OUT & EQUAL
WORKPLACE ADVOCATES

Nonbinary Gender Identities: A Diverse Global History

THEY / THEM

In recent years, companies around the world are focusing more and more on building nonbinary inclusion into their programming, culture and policies. While the shifted focus is a relatively new development, nonbinary people are not "new". It is true that awareness and visibility of nonbinary identities are increasing, and we are always finding new ways to conceptualize and verbalize how we experience gender; however, genders outside the binary have existed throughout human history. i

Identifying outside the binary is not limited to certain geographies, cultures or generations. In fact, from about the 15th-19th century, the idea of gender as binary (man/woman) was very much a Western concept that was forced upon native cultures around the world through colonization. Today however, people around the world are creating more space, and sometimes new language, for folks to discover, reclaim and express these identities.

Locating some of the historical touchpoints of nonbinary identities is an important tool for dispelling the myth that nonbinary identities are somehow "new" or a "trend". It is equally as important to recognize currently evolving language, such as gender-neutral pronouns, as it is to acknowledge that nonbinary people enjoy a rich, diverse history around the world.
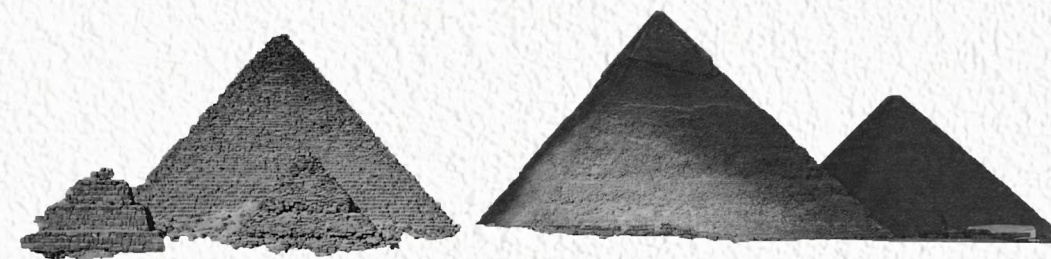
Using the following examples, we can see that nonbinary people – like all LGBTQ people – have existed throughout time and in every society, irrespective of whether their native language authentically reflected their identities. The following is not intended to be an exhaustive analysis of nonbinary history, but rather educational examples to build understanding within your workforce and beyond.

2000 - 1800 BCE

Sekhet (sht)

In ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, we find three recorded genders. Common belief was that the individuals in the third gender category, Sekhet, were eunuchs, but some scholars now realize that this could be a biased binary interpretation as there is little evidence of castration. These scholars propose that ancient Egyptian culture had three recognized genders in this society: man, woman, and a third gender. [ii]

PRE-WESTERN COLONIZATION

(PRE 1500'S) TO PRESENT DAY

Two-Spirit

Though the term "Two-Spirit" was coined in 1990 by Indigenous Peoples as a Pan-Native identity and umbrella term that bridges Indigenous and Western understandings of sexuality and gender, the identity itself goes back much further in time. The term often refers to someone with mixed gender roles found among Indigenous North American cultures, in which the person expresses themselves and performs functions attributed to men and women; however, it can also refer to gender identity, gender expression, and/or sexual orientation. [iii]

Muxe

Muxe is a third gender identity. Those identifying as Muxe have been recognized and celebrated as playing an integral role among the Zapotec community in Oaxaca, Mexico since pre-colonial times. [vi]

Chibados

Chibados were their own caste in Ndongo society (modern day Angola) and today would be called third gender. They often held important spiritual positions and were free to marry men. Unfortunately, Portuguese settlers introduced colonial law and practices that effectively eliminated the Chibados from society during much of that time period. [v]

Bissu

The Bugis people of South Sulawesi, Indonesia recognize five genders. Through a Western English-language lens, they would be: trans man, trans woman, cis man, cis woman, and gender-transcendent ("Bissu"). Although the identity was pushed to the margins and mostly erased through colonialism, many are reclaiming it today. [iv]
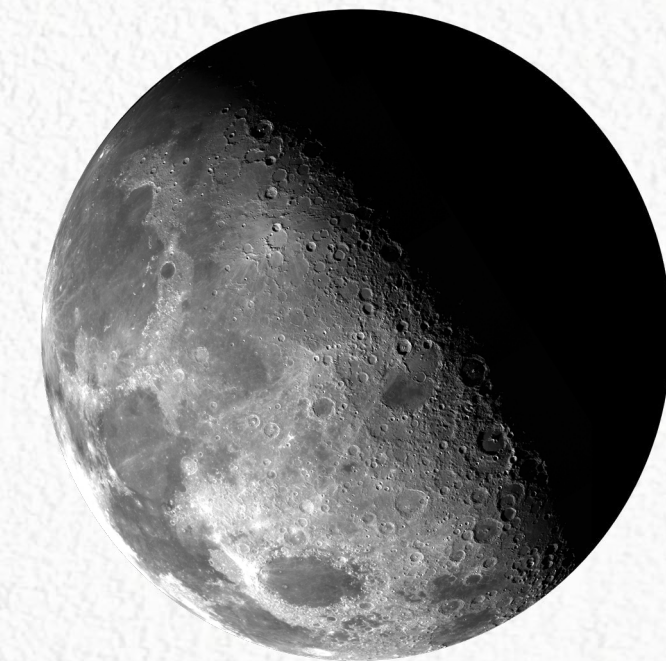
1700'S TO PRESENT DAY

Although there was no term at the time to describe nonbinary identities, in Norway in 1781, Jens Andersson, assigned female at birth, married a woman who later told the authorities that she believed Jens to be a woman. The marriage was annulled, and Andersson was imprisoned and sent to trial. In the trial, Andersson was asked: "Are you a man or a woman?" The recorded answer was: "he thinks he may be both." [vii]

One of the most foundational steps to workplace education is clearing up misconceptions and bias. While many people are learning about nonbinary identities for the first time, it is important to acknowledge that while it may be a newer topic to workplace conversations, the identities themselves are nothing new. When we take the time to learn about the history of marginalized communities, we develop a more well-rounded understanding to drive us to create spaces of true belonging and inclusion in the workplace.

To learn more about LGBTQ workplace inclusion, check out some of Out & Equal's other guides and toolkits.

i. It is important to note that the classification of third gender or nonbinary communities around the world as part of the LGBTQ community could also be considered a classification still within a Western ideological framework.

ii. Graves-Brown, Carolyn, and Kathlyn M. Cooney. Sex and Gender in Ancient Egypt: 'Don Your Wig for a Joyful Hour'. Classical Press of Wales, 2008.

iii. Fewster, Peter H. "Two-Spirit Community." Researching for LGBTQ Health. Retrieved January 14, 2021 from http://lgbtqhealth.ca/community/two-spirit.php.

iv. Guy-Ryan, J. (2016, June 18). In Indonesia, Non-Binary Gender is a Centuries-Old Idea. Retrieved January 14, 2021, from https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/in-indonesia-nonbinary-gender-is-a-centuriesold-idea.

v. Wilhelm, A. D. (2010). Tritiya-Prakriti: People of the Third Sex. Xlibris Corporation.

vi. "Beyond Gender: Indigenous Perspectives, Muxe." Natural History Museum, 2020, Retrieved January 14, 2021 from http://nhm.org/stories/beyond-gender-indigenous-perspectives-muxe.

vii. Dietrichson, Susanne. "Queer Lives Find Their Way to the Museum." Kilden Genderresearch.no, 11 Jan. 2019, kjonnsforskning.no/en/2019/01/queer-lives-find-their-way-museum.

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