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TWO-SPIRIT PERSONS: GENDER NONCONFORMITY AMONG NATIVE AMERICAN AND NATIVE HAWAIIAN YOUTHS

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One of the most common errors in the behavioral sciences is the evaluation of human behavior through the lens of only one society. This bias has had particularly tragic results in the study of same-sex eroticism, resulting in a characterization of homosexuality as "deviant" and "abnormal." Given the widespread discrimination against lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men in Euro-American culture, it is not difficult to understand the ways in which such behavior would be considered marginal and the reasons why such persons might suffer psychological problems. However, if a wider focus is taken, it becomes apparent that the majority of the world's cultures before the spread of Christianity and Western colonialism did not prohibit same-sex eroticism. In fact, many cultures, from as far as Siberia to South Africa and from Melanesia to Mesopotamia, had special respected roles for homosexually inclined people (Conner, 1993; Herdt, 1984; Murray, 1992; Williams, 1986). By considering the entire span of human history, it becomes apparent that it is not homosexuality that is abnormal but heterosexist prejudice. Prejudice and social stigma are sources of the psychological disturbances that some sexual minorities suffer, rather than same-sex orientation per se.

In striving to gain a wider focus, it is necessary to locate data about the social acceptance of homosexuality in other cultures. Yet, the number of anthropologists and historians who are researching this topic is pitifully small. More researchers need to conduct field and archival studies and to encourage students to do the same. Once beyond ethnocentric blinders, there is much to learn from the wisdom of ancient cultures. This chapter is based on the limited research that has been done and on fieldwork that I have been conducting during the last two decades.

After three years of library research on same-sex eroticism in other cultures, I began field research on this topic in the early 1980s. I first went to Native American reservations of the Northern Plains, followed by trips to the Navajo Nation of the Southwest, the Mayas of Yucatan in Mexico, First Nations peoples in Canada, and the Aleuts and Yu'pik Eskimos of Alaska. In 1987 and 1988, as a Fulbright scholar, I conducted research in Southeast Asia and expanded my focus to include Indonesia (Williams, 1991), the Philippines, and Thailand (Williams, 1990). Since 1984, I have

interviewed Native Hawaiians on the islands of Moloka'i, Oahu, and the Big Island of Hawai'i, as well as related Polynesians on the island of Rarotonga in the South Pacific.

In Polynesia, terms used for homosexually inclined individuals are aikane *and* mahu. *Among the hundreds of Native American languages, most have words for alternative gendered same-sex oriented persons, including* nadleh *(Navajo),* winkte *(Lakota), and* achnucek *(Aleut). The common term anthropologists have used cross-culturally to describe such persons is berdache. This term originated from the Persian word bardaj, meaning an intimate friend, which was popular in France in the sixteenth through the eighteenth century to describe an effeminate male who assumed the passive role in sex with men. Today, Native American gays and lesbians prefer using the term two-spirit person to refer to themselves. Their emphasis on spirituality prompts a different way of thinking about the association between homoeroticism and the sacred.*

SPIRITUALITY

Early European missionaries commented in amazement that Native Americans honored androgynous males and females as sacred persons. They were viewed as extraordinary beings, of a higher order than the average person. The missionaries, coming from a Christian tradition with rigid gender roles and a condemnation of sexual variations, could not bring themselves to a tolerant view of two-spirit persons. They could not comprehend the relationship that the Indians saw between androgyny and religion.

Spirituality is, for many Native American tribes, at the heart of two-spirit traditions (Williams, 1986). In Native North American animist religions, a multiplicity of spirits exist in the universe. All things are spiritual. Everything that exists is equally due respect because everything is part of the spiritual order of the universe. The world cannot be complete without this diversity. In these religions, there is no hierarchy of importance among the spirits of animals, plants, and other beings that populate the earth. Humans are not more spiritual than other beings. The spirit of man is not more important than the spirit of woman; each spirit is different, but these differences complement each other, leading to spiritual wholeness.

American Indian religions view androgynous persons—that is, males who are feminine or females who are masculine—as evidence that that person has been blessed with *two* spirits. Because both the masculine and the feminine are respected, a person who combines them is considered as higher than the average person, who only has one spirit. Therefore, persons who act like the other sex are not condemned as "deviant" but are blessed for their possession of a double dose of spirituality. They are not "abnormal" but "exceptional," somewhat similar to the way in which a musically ov intellectually gifted person might be seen in Euro-American culture.

Because Native American religions place considerable emphasis on the belief that everything that exists comes from the spirit world, if a person varies from the average person then that implies that the spirits must have paid particular attention to making that person the way he or she is. It follows, therefore, that such a person would have an especially close connection to the spirit world. Accordingly, two-spirit persons are often viewed as sacred people, spiritually gifted individuals who can aid others with their spiritual needs. In many tribes, such persons are often shamans or sacred people who work closely with shamans (Williams, 1986, chapters 1—2).

MAKING POSITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS TO SOCIETY

Two-spirit people are androgynous persons, who are seldom inclined toward indigenous men's or women's traditional labor roles. A gentle male might not be very effective as a warrior and hunter; a masculine female might not be content to structure her life around child care and food preparation. By recognizing their specialness and encouraging them to assume alternative gender roles, Native cultures provide such persons with a means of contributing positively to society. A Crow Indian elder told me, "We don't waste people, the way White society does. Every person has their gift, every person has their contribution to make" (Williams, 1986, P. 57).

