



Native Americans

by Will Roscoe

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A social role for individuals who crossed or mixed male and female characteristics was one of the most widely distributed institutions of native North America--a continent otherwise noted for its cultural diversity (as many as three hundred languages and four hundred distinct societies at the time of contact). Such roles for males (and, likely, intersexed persons) have been documented in 155 tribes, with about one-third of these also having a named role for women who adopted a male lifestyle as well.

Although there are no reliable data concerning the numbers of such persons in various tribes, they were numerous enough among the Timucua of Florida and the Hidatsa, Crow, and Cheyenne of the Plains to be recognized as a social group that functioned cooperatively. Among the Hidatsa, there was said to be 15 to 25 *miáti* in a village, while informants of the small Yuki tribe of California recalled as many as 30.

Anthropologists adopted the term "berdache" to refer to such individuals, following its frontier usage by whites and natives, having been first introduced by the French. Today, native people often prefer the neologism "two-spirit," both to refer to historic "berdaches" and as an identity label for lesbian, gay, and transgender natives. In native languages, a single term sometimes served to identify both male and female berdaches (thus denoting a third gender), while in others distinct terms were employed for each (denoting third and fourth genders).

Signs of Berdache Status

The most visible sign of berdache status was cross-dressing, although this practice was far from universal and often symbolic in nature. In some cases, male berdaches dressed differently from both men and women, or they did not cross-dress at all, or only partially or for special circumstances. Similarly, despite the clichéd description of berdaches as "doing the work of the opposite sex," they just as often combined men's and women's activities with pursuits unique to their status.

Berdache roles can be viewed as alternative or multiple *genders* because the individuals who occupied them were consistently distinguished from both men and women, and because these roles were multi-dimensional. Berdaches differed from men and women in all the dimensions that women and men differed from each other--work, social status, cultural meanings, and sexuality. Berdache status, like that of "man" and "woman," functioned as a core identity.

Individuals who became berdaches were typically identified in childhood by their families based on a marked preference for activities of the "opposite" sex. Since these inclinations were apparent before puberty, sexual preference was usually secondary in defining berdaches. In some tribes, a boy's entry into berdache status was formally marked. Shoshone, Ute, Kitanemuk, and Pima-Papago families staged a ritual test in which the boy was placed in a circle of brush with a bow and a basket (men's and women's objects respectively). The brush was set on fire, and whichever object the boy picked up as he ran out determined his gender identity--if the bow, male; if the basket, berdache.

Sexual Activities

Although male berdaches typically engaged in sexual relations with non-berdache males, and female berdaches with women, some had relations with both men and women, and occasionally heterosexually married men became berdaches on the basis of dreams or visions. (The one sexual pattern not attested is that of berdaches in relationships with each other.)

Many third and fourth gender natives had active sex lives. The Navajo *nádleehí* (literally, "changing one"), Kinábahí, claimed to have had sex with over one hundred different men. The Sauk and Fox held an annual dance in which a berdache, or *aya'kwa*, appeared surrounded by "her" lovers. Lakota *winkte* bestowed bawdy nicknames on the men who visited them, and warriors sometimes had sex with them before going to battle as a means of increasing their own virility.

Indeed, third and fourth gender individuals were often viewed as having special aptitude in all matters relating to love and sexuality. Navajo *nádleehí*, Cheyenne *he´eman*, and Omaha *minquga* were matchmakers; Pawnee berdaches made love charms for men. The Mohave *alyha*: (male) and *hwame*: (female) were considered lucky in finding lovers, and if they became shamans, they specialized in the treatment of sexual diseases.

Berdaches as Seers

Berdaches were believed to be fortunate in economic pursuits as well. According to a Navajo saying recorded in the 1930s, "A *nádleehí* around the hogan [house] will bring good luck and riches." Indeed, *nádleehí* were often entrusted with the management of their families' resources. Berdaches also had a reputation for luck in gambling. Lakota *winkte* could convey this good fortune through the lucky names they gave to infants. From good fortune to the ability to foretell the future is a small step, and, indeed, Lakota *winkte* and berdaches in other tribes were sometimes seers, an especially useful skill when war parties needed to locate and surprise enemies.

The spiritual dimension of alternative gender roles varied in different tribal belief systems. Among Plains tribes, characterized by what anthropologists term a "vision complex," dreams and visions defined one's identity and imparted luck, talents, insights, and power. Men sought visions for success in hunting and warfare; women sought visions for inspiration for their arts; and male berdaches, among the Mandan, Lakota, Assiniboine, Arapaho, Omaha, Kansa, Osage, and Oto, had dreams and visions of female deities or the moon that served to endorse their identity and convey unique skills.

Skill in Tribal Arts

Of the various traits attributed to berdaches by far the most common was skill in tribal arts. As Ruth Benedict related in *Patterns of Culture*, "The Dakota had a saying, 'fine possessions like a berdache's,' and it was the epitome of praise for any woman's household possessions." Among Plains tribes, this meant proficiency in working with hides, which were used to make everything from clothing to shelter and elaborately decorated with quillwork, beads, paint, and other treatments. In California, berdaches were renowned for their basketry; in the Southwest, berdaches like the Navajo weaver Hastiín Klah and the Laguna potter Arroh-ah-och were innovators as well as masters of traditional arts.

