



## Berdache

by Susan Stryker

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*Dance to the Berdache*, a sketch created by George Catlin (1796-1872) while he was on the Great Plains among the Sac and Fox Indians.

Until the 1990s, the word *berdache* was used in English-language anthropological and ethnographical literature to describe a widely divergent set of social statuses found in many Native American tribal cultures, but which have been largely incomprehensible to Eurocentric observers, who have attempted to describe berdachism as a combination of homosexuality and transvestism. In recent years, Native Americans and the people who study them have proposed the term *two-spirit* as a more appropriate label.

*Berdache* is not a Native American term. According to linguist Claude Courouve, the word derives from the Persian *bardaj*; via European contact with the Muslim world, the word spread by the early sixteenth century to Italian as *bardasso*, to Spanish as *bardaxa* or *bardaje*, and to French as *bardache*.

*Berdache* is a relatively recent Anglophonic corruption of this term, which was defined in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French dictionaries as "a young man who is shamefully abused" or "a young man or boy who serves as another's succubus, permitting sodomy to be committed on him."

Early Spanish and French explorers and colonizers in North America applied these terms as a means of making sense of the relationships, anatomical sex, sexual behavior, and social gender role of those individuals they encountered who fell outside their own conceptual frameworks.

Berdachism was well known to anthropologists of North America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but discussion of it was most often relegated to footnotes in general texts. Famed anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, a student of Franz Boas and founding figure in the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, did extensive ethnographic fieldwork on berdachism among California tribes. This work reportedly informed *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), a popular science fiction novel set on a world with a complex gender system in which individuals change sex over the course of their life span, which was written by Kroeber's daughter, Ursula K. Le Guin.

Interest in berdachism among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender scholars began with the publication, in Jonathan N. Katz's *Gay American History* (1976), of several ethnographic descriptions discovered in archival source materials. Over the past several decades, a large body of literature on the phenomenon has been produced by Charles Callender and Lee Kochems, Walter Williams, Will Roscoe, Beatrice Medicine, Evelyn Blackwood, Sabine Lang, and others.

Contemporary investigators of two-spirit traditions have documented their existence in 150 tribes for males, and roughly half that number for females. According to Will Roscoe, key features of these traditions include economic specializations (handcrafts and domestic work for males; warfare, hunting, and leadership roles for females); supernatural sanction (in the form of authorization through dreams and visions for adopting the atypical role); and gender variation (relative to normative expectations for males and females in a given society).

Same-sex erotic behavior is no longer considered a definitive marker of two-spirit status, although

homosexuality (defined here as sexual relations involving two individuals of the same anatomical sex, regardless of their social gender) is common.

Historically, two-spirit people typically have been well integrated into the life of their tribes, and have often held revered and honored positions within them. Because of homophobia in the dominant cultures of North America, some aspects of two-spirit traditions have been suppressed or lost. Members of native cultures are often quite reluctant to discuss two-spirit traditions with outsiders, who they feel may misunderstand them or appropriate them for their own agendas.

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