Sometimes this contribution has life or death implications. Among the Kaska Indians of the Canadian subarctic, for example, people are heavily dependent on big-game hunting for food. In the cold climate, which is too far north to farm, a family without a hunter could starve during the long winter. Kaska women do not usually hunt because they need to remain near the home to protect, breastfeed, and nurture their small children. Only the husband and older sons hunt for big game. If a family does not have at least one or two sons to search for game, they might face disaster once the father becomes too old or infirm to hunt. In this situation, Kaska families without sufficient sons feel fortunate if they have a masculine-inclined daughter. They cannot afford to waste her potential talents,

In this situation, the parents perform a special ceremony to transform this young daughter into a son. She becomes "like a man." They 'tie the dried ovaries of a bear to a belt that she always wears next to her abdomen. They believe this will give her luck on the hunt, will prevent menstruation when she reaches puberty, and will protect her from becoming pregnant. From about age 5, she is trained by her father for men's tasks. According to Kaska informants, such females are said to develop "great strength" and usually become "outstanding hunters" (Honigmann, 1964, pp. 129-130).

Female hunters react violently if a male makes sexual advances toward them. Kaska people explained to an anthropologist their belief that if a female hunter engages in heterosexual sex, “her female luck with game will be broken.” This belief is not simply a superstition; a female who becomes pregnant and then has to breastfeed an offspring for several years simply cannot be a dependable hunter. Thus, in the Kaska

view, the only sensible sexual partner for a female hunter is another female. A Kaska female hunter traditionally would be expected to marry a woman, just as a male hunter would. She and her wife choose a male to impregnate the wife, but the female hunter is considered to be the true father of the child. By this means, she can have a marriage and family, just like male hunters (Honigmann, 1964).

Many other Native American groups likewise have accepted the view that masculine females should become hunters and take a feminine woman for a wife. At least before Christian missionaries brought alien Western ideas, Native belief systems incorporated same-sex marriages into their kinship systems. The Mohaves of Arizona, for example, believe that the real father of a child is the *last* person to have sex with the mother before the birth. If a woman becomes pregnant by a male but then has sex with her female partner, the female-female marriage is recognized and the female lover is fully accepted as the child's parent (Devereux, 1969, pp. 262, 416-420).

Many other cultures, conversely, value daughters so highly that parents without a daughter hope for a feminine son who could be raised like a daughter. In my fieldwork in Hawai'i, I was told by many Native Polynesians that parents who have only sons select the most androgynous and encourage him to take on the *mahu* role. Mothers in particular are said to desire having a *mahu* son. While there has not been sufficient research to conclude whether these folk explanations are accurate, their statements are amazingly similar to the testimony of an early Spanish explorer in South America, Fernandez de Piedrahita, who reported that among the Lache Indians of Columbia,

> it was a law among them that if a woman bore five consecutive male children, without giving birth to a female, they could make a female of one of the sons when he reached the age of twelve—that is to say, they could rear him as a woman and teach him the habits of a woman, bringing him up in that wise. In their bodily form and manners they appeared so perfectly to be women that no one who beheld them could distinguish them from the others. These were known as *cusmos* and they performed womanly tasks with the strength of men, as a result of which, when they had attained the proper age, they were given in wedlock as women. And indeed the Laches preferred them to true women, whereby it follows that the abomination of sodomy was freely permitted. (translated from Requena, 1945, p. 16)

Such traditions of acceptance were quite common in many aboriginal cultures of the Western Hemisphere. In Alaska, early Russian explorers reported that the Aleuts and Kodiak Eskimos thought it especially prestigious to have an effeminate son. If parents noticed signs of gender-atypical behavior in a young son, they dressed him in feminine clothing and styled his hair like a woman's. They trained him in women's skills and in all ways raised him as an especially gifted child. When he was between 10 and 15 years of age, this son was married to a wealthy man. For an Aleut man, having a boy-wife marked a major social accomplishment, and the boy's family benefited from the association with their new wealthy in-law. Because the boy was treated with great respect by the husband and by society in general, this practice of

same-sex marriage provided a no-lose situation for easy social mobility among Aleut and Kodiak families (Williams, 1986, pp. 45-46, 193-194, 254-255).

ANDROGYNY AS AN INBORN CHARACTER

While families valued two-spirit children, the reports of early European explorers should not lead us to believe that parents forcibly imposed such alternative gender roles on unwilling children. Native American children generally have wide latitude to live where they are comfortable and in a manner that is compatible with their "spirit"—that is, their inclinations or basic character. Children raised by traditionalist families can decide in which household they wish to live, and adults do not try to coerce them to choose differently. Children are allowed to live where and how they wish.

If children feel manipulated in a direction other than the one they are inclined to take, they refuse to cooperate. Refusal is interpreted as a reflection of the child's spirit. Thus, children who are reported to have been "chosen" by parents to assume an alternative gender role already have evidenced an inclination for gender atypical behavior. For example, a Pueblo 60-year-old two-spirit person who was interviewed by White (1980, pp. 99—101) remembered that when he was 6 years old, his relatives told him they were not going to raise him as an ordinary man but as someone special. They stated this as a matter of fact based on their observation of his androgynous character. The boy accepted the two-spirit role with the same positive attitude. He valued his specialness and grew up with a secure position in his Pueblo traditional community.

Even in tribes that traditionally emphasized warfare and in which most boys were socialized for violent aggression that would make them suitable warriors, two-spirit persons were honored. While bravery was highly prized in such cultures and cowards were despised, no demands for demonstrations of bravery were placed on two-spirit boys. Among warlike tribes, such as the Navajo, Mohave, and Lakota, early documentary accounts state that androgynous males were noted as "peaceful persons" who had received their instructions from a vision. While bravery was valued, power obtained in a dream was even more highly prized. Therefore, rather than viewing such persons as seeking to "escape" masculinity, Native American explanations maintain that two-spiritedness is a reflection of the child's inborn individual character. Even today, traditionalist Indian people still follow such traditions of acceptance. This spiritual explanation means that adults will not impose such roles on children or restrict gender-atypical children from acting out their desires.