Among the Pueblo Indians, whose religious life was centered on collective ceremonies rather than individual vision quests, berdache status was sanctioned by myths and tales. These relate the origin of multiple gender roles and provide accounts of supernatural berdaches--like the Zuni Ko'lhamana, the Navajo Begochííín, and the Storoka of Acoma-Laguna legend, an entire tribe of berdaches. Sometimes these deities were portrayed in masked dances, as well. In several tribes, berdaches filled special roles in religious ceremonies. Cheyenne *he´eman* directed the tribe's victory, or scalp, dance; Crow and Hidatsa berdaches selected the tree used for construction of sun dance lodges; and Navajo *nádleehí* were often

medicine men.

Relationship to Warfare

Perhaps the most misunderstood dimension of alternative genders in North America was their relationship to warfare. In the early twentieth century, anthropologists often characterized the berdache role as a stopgap for men who failed to live up to the (presumably) hyper-masculine standards of tribal society. There are indeed recorded instances of men forced to cross-dress in certain tribes based on some ignominy, and male captives similarly treated. However, as Ruth Landes found among the Winnebagos, men who were afraid to go to battle were consistently distinguished from berdaches, "who had a dream."

In fact, berdaches were intimately involved in several aspects of tribal warfare. Early reports from the Southeast and the Texas gulf indicate that berdaches throughout that region joined war parties to provide logistical support and sometimes to fight. Some male and female berdaches were celebrated for their war exploits, like the Crow Osh-Tisch or Finds-Them-and-Kills-Them, the Ojibway Yellowhead, and the Kutenai female berdache Qánqon-kámek-klaúlha. In Yuman and Pueblo mythology, third and fourth gender figures appear as warriors.

Underlying the role of third and fourth genders in tribal warfare was a broader association of these roles with the mediation of life and death. This is evident in Cheyenne and Mohave scalp ceremonies in which male berdaches were responsible for handling the scalps of newly killed enemies and conducting ceremonies to transform their dangerous and violent power into life-giving power for the tribe as a whole--in particular, the promotion of sexuality and fertility. This association with death is also evident in various California tribes, where berdaches served as undertakers and mourners.

The connection of alternative gender status with beliefs about death were a function of the nonprocreative nature of berdache sexuality. Some native terms for berdaches literally mean "sterile" or "impotent." All these associations--between death, fertility, sexuality, creativity and inspiration, and gender difference--point to an archaic level of belief difficult to grasp from a Western perspective.

Prestige of Berdaches

In some tribes, third and fourth gender persons could attain significant prestige. According to early French accounts, Illinois *ikoueta* went to war, sang at religious ceremonies, gave advice at councils, and were considered "manitou," or holy. Some berdaches were key figures in tribal history--the Crow Osh-Tisch, who fought in the Battle of the Rosebud in 1876 and resisted government efforts to suppress his role; the Zuni We'wha, who traveled to Washington, D. C. in 1885 dressed as a woman and met President Grover Cleveland; and the Navajo Hastiin Klah, who also traveled widely in the white world and created large scale weavings depicting religious themes that helped transform what had been a craft into a fine art.

Scattered ethnographic reports suggest, however, that in some tribes berdaches were held in low esteem (Pima). Some contemporary natives sometimes deny that their tribes had such a role or such persons (Cahuilla). Ambivalent attitudes toward berdaches sometimes reflect fear of their supernatural power. In many cases, however, there are simply no data for determining the presence of absence of alternative genders.

Female Berdaches

Some characteristics of male berdache roles are paralleled in similar roles for females--in particular, mixed-gender activities, religious associations, and sexuality. However, a broader frame of reference is needed to appreciate the diversity of women's lives in the native North America. At least three patterns of role variation can be identified, of which a named, alternative gender identity is just one.

Throughout the region from New England to the Southeast that was occupied by Algonkian-speakers, women sometimes became chiefs through kinship or marital connections. The Spaniards and English referred to them as "queens." In New England, Algonkian queens, or *sunksquaw*, were key figures in native uprising known as King Philip's War from 1675-1676. They were not, however, reported to have cross-dressed, and they married men.

A second pattern of native women's gender difference can be seen in the informal but widespread participation of women in hunting and warfare. In the strife-torn Plains, women's participation in war parties--and their frequent success--was such that distinct societies existed for women who had counted "coup" (killed or otherwise bested an enemy). Some Plains women, such as Running Eagle, or Pitamakan, of the Piegan, and Woman Chief of the Crows, who led war parties and married four women, earned places of honor in tribal memory.

In the East and Plains, only the Algonkian-speaking Illinois and Cheyenne are known to have had female berdaches, called *ickoue ne kioussa* among the former (women, according to a French report, who "will not hear of a husband, through a principle of debauchery"), and *hetanemane'o*, among the latter. It is in the Far West--the Columbian Plateau, Great Basin, Southwest, and California--that female berdaches were most common.

Alternative gender females, women chiefs, and women warriors were prominent figures in some tribes. Qánqon, the Kutenai female berdache, or *títqattek*, was a mysterious but central player in the opening of the Northwest to the fur trade at a time when the British and Americans vied for control of the region.

The Apache woman warrior and shaman Lozen, and her female lover, fought with Geronimo's band in the 1880s in an episode of armed resistance to colonialism in North America. As Eve Ball reported her brother Victorio as saying, "Strong as a man, braver than most, and cunning in strategy, Lozen is a shield to her people."

Woman Chief, Running Eagle, Qánqon, along with male berdaches like Hastíín Klah and Osch-Tisch, all hold similar places in tribal memory. These berdaches represent an enduring cultural legacy of native North America.

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