender. If they reject these toys and clothes repeatedly, there was a gathering and if the participants had done everything they could to dissuade the child and it persisted with its choices, it was recognized as a transvestite and given the toys and garments of the opposite sex. A child's gender was decided by the time they were between ten and twelve.⁶

The story of Coyote and Tehoma is a Wintu story. This story is a beautiful tale of love and loss; it is a shame to condense it. Coyote was a God who could change his shape and could seduce any woman. One day he heard of Tehoma, the beautiful God of the smoking mountain. Coyote went to meet Tehoma and they wrestled first as men, then as lovers (they had sex) and Coyote loved Tehoma. While they slept there was a tragedy and when they awoke as far as the eye could see, everything was covered in ash. Coyote and a few other kind spirits looked everywhere and could not find Tehoma. After searching in many directions, Owl found him in the stars. This comforted Coyote, who wished to honor Tehoma, so he and the spirits built a beacon so that when Tehoma returned to Earth, he would know where to find Coyote. This

⁶ Georges Devereux, *Institutionalized Homosexuality of the Mohave Indians* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1937), 37.

beacon was an enormous mound they called Tehoma. This story is a beautiful example of the acceptance that some natives had for their homosexual peers, being closer to the gods, or godlike themselves.⁷

The main indicator in many tribes for a two spirit, seems to have started with a dream. The details of the dream could change per person, per tribe. The details of the dream also indicated what type of two spirit a person would become. There were straight men who would dress like women, there were gay men who still dressed masculine, and there were men who were gay and took up the daily tasks of a woman. These instances were true for women as well. In tribes that had these two spirits, these individuals took a sacred position. In some tribes was is considered lucky for a two spirit to accompany a hunting party, and in others only two spirits could pick the sacred names. A two spirit could be a shaman or married to one and women could be chiefs. Women could and did become chiefs, most often they were two spirits. Several historical accounts of women chiefs have been given, some from native sources, some from outsiders surveying or trading.⁸

Perhaps one of the most famous female chiefs is Woman Chief, whose original name is unknown. Called the Absaroka Amazon by white traders and surveyors, as her status reminded them of the mythical Amazons from Greek literature. Woman Chief was born a Gros Ventres but was captured by the Crow at around eleven years old. The man who adopted her into his family noticed she did not like feminine chores, preferring to learn to shoot, hunt and ride. She became skilled in all these aspects. An extremely biased account says that she was subservient and that he only allowed her to do small tasks to humor her. After her adoptive father and mother passed

⁷ Daniel-Harry Steward, "Coyote and Tehoma (Wintu)," in *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology*, 158-162.

⁸ Kenny, 15-20.

away, she became the new head of the house. This did not suite her taste, so she had a widow come and take care of the daily female needs. One notable difference between Woman Chief and other two spirits is that she did prefer to dress like a woman. One night there was an ambush by the Blackfeet and everyone ran into the fort. The Blackfeet kept calling for a negotiator, but no one dared to come out, except for Woman Chief. Everyone tried to hold her back, but she went up and met them about halfway. She killed three Blackfeet and the rest of the party ran. After this she achieved warrior status and was praised for her bravery. Soon after, she was on the Council of chiefs, where she was ranked third out of one hundred and sixty lodges. She also had up to four wives. She was killed by the tribe of her birth, the Gros Ventres.⁹

Today, there are many organizations across the United States dedicated to giving support and educating indigenous and non-indigenous alike on the history of these largely ignored instances in history.¹⁰ Despite the long history of removal and colonization aimed towards removing traditional practices and beliefs, a variety of people are taking notice. Robert Taylor, a Distinguished Visiting Artist at the Fred Jones Museum of Art at the University of Oklahoma during October 6 to December 30, 2017, displayed a beautiful and thought-provoking image titled “Berdaché.” Painted in 2000, it displays a beautiful yet simple air about a subject that has been largely belittled. A pale man standing with a butterfly on his right hand, wearing a sort of burgundy skirt, himself an odd image. The shadow, however reveals his true self, a woman’s shadow. This modern painting stands as an artistic reminder that these people were and still are here. The misinterpretation of the term two spirit is also a cultural problem. While the name is

⁹ Edwin Thompson *Denig and John C Ewers, Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri. Sioux, Arickaras, Assiniboines, Crees, Crows.* Edited, and with an introduction by John C. Ewers, (Norman : University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), 195-200.

¹⁰ I have attempted to contact the East Coast Two Spirit Society. They have not responded as of yet.

understood by the outside world to mean a binary male or female gender system, historically the modern two spirits are attempting to make it understood that it means so much more.¹¹

¹¹ Jorge Rivas, "Native Americans talk gender identity at a 'two spirit' powwow," *Splinter*, February 29, 2015, accessed January 12, 2018, <https://splinternews.com/native-americans-talk-gender-identity-at-a-two-spirit-1793845144>