According to an anthropologist working with the Yumas of Arizona in the 1920s, when a young girl manifested an unfeminine character, her parents sometimes tried to interest her in women's pursuits. But if she resisted, she was viewed as having undergone a change of spirit as a result of dreams while in infancy. Growing up, such

a female played and hunted with boys but had no interest in heterosexual relations with them. These females were given the name kwe'rhame, defined as "women who passed for men, dressed like men and married women." They were known for bravery and skillful fighting in battle (Forde, 1931, P. 157).

While there has not been enough research on Native American sexuality and gender to indicate on which reservations such traditions have continued into the present, even today Indians of numerous tribes believe that two-spiritedness is evident by early childhood. Many informants of different tribes have told me that a two-spirit character emerges in a child by age 3 to 5. Only after a child demonstrates gender-nonconformist behavior do adults single out that child as special. A Hupa two-spirit male told me:

> I was real feminine as a child, from as early as I can remember. Noticing how I like to do cooking and cleaning, my grandmother said I would grow up as a woman. Within the family, Indians believe you can be whatever you choose. (personal field notes, 1985)

Although Native people refer to persons as "choosing" to be a two-spirit, this term is used within the context that the spirits chose this role for selected individuals. This does not mean that a person can freely and rationally choose to be of a certain character. When asked by an anthropologist if two-spirit persons "choose" their gender nonconformity and homosexual sexuality, Zapotec Indians in Mexico considered this as ludicrous as the notion that someone could freely choose their eye color. They strongly defended the right of two-spirit people to follow their different ways, saying simply, "God made them that way" (Chinas, 1985, PP. 1-4).

The belief that two-spiritedness is inborn is held by many Native Americans. For example, speaking about male two-spirits, a Lakota traditionalist told me:

> It is obvious from infancy that one is a *winkte*. He is a beautiful boy, and the sound of his voice is effeminate. It is inborn. The mother realizes this soon and allows the boy to do feminine things—how to prepare meat and other foods. They all end up being homosexual. (personal field notes, 1982)

This view is not a product of recent gay liberation influences. In the 1930s, anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote similarly about an Omaha boy who showed marked feminine physical traits" and who later ended up taking on the berdache" two-spirit role (Mead, 1935, p. 294).

Even earlier, in the 1910s, anthropologist Elsie Clews Parsons knew several two-spirit persons at Zuni Pueblo, including a young boy whose features were “unusually fine and delicate.” Parsons observed that this boy always played in the girls' play group (Parsons, 1916, pp. 521—522). This is similar to an 1850s' report by a frontier trader who remarked about numerous feminine young male children among the Crows, who '"cannot be brought to join in any of the work or play of the boys, but on the contrary

associate entirely with the girls. . . . When arrived at the age of 12 or 14, and his habits are formed, the parents clothe him in a girl's dress" (Dening, 1961, pp. 187—188).

In 1903, an anthropologist reported meeting a Crow two-spirit male who “was decidedly effeminate in voice and manner. I was told that, when very young, these persons manifested a decided preference for things pertaining to female duties." Even if parents gently suggested that such boys assume a standard masculine role, they invariably resisted (Simms, 1903, pp. 580—581). The family adjusted to the child's basic character rather than the child conforming to standard gender norms. The consistency of reports from various Native cultures over the centuries is striking. As early as 1702, a French explorer living with the Illinois Indians noted that feminine males were notable "from their childhood, when they are seen frequently picking up the spade, the spindle, the axe [women's tools], but making no use of the bow and arrows, as all the other small boys do" (Pierre Liette, quoted in Katz, 1976, p. 228). It is the characteristic of males preferring feminine pursuits during childhood and playing in girls' play groups that is most frequently reported in the published literature.

A UNIQUE CHILDHOOD

In interviews with two-spirit males, I also found another pattern, one that is more individual and less stereotypically feminine. For example, a Hupa two-spirit male remembered: "I was always into something else, things that were never expected of me. I did what I wanted to do, and I liked that" (personal field notes, 1985). A Lakota *winkte* reported memories of being different from other children while growing up on the reservation:

> I was different. I never played with the boys. I played with the girls a little, or off in my own little world. There were other things I hod to do besides play. I did drawings and things. I hung around my grandparents a lot. My grandfather taught me the traditions, and my grandmother taught me how to sew and cook. I was the only child there and they basically responded to my interests. I loved things like beadwork. I was mostly involved in doing artistic things. It isolated me from the other kids, so I took a liking to it. I did all the isolating things. You do beadwork and you're not bothered with other kids. (personal field notes, 1985)

Among the Yaqui Indians of northern Mexico, I also identified this pattern of uniqueness, which was expressed by a Yaqui man who characterized his male two-spirit cousin as "androgynous" rather than "feminine." This is a distinction that non-Native observers, accustomed to thinking in male/female, either/or dichotomies, are likely to miss (see Golden, this volume). By the time this Yaqui boy was 9 years old, he was considered by his relatives to be extremely noncompetitive and to have a cooperative approach to life. He also was recognized as having an unusually strong proclivity for dreaming. His family recognized t he was not typical, but rather than

look down on him for his different ways, they valued and understood his uniqueness. His cousin told me:

