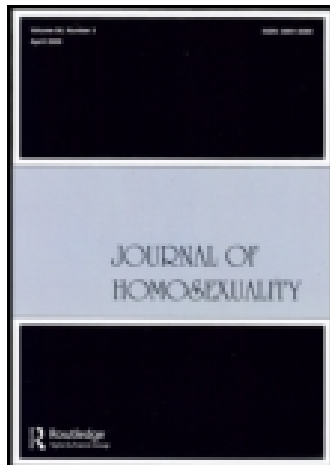


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Persistence and Change in the Berdache Tradition Among Contemporary Lakota Indians

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ABSTRACT. This article explores the gender non-conformity role of *berdache*, which ethnographers have often assumed has died out among contemporary American Indians. Ethnohistorical sources indicate intense suppression of berdaches by missionaries and government officials. The authors fieldwork in 1982 on Lakota reservations in South Dakota reveals that individuals recognized as berdaches continue to hold a social and ceremonial role. A gender-mixing status seldom talked about with outsiders (including heterosexual ethnographers) was observed. This role involves more emphasis on sexual contact with men that has been noted in recent anthropological writings.

The *berdache* tradition in American Indian culture has been discussed since the earliest Spanish and French explorers confronted aboriginal societies. Frontiersmen and early ethnographers also described it, and a few even interviewed berdaches as late as the 1930s (Stevenson 1901-2; Hill, 1935). Nevertheless, most of the first-hand writings on the subject were based upon statements by non-berdache Indians or by whites who may have had only fleeting contact with a berdache. Some of these white observers approached the subject in a neutral manner, but the majority (including some anthropologists) expressed condemnatory attitudes reflective of western prejudices. Most reports devoted only a paragraph or two to the berdaches, preferring to focus on less "disagreeable" topics.

Modern scholars analyzing the topic on a multi-tribal level have had to rely on these limited sources, as a basis for theorizing about the social

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function of the berdache tradition (Angelino & Shedd, 1955; Blackwood, 1984; Callender & Kochems, 1983; Forgey, 1975; Jacobs, 1968; Katz, 1976; Thayer, 1980; Whitehead, 1981). The berdaches have been presented only abstractly, rather than in a personalized way as real people, due to the deficiencies of the available data. Berdaches have not been allowed to speak for themselves. Furthermore, most anthropologists assume that the berdache tradition has died out among contemporary American Indians. As with all traditional aspects of aboriginal societies the berdache tradition has changed, but it still persists among some tribes. Changes in the tradition are the result of cultural adaptations that Indian people have made to life in a homophobic colonial environment.

One group in which the berdache tradition survives is the traditionalist Lakotas, or Sioux, in the northern Plains. In their language the word for berdache is *winkte*, and refers only to biological males (Hassrick, 1964; Powers, 1977). According to Forgey (1975), a male on the Lower Brule reservation continued dressing in women's clothing in the 1970s, and was fully accepted as a *winkte* and as a respected member of the community. In 1971, the revered Lakota medicine man, Lame Deer, also reported the continued existence of *winkte*. In that year he held a conversation with a berdache, of whom he said, "I wasn't even sure of whether I was talking to a man or to a woman. . . . To us a man is what nature, or his dreams, make him. We accept him for what he wants to be. That's up to him. . . . There are good men among the *winktes* and they have been given certain powers" (Fire & Erdoes, 1972, p. 149).

Equipped with nothing more than these brief statements, I searched for information about berdaches among contemporary Lakotas. During the summer of 1982, I did fieldwork in South Dakota on the Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations, with a brief trip to the Cheyenne River reservation. Lakota people generously took me into their households and allowed me to learn of their sacred traditions and ceremonies. Lakota berdaches spoke frankly to me of their lives and place in their tribal society.

The best way to understand *winkte* is to let the Lakota people speak for themselves. The people quoted here are full-blood Lakotas who have lived most of their lives on one of the Lakota reservations. They think of themselves as "traditionalists," meaning that they respect the institutionalized ways of the old people, participate in the aboriginal religious ceremonies, and reject Christianity and the competitive Protestant ethic.