> He has lived as if he has some higher understanding of life. He is a very wise old young man. He can draw out of people their feelings. One time we kids got down on him for not being typically masculine, but my great aunt, who is the clan matriarch, come down on us real strongly. She said it was part of his character and we should respect him. After that, we protected him when he was around mestizos. They were typically machismo, but we did not let anyone trouble him. I have really learned to value him. His being my cousin made me question the homophobia in society, similar to my great aunt's leadership with questioning women's roles. (personal field notes, 1985)

The tendency for a family to feel protective toward a two-spirit relative has also been observed among the Hopi by ethnographer Richard Grant. In 1978, Grant met a 15-year-old Hopi boy whom he described as "quite androgynous." In the boy's family, "everyone manifests a special kind of protective attitude toward him." Four years later, at a ceremonial dance, Grant tried to chat casually with the young man, whereupon other Hopis, as he described,

> sort of moved in around him and I had a distinct impression of threat coming from them. It was very clear that they were strongly committed to protecting him. So I backed off I was able to continue observing, and I noted that his companions continuously formed a protective ring around him while he, in his turn, was quite flagrant in his behavior (what we would call a real "queen"). He consistently uses "female talk" forms in his speech. (personal communication, 1985)

This use of women's speech patterns is often noted in the sources about male two-spirit persons.

This feminine speaking style is also evident during singing events, a popular Indian form of entertainment. A nineteenth century observer of a Navajo night singing reported that the *nadlehs* sang in falsetto (Karsch-Haack, 1911, P, 321). At a 1973 traditional Cherokee songfest I attended on the Eastern Cherokee reservation in North Carolina, a male falsetto singer was quite popular. This extremely effeminate male was without a doubt the star of the singing event. While his sexuality was never mentioned, Cherokees of all ages fawned over him to an extreme degree. On the Crow reservation in Montana, *bade'* take a leading role in social singing events and are always invited to stand with the women singers to sing in the feminine style. Crow people greatly value their singing (personal field notes, 1982).

APPRECIATION OF DIFFERENCE

This appreciative response is quite different from the manner in which gender non-conformist children are treated in Euro-American culture. Peer groups, parents and

teachers alike attempt to force these children to conform to gender norms; psychiatrists appear most interested in discovering a "cause" for such gender non-conformity (see Bailey, this volume). The motivating factor in this research is often to discover a way to prevent such behavior. Many other cultures, by contrast, ave move interested in findings the best social role for these unique individuals. Given these social values, parents have no motive to discourage such a child. Accepting gender variation as an acknowledged reality, they provide a recognized social alternative. They simply admit that this is the way these children will be.

Today, traditionalist Native families play an important role in helping their child fit into these recognized alternative gender roles. It helps greatly when a culture has a respected and recognized alternative gender tradition. For example, a Lakota *winkte* I interviewed remembered the following from when he was about 12 years old: "My mother explained *winkte* to me and asked me if I was going to be that way. By then I had decided I was the way I was, so she never tried to change me since then" (personal field notes, 1982). I have heard similar statements from Polynesian *mahus*, who reported that their parents asked them as children if they were going to become a *mahu*. Because the parents had knowledge of an established and respected gender-variant tradition, it was easy for them to accommodate their child. Another Lakota told me:

> *Winktes* hove to be born that way. People know that o person will become a *winkte* very early in his life. About age 12 parents will toke him to a ceremony to communicate with past *winktes* who had power to verify if it is just a phase or a permanent thing for his lifetime. If the proper vision tokes place and communication with a past *winkte* is established, then everyone accepts him as a *winkte*. (personal field notes, 1982)

The association with past *winkte* spiritual power is an important aspect of the social acceptance of two-spirit persons. Another Lakota *winkte* I interviewed related his spiritual experience:

> I hove always filled a *winkte* role. I was just born this way, ever since I can remember. When I was eight I sow a vision of a person with long gray hair and with many ornaments on, standing by my bed. I asked if he was female or mole, and he said "both." He said he would walk with me for the rest of my life. His spirit would always be with me. I told my grandfather, who said not to be afraid of spirits, because they have good powers. A year later, the vision appeared again, and told me he would give me great powers. He said his body was man's, but his spirit was woman's. He told me the Great Spirit made people like me to be of help to other people.
>
> I told my grandfather the name of the spirit, and grandfather said it was a highly respected *winkte* who lived long ago. He explained *winkte* to me and said, "It won't be easy growing uo, because you will be different from others. But the spirit will help

you, if you pray and do the sweat." The spirit has continued to contact me throughout my life. If I practice the *winkte* role seriously, then people will respect me.

Once I asked the spirit if my living with a man and loving him was bad. The spirit answered that it was not bad because I had a right to release my feelings and express love for another, that I was good because I was generous and provided a good home for my [adopted] children. I want to be membered most for the two values that my people hold dearest: generosity and spirituality. If you say anything about me, say those two things. (personal field notes, 1982)

By appealing to this personal visionary experience, two-spirit traditionalists have a spiritual source of strength that provides them with psychological balance and self-esteem. Far from ignoring or covering up their difference, gender-atypical Native persons are provided with a spiritual explanation for their difference that gives them a personal sense of power.

ACCEPTANCE OF SEXUAL DIVERSITY

Characteristics such as generosity and spirituality are upheld as ideals for such persons, but these people are not expected to deny or suppress their sexuality. In fact, alternative-gendered persons are *expected* to be same-sex oriented in their affectional inclinations. This accepting attitude toward sexual diversity in many Native American and Polynesian cultures is congruent with their larger value systems. Sex is not solely for the purpose of marriage and reproduction but is valued as a means of relaxation, entertainment, and stress reduction. Perhaps its most important social function is the creation of intimate bonds among unrelated individuals. In this context, sexual expression is not restricted to a single marriage partner. Sex is a gift from the spirit world, to be widely enjoyed and appreciated. This attitude results in a casualness regarding sexuality and a lack of cultural proscriptions repressing human sexual variations. Stigmatizing individuals because of their sexual behavior and restricting people's choices generally are not considered to be a valid function of society. Personal freedom is too highly regarded for such an approach.

The way that such a society functions is best illustrated by traditional Mohave culture. George Devereux, an anthropologist who lived with this Southwestern tribe in the 1930s, reported that the Mohave had an "easy" culture, providing "a rational, supportive, lenient and flexible upbringing" for children (Devereux, 1969, pp. viii—ix). His studies of mental illness among the Mohave found that both the incidence and the severity of mental illness were drastically lower than among Euro-Americans of the time. He concluded that the main reason for their higher rates of mental health was the Mohaves' easygoing pattern of child rearing (Devereux, 1969).

The Mohave attitude toward sexuality was consistent with their carefree attitude toward life in general. Devereux noted that "Mohave sex-life is entirely untrammeled

by social restraint" (Devereux, 1937, p. 518). They viewed sex as an enjoyable and humorous sport, a gift from nature and the spirit world to be freely indulged. Devereux reported that Mohaves talked incessantly about sex and never censored their sexual talk in the presence of children. Hearing this talk and observing adults' sexual activities with no social restrictions placed on them, Mohave children grew up with an adventuresome attitude toward sex. Children did not wear clothing until puberty, and they were encouraged to explore their bodies. Urinating competitions among boys, to see who could pee the farthest, were common. Groups of males also engaged in masturbation contests to see who could reach orgasm most quickly and who could shoot their ejaculate the farthest. Devereux reported that casual same-sex relations were frequent, from early childhood through adulthood (Devereux, 1937, pp. 498—99, 518).

Although the ease of sexual experimentation with both sexes was enjoyed in a lighthearted way, Devereux noted:

> Even the most casual coitus implied, by definition, also an involvement of the "soul": body cohabiting with body and soul with soul…. Many children cohabited with each other and even with adults long before puberty; the [nonsexual] latency period was conspicuous by its absence. Children were much loved, brought up permissively, and looked after at once generously and lackadaisically. (Devereux, 1969, p. xii)

Mohave children spent their prepubertal years exploring their environment with their age mates, playing, swimming, and indulging in sexual play.

Because the culture placed a high value on kindness to children, Mohave children learned to like and trust everyone. Children interacted, sexually and otherwise, with various people of different ages. As a result, Mohaves tended not to restrict themselves to an "overintense and exclusive emotional attachment" to a single person. Devereux wrote, no doubt at least partly from his own personal experience, "This explains why the adult Mohave is so highly 'available,' both sexually and for friendship" (Devereux, 1969, p. xiii). Mohave sexual patterns tell much about the shape of the overall culture. That is, their casual attitude toward sex reflected their carefree and freedom-loving attitude toward life in general (Devereux, 1969, p. xiii).

SAME-SEX BEHAVIOR DURING CHILDHOOD

In such an atmosphere, exploratory same-sex behavior during childhood and adolescence can take place in an open and accepted manner. No other anthropologist has studied Mohave sex life as intensely as Devereux, so the extent to which such liberationist attitudes continue today is not known. But in my conversations with many Native Americans of diverse tribes in the 1980s and 1990s, and also with Native Hawaiians, I have found that sexual play continues to be viewed as an important element in growing up and learning adult roles. I have been told by many Polynesian

men that their first sexual experience occurred when they were quite young, often between 5 and 9 years old, and with an older male relative, This was usually a cousin or an uncle, and their sexual involvement occurred in the context of a close emotional bond. As adults, they reflected on this sexual relationship with fond memories, even if they were heterosexually oriented. The sexual activities were merely one aspect of a loving relationship and were an important part of their maturation process. Because homosexuality is not regarded by the society as dirty or sinful, they were not afflicted with negative memories of "child abuse" that so commonly plague Euro-American adults who engaged in same-sex eroticism during childhood.

If Native traditionalist adults learn about the sexual activities of their children, their reaction is usually one of amusement rather than alarm. Cognizant of societal acceptance of such behavior, children who engage in consensual sexual behavior are not psychically damaged and do not suffer feelings of guilt or shame. Cross-cultural data thus suggest that current American psychological studies about the damage of same-sex child abuse can be traced mainly to societal homophobia rather than to the intrinsic harm of the sexual behavior itself. Further research on this topic is needed, especially with adults who engaged in same-sex behaviors during childhood but who do not feel that those behaviors resulted in psychic harm. Truly unbiased studies are needed to determine which factors lead some children to feel their childhood experiences were abusive and which factors lead others to opposite conclusions. Investigators should explore whether there are differences between same-sex and other-sex involvements, between boys and girls, and between the negative and neutral reactions of others if childhood sexual involvement becomes known.