Interview 1: The informant was a sixty-year-old man who identifies as a traditionalist, takes a leadership role in community ceremonies as a drummer and chanter, and is regarded as an authority on Lakota culture. He described the *winktes* as follows:

At one time the *winktes* were regarded as sacred people, but that has

declined and today it is like "gay," like you have in California. People will tease each other about being winkte, but you would never tease a winkte himself. The attitude of respect changed around World War II or a little after, because of social pressures, as Indians who had been educated in white schools lost respect for the traditions. But even today elderly winktes are respected as holy persons, especially by the elderly and traditional people. They are feared because of their spiritual power. They could put a curse on people who don't respect them.

Becoming a winkte comes from different things. Winktes sometimes come from families with lots of sisters and brothers. It could be how they are brought up, I don't know. Sometimes a person will change, and no longer be a winkte. So if they stay that way it is more of their own choice. It is easy to pick out a winkte. They don't marry women, but they act and talk like a woman. But they're "half and half," and will dress mostly like men. Winktes had to assume their roles because if they didn't, something bad would happen to them or their family or their tribe. But there could also be other reasons for winkte, I'm not sure.

In ceremonials, winktes would dance like a woman and wear an article or two of women's clothing, but otherwise dress as a man. This still happens today. Fifteen or 20 years ago there were still quite a number of elderly winktes on the reservation, but most of them have died since then. I saw them at the ceremonies. People take for granted that they aren't going to change him. That's his life and they accept him. . . . But the white missionaries condemned winktes, and would tell families if something bad happened it was because of the winktes. They would not even accept them into the cemetery when a winkte died, saying "their souls are lost." They ostracized winktes.

Some younger people today are called winkte, but I don't think they are really winkte because they don't have spirituality. They are just "gay"; there is a difference. Maybe they got that way from drinking or smoking. And most of them don't even know about the winkte tradition. If they did they wouldn't drink or live with each other. None of the winktes I knew were married to men. They lived alone and men would visit them.

. . . A very few winktes married women and had children, but still fulfilled the winkte role. But most were not permitted by the spirits to be married. It varies from one person to another. Winkte means "different." It is neither man nor woman, but is a third group different from men and women. That is why winktes are regarded as sacred. Only Wakan Tanka, the great spirit, can explain it, so we accept it. Winktes are gifted persons.

Interview 2: The informant was a twenty-five-year-old man who was raised by his grandfather, a prominent traditionalist medicine man. At age 12 he began to take on a medicine role, under his grandfather's direction, and learned many of the old traditions. Today people come to him for curing and to help in preparing for ceremonies. He is also a road man for the Native American Church, conducting peyote meetings.

Winktes know medicine, but they are not medicine men. They have good powers, especially for love medicine, for curing, and for childbearing. They can tell the future.

Some say winktes were born that way and you cannot change them. They had a dream, seeing women's quillwork and tools. Winktes do top quality beadwork and crafts, women's work. Most winktes did not go to war, but my grandfather told me stories about one who did. He did the cooking and took care of the camp and cured the wounds of the warriors. Winktes give secret names to people to protect them through life. Some really have strong powers, but others just wanted to be like women. They call each other "sister." Winktes had high status, and some men married a winkte as a second or third wife. If not married, the winkte had his own tipi and his men friends could visit for sex. A married man would visit a winkte for sex during the time when his wife was pregnant, or in taboo days. But this varied from band to band. My grandfather told stories that in sex the winkte usually took the passive role, but sometimes he would exchange and take the active role with his men friends.

Traditionally, winktes were both joked about and respected at the same time. But when people forgot the traditional ways and the traditional medicine, by going to missionaries and boarding schools, then they began to look down on winktes and lose respect. The missionaries and government officials said winktes were no good, and they tried to get winktes to change their ways. I heard sad stories of winktes committing suicide, hanging themselves rather than change. The 1920s and 1930s were the turning point in the winkte's decline, and after that those who remained would put on men's clothing.

Today people would look down on winktes and might shun them. But a few years ago one man wore eye shadow and a woman's blouse, and many accepted him but he was shunned by others. Two men might have sex today, but they'd do it in secret and if discovered would be shunned. . . . If I had lived in traditional times, I might have had a winkte for a wife, but not today. The old respect is gone.

Interview 3: The informant was a twenty-eight-year-old woman who was raised in a traditionalist household. Although she now holds a wage

job in a nearby town she continues to participate in the tribal ceremonies. She recently had gone through scarification in a Sun Dance and proudly displayed her scars.