Cross-cultural perspectives demonstrate that many current American suppositions about sex may be improper assumptions based solely on investigations in a single, sex-negative society. Unfortunately, little cross-cultural documentation exists regarding female-female sexual activities during childhood. However, for males worldwide, data clearly suggest that same-sex involvements have been commonly accepted in many cultures. For example, ethnographer Grant reported in the 1970s that it was commonly known within the reservation community that Hopi males up to their late twenties would often participate in same-sex activities with their friends, without social disapproval. Grant wrote:

> Everyone considers homosexual behavior normal during adolescence, and nearly all boys form special bonds, which include sexual behavior. It is expected that all will "grow out of it," however, so that in adulthood [heterosexual] marriage and the production of children will occur. (personal communication, 1985)

Among seventeenth-century Mayas, this type of same-sex relationship was institutionalized among boys and young men. In the early seventeenth century, the Franciscan Guatemalan friar Juan de Torquemada wrote about the Mayas telling him a legend of a god who came down to earth and taught the males how to have sex with each other:

> Convinced therefore that it was not o sin, the custom started among parents of giving o boy to their young son, to hove him for o woman and to use him as o woman; from that also began the low that if anyone approached the boy [sexually], they were ordered to pay for it, punishing them with the some penalties as those breaking the condition of o marriage. (Quoted in Guerra, 1971, pp. 172-173)

This custom of an adolescent male having a younger boy as a "wife" negates the view of homosexuality as "abnormal." The norm for that culture was for a boy to be a boy-wife in his youth, graduate in the teenage years to being a husband of a younger boy, and then in his twenties to marry a woman. This custom did not exist in isolation among the Mayas. Though very little is known about sexual variance in most cultures, same-sex marriages among male youths have been socially accepted and honored in many areas of the world, from the Azande warriorhoods of East Africa to the Edo courts and Buddhist monasteries of Japan (see Williams, 1986, chapter 12). The widespread existence of such customs also illustrates the inclination of many, if not most, males—in the absence of social taboos—to interact sexually with both males and females during at least part of their lifetime.

Among many cultures, such as the Zapotecs of Mexico, same-sex behavior among males is so common that same-sex eroticism is not used as a means of classifying people. Only the gender-variant *mux*e, or two-spirit, is considered different. Gender-conformist masculine boys may be sexually active with other boys or adult men and their behavior does not mark them as deviant. Though boys commonly become sexually active with men before puberty, when they reach their mid-twenties almost all marry women. This occurs primarily to ensure the reproduction of offspring, but even after marriage a male may continue to have sex with other males without censure (Chinas, 1985). In most Native cultures, marriage is traditionally and primarily viewed as an economic arrangement for securing the family's subsistence and raising the next generation. A marriage partner is not expected to fulfill all sexual desires. The emphasis of the sexual value system is to provide independence for each person in making decisions about her or his life.

SAME-SEX BEHAVIOR OF ALTERNATIVELY GENDERED PERSONS

Although sexual behavior may often occur between two masculine males or two feminine females, many cultures socially encourage homosexuality between a gender conformist and an androgynous person of the same biological sex. I interviewed many androgynous male Polynesians and Native Americans who reported that other boys or men approached them for sex, beginning when they were as young as 5 or 6 years old. From that point, they were socialized to take the passive/insertee role in sex. They almost invariably enjoyed and preferred to be anally penetrated by a masculine man; others most enjoyed sucking the man's penis. Few wanted to reverse sexual roles, and indeed some did not even want their penis to be touched. They often experienced

ejaculation solely from the pleasure of being anally penetrated; even when they did not ejaculate, they reported feeling “an internal orgasm.”

The vast majority of my Native interviewees expressed pleasant memories about their childhood sexual experiences. In 1982, a Lakota *winkte* matter-of-factly said that he became sexually active when he was 8 years old, after beginning an affair with a 40-year-old man. "Since he was good to me and for me it was considered by my family to be okay and my own business—no one else's" (personal field notes, 1982). Another recalled in 1985 that when he was 8 years old, his uncle, who was in his thirties, gave him body rubs in which he rubbed the boy's genitals.

> I never knew if it was right or wrong. I was too afraid to know what was happening. They'd call it molestation today t but I don't think it had any bod impact on me in the long run one way or the other. There was no harm done. It intrigued me that I could do this. And then my feelings started to awaken inside of me as I got older, and I began sexual intercourse with men. (personal field notes, 1985)

When this same person was 10 years old, two heterosexual Indian men in intoxicated and raped him. He recalled,

> I knew I liked the male sex, but I didn't like it to be that intense. I didn't like the rape. But then at age 10 I began a whole string of involvements in sex, from ministers to tribal presidents to government officials. Mostly Indian, but White as well. I never was attracted to someone my age. . . I was never connected to women, never any sexual attraction at all. (personal field notes, 1985)

His experiences over the next 6 years were ongoing sexual encounters with heterosexually married men, rather than full-time relationships. Sometimes he initiated these affairs, and he has fond memories of his promiscuous times. However, when he was 16 he met a 32-year-old unmarried, masculine construction worker with whom he moved in and began a long-term relationship. This Lakota male is now over 40 and continues to live happily in his marriage with the older man. They are financially stable, own a house, and are emotionally supportive of each other.

The only Native man I interviewed who felt traumatized by sex during childhood was a 25-year-old Blackfoot gay man. When he was 9 years old, he was forcibly raped by his alcoholic grandfather. He remembered the anal rape as physically painful and emotionally disgusting. Because this boy hated his grandfather, who had often physically beaten him and his sister, and because the man had no concern for the boy's pain, the violent rape was particularly damaging. To cope with his trauma, he turned to drugs and alcohol. Only after years of counseling with a patient therapist did he learn to cope and at last could begin to enjoy sex with his European gay male lover, with whom he now lives happily.

Without a doubt, his case constituted child abuse, and his memories stand in sharp contrast to the positive feelings expressed by other Native males who engaged in

consensual and loving sexual relationships during childhood. Even the Lakota winkte cited above who was raped at age 10 grew up without extensive Psychic harm because his previous enjoyable sexual experiences allowed him to place the rape in perspective. These cases indicate that the pleasurableness of initial sexual experiences may be extremely important in determining a person's later psychological health. Thus, if our society is truly concerned with protecting youth, it is important to ensure that young people's initial sexual encounters are pleasant and enjoyable. Enjoyment and positive memory, not the age at which the youth begins to be sexually active, are crucial in promoting the development of psychological health and maturity.

The above cases children illustrate the extreme contrast between and child-loving child-abusive societies, in which children suffer the rapes extreme and oppression, and child-loving societies, such as the Mohaves and Zapotecs, in which children are permitted to be sexually free and unrepressed. Child-loving cultures are better able to produce children with positive self-esteem and little psychosis, partly because they have evolved a formula in which sexual diversity and gender variance are recognized and accepted. Persons in those societies who are gender nonconformist and same-sex oriented are not just grudgingly tolerated, but honored as exceptional two-spirited persons having special spiritual gifts.

ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FAMILY

Besides spirituality, the other important factor generating respect for sexual diversity in both Native American and Polynesian cultures is the strong economic contribution that androgynous people often make to their family and community. In my interviews with Native Hawaiians, I have been struck by an especially strong respect for family, which is the basis of acceptance of same-sex inclined and bisexually inclined individuals. Similar to Native Americans, Polynesians have traditionally lived in extended families with wide networks of kin dependent on each other. In this family organization, not everyone has to have children.

By contrast, in societies characterized by the nuclear family, everyone must reproduce if they are to have someone to care for them in their old age. In an extended family, however, persons who do not reproduce have nephews and nieces who will take care of them. In fact, it is an economic advantage for one or two adults not to reproduce because then there is a higher ratio of food-producing adults to food-consuming children.

Today in our geographically mobile society, it might not be possible for many people to reconstruct this emphasis on the extended family, but knowledge of the importance of a wide network of kin can serve as inspiration for developing other alternatives. In my opinion, the best potential for accomplishing this is through encouraging longstanding close-friendship networks (see Weston, 1992). As an anthropologist, one of the most striking aspects I see in contemporary American culture is the severely

restricted number of persons on whom Americans depend emotionally. Current social problems suggest that the small nuclear family is not doing a very good job providing emotional support and personal financial interdependence. If emotional bondings beyond the nuclear family can be created, whether in extended families or in long-term friendship networks, a much healthier society will evolve.

In Native American extended families, two-spirit persons, being both masculine and feminine, make particularly important economic contributions because they can do both women's and men's work. They provide assistance to their siblings' children and thus advance the status of the extended family as a whole. This family role is particularly strong among the Navajo, whose word *nadleh* suggests spiritual transformation. A traditionalist Navajo woman, whose uncle was a well-respected *nadleh* healer, told me:

> They are seen as very compassionate people, who care for their family a lot and help people. That's why they are healers. *Nadlehs* are also seen as being great with children, real Pied Pipers. Children love *nadlehs,* so parents ore pleased if a *nadleh* takes on interest in their child. One that I know is now a principal of a school on a reservation…. *Nadelhs* are not seen as an abstract group, like "gay people," but as a specific person, like "my relative so-and-so." People who help their family a lot are considered valuable members of the community. (personal field notes, 1982)

Thus, it is within the context of individual family relations that much of the high status of two-spirit people must be evaluated. When family members know that one of their relatives is this type of person and when they have positive cultural reinforcements to account for such individual diversity, then tensions are not imposed on the family. Without interference from external societal and religious groups claiming that there is something wrong with parents who raise such a child, unprejudiced family love can express itself.

In this context, an individual who in Euro-American culture would be considered a misfit, an embarrassment to the family, is instead central to the family. Because other relatives do not feel threatened, family disunity and conflict are avoided. The two-spirit person is not pressured to suppress gender-atypical or same-sex behavior and thus does not develop a poor self-image or engage in self-destructive behavior. Considered to have special strengths, such persons are too strongly valued by their families to have their talents and potential contributions wasted.

Instead of being suppressed or discarded, the unique energies of two-spirit persons are channeled into productive labor that benefits the extended family. Traditionally, masculine female two-spirits are known as skilled hunters and brave warriors (see Williams, 1986, chapter 11). Androgynous male two-spirits are known as excellent cooks, skilled craftspersons, potters, beadworkers, and seamstresses and for having the best-decorated houses (see Williams, 1986, chapter 3).

This reputation reflects a strong striving for prestige by those who are different. Unlike Euro-American society, in which prestige is a reflection of material wealth, in many Native American cultures a person gains prestige by helping others. Whether helping to heal people through shamanistic abilities, teaching the young, working hard for the well-being of their family, showing their generosity, or displaying their talents in superior craftwork, the theme that unites all of these endeavors by two-spirit people is an especially strong striving for prestige.

The female two-spirit in traditional times, then, had an inclination not just to be a hunter and warrior but to be an outstanding one. Her strong personal motivation to prove to everyone that she deserved to be accepted in those roles led her to work especially hard. Likewise, the androgynous male child who did not demonstrate bravery in warfare or success in the hunt could still gain renown for spiritual, intellectual, and artistic skills. In many tribes, two-spirit persons traditionally had particular opportunities to accumulate wealth. For example' in some California groups, the two-spirits prepared the dead for burial and were entitled to keep the property that was placed with the body.