I grew up on the reservation, and still respect the old traditions. My uncle is now a winkte, and so was my grandfather. He died in 1980, in his 70s. He was married to my grandmother, and even had children, but was basically homosexual though he was secretive about his male lovers. He was effeminate, quiet, easy-going, very philosophical, and very respected on the reservation. He gave people sacred names. When someone died, it was the winkte who was the first one people came to, to help out with the funeral and the ceremonies. People who don't respect their Indian traditions criticize gays, but it was part of Indian culture. It makes me mad when I hear someone insult winktes. A lot of the younger gays, though, don't fulfill their spiritual role as winktes, and that's sad too.

Interview 4: A twenty-four year-old man does not identify as winkte, though other people think of him as winkte because of his feminine nature. He is a very gentle person who is well respected for his work with children.

The last true traditional winkte on this reservation died in the 1960's. I remember seeing him at ceremonials. You never talked disrespectfully about a winkte because it is sacred. Every true winkte has sacred powers, some more, some less. They doctored illnesses, and were wakan [sacred]. If a person took ill, a winkte could give medicine that would make a miraculous cure. One doctored my grandfather and healed his broken leg in one day. This winkte wore a woman's breastplate, shawl, and underwear, but always wore men's pants. He could do anything and everything better than a woman. He was very neat and clean, good at crocheting and cooking. Winktes were always male, never a female, but they always danced with the women, dancing at the head of the circle leading the women. They talked in woman's dialect, but were different from both men and women.

I heard a story that if a man wanted a winkte to name his child, then he would have sex with the winkte. If a winkte names a child, then that child will take on some winkte ways. That would be good because if there was a winkte in a family, that family would feel very fortunate. Due to white influence the younger generation sometimes ridiculed winktes, but the elders respected them almost like an immortal. Today, when Indians say winkte, they mean "effeminate" or "like a woman." There are some gays on the reserva-

tion now, but "gay" and winkte are different; winkte is a gay with ceremonial sacred powers.

People have always called me winkte, in a joking or negative way, because of my effeminate mannerisms. I don't think I am spiritual enough. If I did it I would be very serious about it. But I don't want to be considered gay either, because that brings more kidding. I would be frightened to leave the reservation and my family, so I don't think I would fit into the gay lifestyle in the city.

Interview 5: A thirty-two-year-old man who identifies as winkte, dresses in men's clothes, but wears his hair very long like a woman. He is extremely feminine in voice and manner, and does not try to hide this but is very proud of it. He takes the traditional religion most seriously.

A winkte is two spirits, man and woman, combined into one spirit. That is me, and I get my holiness from the Sacred Pipe. From that holiness the Sioux people show respect. In the last few years, respect for winkte has increased somewhat, more than it had been, as more people return to respect for the traditions. Some mixed-blood Indians condemn "queers" but the traditional people stick up for them. Formerly, higher class winktes had up to twelve husbands. Chief Crazy Horse had one or two winktes for wives, as well as his female wives, but this has been kept quiet because Indians don't want whites to criticize. It's not so much that whites influenced Indian culture, because they didn't really care very much about anything other than getting the Indians' land and wealth, but Indians just keep things like this unknown to white who don't understand our sacred ways.

As a winkte, I accept my feminine nature as part of my being. I dress as a man, but I feel feminine and enjoy doing women's things. I would be terribly scared to be considered as a man. It is obvious from infancy that a boy is going to be a winkte. He is a beautiful baby and the sound of his voice is effeminate; it is inborn. The mother realizes this soon, and allows the boy to do feminine things. They all end up being sexually attracted to men.

I began to be sexually active when I was eight years old, and had an affair with a forty-year-old man. Since he was good to me and for me, it was considered by my family to be o.k. and my own private business—no one else's. I still, at age 32, live with my parents, and my men friends visit me at home. Straight Indian guys will go sexually with a gay here, in a way that whites don't. A man will go out with winktes and with women, but he is not considered to be a winkte. "Homosexuals" are two he-men who live together as a couple. That is not done here; it is an effeminate and a he-man. Married

men are the best. I only want to play the passive role with a he-man, though sometimes the man wants to change sex roles. I want to lie with all the men. I used to keep a list of how many men I had been with. It would be unholy for me to have sex with a woman, or with another winkte. That would be wrong, and would violate the role set for me by the Sacred Pipe. The man could be gay, but he must be masculine. . . . A man and a winkte could go through a wedding ceremony, and it would be accepted by traditional people just as a marriage between men and women. It is by the Sacred Pipe. People know that on the reservation the spirit of Big Bull is watching them, so they cannot criticize winkte. But if they were away in the city, away from the kin groups, then they might be anti-gay. That is a different thing.

One person I know goes in and out of a winkte role, but that is very unusual. Usually winktes hold on to their role always, for its spiritual power. Sacred Pipe people, the traditionalists, would not object if a winkte dresses in woman's clothing in ceremonies. They would only see it as winkte getting more spiritual power. A couple of years ago I saw an eighty-year-old winkte dance in a ceremony with a woman's shawl and hairnet over his long braids, but otherwise he dressed as a man. That's the way he always dressed.

People are afraid to criticize winkte, because they fear the winkte spiritual power. To become a winkte, you have a medicine man put you on the hill for a vision quest. You can see a vision of a White Buffalo Bull Calf if you truly are a winkte by nature, or you might see another vision if Wakan Tanka wants you to.

Interview 6: The informant is a forty-nine year-old male who identifies as winkte. He dresses in pants, but they are women's style. His entire dress and manner suggest androgyny, with a mixture of both male and female aspects. He has always filled a winkte role and been accepted as such by his family and the reservation at large. He takes a leading role in the tribal ceremonies.

Winkte are wakan, which means that they have power as special people. Medicine men go to winkte for spiritual advice. Winktes can also be medicine men, but they're usually not because they already have the power. An example of this power is the sacred naming ceremony. It takes a winkte a full year to prepare for this. He starts with a fast and a vision quest, with sacrifices, to be fully sincere. He works with the family for the whole year, making preparations to the family and the child, and closely guiding the child for the year. A winkte can take on no more than about four children a year. Later, it is the winkte's responsibility to help look after that child.

The winkte makes a medicine bag for the child, with a piece of the winkte's skin and hair, and also a holy stone, which the child will carry for protection during the rest of his life. Traditionally it was the first born and the last born that got a winkte name, but nowadays it is very rare.

People know that a person will become a winkte very early in his life. About age twelve, parents will take 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 takes place, and communication with past winkte is established, then everyone accepts him as a winkte. I am now nearly fifty years old, and I have always filled a winkte role.

I was just born this way, ever since I can remember. When I was eight I saw a vision, of a person with long grey hair and with many ornaments on, standing by my bed. I asked if he was female or male, 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 up, 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. If someone ever makes fun of me, something bad will happen to them. Once a half-breed woman said I was a disgrace to the Indian race. I told her that a century ago, I would have been considered that much more special. She died shortly after, and I think it was because she had insulted winkte.

My spirit takes care of me. I love children, and I used to worry that I would be alone without children. The Spirit said he would provide some. Later, some kids of drunks who did not care for them, were brought to me by neighbors. The kids began spending more and more time here, so finally the parents asked me to adopt them. In all, I have raised seven orphan children.

I worked as a nurse, and a cook in an old age home. I cook for funerals and wakes too. People bring their children to me for special winkte names, and give me gifts. If I show my generosity, then others help me in return. 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 children. I want to be remembered most for the two values that my people hold dearest: generosity and spirituality. If you say anything about me, say those two things.

CONCLUSIONS

From an ethnohistoric perspective, several themes emerge from the berdache tradition among Lakotas. Despite intense pressure from white missionaries and government officials, native culture has not succumbed to attempts at cultural genocide. Winktes had to change and become secretive, but they have not vanished. They retain the respect of traditional Lakota people, though respect has declined among acculturated Indians. Interestingly, cross-dressing is not seen as that important to a continuation of berdachism. But same-sex erotic behavior does continue to have a strong association with winkte status, more so than the recent literature would suggest. This behavior, however, is seen as distinct from the Western concepts of "gay" or "homosexual," because of the strong berdache association with femininity and spirituality.

Even the descriptive variations found in these interviews are evidence of the Lakota viewpoint that individuals decide spiritual truth for themselves. Nevertheless, the general characteristics of the winktes are graphically rendered: their spiritual power, respected status, homoeroticism, the mixture of women's and men's work, their repression in the last half century, and their survival. By creative, individualized adaptation, the berdache, like American Indian culture generally, has survived.

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