Among the Navajos, *nadlehs* participate in both women's and men's economic activities, gaining twice as much as the average man or woman. *Nadlehs* also make pottery, baskets, and woven goods. Because their crafts are associated with spiritual power, their products are always heavily in demand as trade goods. Beyond this, because they arc believed to be lucky in amassing wealth, *nadlehs* usually act as the head of their extended family and have control of family property. Because their opportunities for accumulating wealth are greater than those of an ordinary person, it is easy to support the belief that *nadlehs* ensure prosperity. In 1935, an ethnographer published an interview with a *nadleh* that reflected the quiet self-confidence and centrality of a two-spirit person within the Navajo family. The *nadleh* reported:

> A family that has a *nadleh* born into it will be brought riches and success. . . I have charge of everything that my family owns. I hope that I will be that way until I die. Riches do not just come to you; you have to pray for what you get. My parents always took better care of me. . The family, after I grew always gave me the choice of whatever they had. (Hill, 1 935, p. 278)

CONCLUSION

This reaction of Native families to an androgynous child is opposite to that of most Euro-Americans. As the large caseload of psychiatric therapy in the United States attests, severe damage can result when children evolve a negative self-image. Gender-atypical children in North America, recognizing their difference from the norm and reminded of it by relatives and peers, easily acquire feelings of deviance or inferiority. Denying meaningful differences ("I am the same as you except for this one minor difference") is not a very effective means of reducing the prejudice directed against

them. Because society considers gender and sexual differences important, making an appeal that "we're all really just the same" frequently results in prejudiced persons recoiling in terror; they fear that someone might consider them deviant as well.

My cross-cultural research suggests that the most effective means for inculcating social acceptance of androgynous persons is through cultural emphasis and appreciation for the unique gifts of such persons. Difference is transformed from "deviant" to "exceptional." The difference is emphasized, becoming a basis for respect rather than stigmatization. Native American and Polynesian cultures utilize the talents of androgynous persons precisely because these cultures offer prestige and rewards *beyond* those which are available to the average person.

Both Native American and Native Hawaiian sources often remark that androgynous males are particularly clean and tend to have the best-decorated homes. These characteristics are similar to the emphasis on personal looks, clothing style, and interior decoration in contemporary Euro-American urban gay subculture. These historic similarities cannot be explained by cultural diffusion. Rather, they are a result of gender nonconformists' individual pride for doing well in a cultural system in which they are not typical. Euro-American traditional family values allow at best only a grudging tolerance for androgyny and sexually nonconformist individuals, whereas in Native cultures family members are taught to feel especially blessed and fortunate to have a two-spirit relative.

Family and community respect for two-spirit persons was noted repeatedly by early anthropologists. For example, in the Zuni pueblo in the 1890s, Stevenson described a two-spirit *Ihamana* named We'wha: "His strong character made his word law among both the men and the women with whom he associated. Though his wrath was dreaded by men as well as by women, he was beloved by all the children, to whom he was ever kind." When We'wha became ill with heart disease in 1896, Stevenson wrote that she had "never before observed such attention as every member of the family showed." Despite their efforts, within a week We'wha went into a coma and died. Stevenson reported: "Darkness and desolation entered the hearts of the mourners. . . . We'wha's death was regarded as a calamity. . . . [It was] a death which caused universal regret and distress in Zuni" (Stevenson, 1901/1902, PP. 37-38, 310-313).

An anthropologist who lived among the Navajo in the 1930s also emphasized the extremely favorable attitudes of families toward *nadlehs*:

> The family which counted a transvestite among its members or had a hermaphrodite child born to them was considered by themselves and everyone else as very fortunate. The success and wealth of such a family was believed to be assured. Special care was taken in the raising of such children and they were afforded favoritism not shown to other children of the family. As they grew older and assumed the character of *nadle* [sic], this solicitude and respect increased…. This respect verges almost on reverence in many cases. (Hill, 1935, p. 274)

This anthropologist quoted several Navajo informants to illustrate these attitudes:

> They know everything. They can do both the work of a man and a woman. I think when all the *nadle* are gone, that it will be the end of the Navaho.
>
> If there were no *nadle*, the country would change. They are responsible for all the wealth in the country. If there were no more left, the horses, sheep, and Navaho would all go. They are leaders just like President Roosevelt. A *nadle* around the hogan will bring good luck and riches. They have charge of all the riches. It does a great deal for the country if you have *nadle* around.
>
> You must respect a *nadle*. They are, somehow, sacred and holy. (Hill, 1935, p. 274)

Another reason two-spirit persons are respected is because they are often the person who will care for elderly relatives. Being homoerotically inclined, they seldom have children. This is also true in Hawai'i, where, according to Polynesian informants, the *mahu* is traditionally the family member who cares for the aged parents. This arrangement is advantageous for heterosexual siblings, allowing them more time to care for their children. Hawaiian traditionalists value their *mahu* relatives partly because such persons are not reproductive. Traditionalists strongly defend their *mahu* relatives and friends by asking: "How could I turn my back On them? They are my relatives. They are part of my family" (personal field notes' 1992). Ironically, it is traditional family values—Polynesian style—that are the basis for acceptance of the *mahu*. Because their families are strong, much stronger than the weak nuclear family system of the West, they dare not turn their back on relatives. These are real "traditional family values": unconditional love, a certainty of mutual dependence, acceptance of people the way they are, and a respect for the magic and power of human diversity.

Having this level of support and high family expectations, two-spirit people and *mahus* are often renowned for being hard workers and productive, intelligent contributors to their family. Their relatives benefit, much more so than among Euro-American families, where heterosexist prejudice often divides farnilies and causes relatives to lose the potential contributions of talented and exceptional individuals. If families in contemporary society incorporate such loving values into raising children, the strength of true family values can be increased. This can be learned if we listen to the wisdom of Native American and Polynesian traditionalist people. An Indian from Arizona expressed the essence of this wisdom when he concluded:

> Among my people, gay is a special status. . . The more unique someone is, the more valuable they are, the more unique their vision, the more unique their gift, their perspective, everything they can offer is something that other people can't offer… The thing that's different about where I come from, is that all human beings are respected because all human beings have potential, all human beings have value. (quoted in Von Praunheim, 1980, p. 148)

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