

TWO-SPIRIT PEOPLE OF INDIGENOUS NORTH AMERICANS

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Many Native American indigenous cultures have traditionally held intersex, androgynous people, feminine males, and masculine females in high respect. The most common term to define such persons today is to refer to them as Two Spirit people, but in the past feminine males were sometimes referred to as "berdache" by early French explorers in North America, who adapted a Persian word "bardaj," meaning a close intimate male friend. Because these androgynous males were commonly married to a masculine man, or had sex with men, and the masculine females had feminine women as wives, the term berdache had a clear homosexual connotation. Both the Spaniards in Latin America and the English colonists in North America condemned them as "sodomites."

Rather than emphasizing the homosexual orientation of these persons, however, many Native American cultures focused on the spiritual gifts of such persons. American Indian traditionalists, even today, tend to see a person's basic character as a reflection of their spirit. Since everything that exists is thought to come from the spirit world, androgynous or transgender persons are seen as doubly blessed, having both the spirit of a man and the spirit of a woman. Thus, they are honored for having two spirits, and are seen as more spiritually gifted than the typical masculine male or feminine female.

From this religious perspective, androgynous or transgendered persons are honored as sacred. Therefore, many Native American religions, rather than stigmatizing such persons, often looked to them as religious leaders and teachers. Because researchers are so dependent upon the written sources of early European explorers, it is difficult to say with certainty exactly how widespread were these traditions of respect. Quite similar religious traditions existed among the native peoples of Siberia and many other parts of Asia. Since the ancestors of Native Americans migrated from Siberia over 15,000 years ago, and since reports of highly respected Two Spirit androgynous persons have been reported among indigenous Americans from Alaska in the north to Chile in the south, androgyny seems to be quite ancient among humans.

Though some anthropologists have equated Two Spirit people with transsexuality, there was no tradition of Native Americans castrating Two Spirit males. Rather than attempting to change the physical body, Native Americans emphasized a person's "spirit," or character, as being most important. Instead of seeing Two Spirit persons as transsexuals who try to make themselves into "the opposite sex", it is more accurate to understand them as unique individuals who take on a gender status that is different from both men and women. This alternative gender status offers a range of

possibilities, from only-slightly effeminate males or masculine females, to androgynous or transgender persons, to those who completely cross-dress and act as the other gender. The emphasis of Native Americans is not to force every person into one box, but to allow for the reality of diversity in gender and sexual identities.

Because so many eastern North American cultures were so quickly overwhelmed by the European invasion, there is not much evidence of Two Spirit traditions in those societies. But the little evidence that does exist suggests that, especially before they converted to Christianity, these eastern Indians also respected Two Spirit people. Most of the evidence for respectful Two Spirit traditions is focused on the native peoples of the Plains, the Great Lakes, the Southwest, and California. With over a thousand vastly different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, it is important not to overgeneralize for the indigenous peoples of North America. Some documentary sources suggest that a minority of societies treated Two Spirit persons disrespectfully, by kidding them or discouraging children from taking on a Two Spirit role. However, many of the documents which report negative reactions are themselves suspect, and should be evaluated critically in light of the preponderance of evidence that suggests a respectful attitude. Some European commentators, from early frontier explorers to modern anthropologists, also were influenced by their own homophobic prejudices to distort Native attitudes.

Two Spirit people were respected by native societies not only due to religious attitudes, but also because of practical concerns. Because their gender roles involved a mixture of both masculine and feminine traits, Two Spirit persons could do both the work of men and of women. They were often considered to be hard workers and artistically gifted craftspersons, of great value to their extended families and community. Among some groups, such as the Navajo, a family was believed to be economically benefited by having a "nadleh" (literally translated as "one who is transformed") androgynous person as a relative. Two Spirit persons assisted their siblings' children and took care of elderly relatives, and often served as adoptive parents for homeless children.

A feminine male who preferred to do women's work (gathering wild plants or farming domestic plants) was logically expected to marry a masculine male, who did men's work (hunting and warfare). Because a family needed both plant foods and meat, a masculine female hunter, in turn, usually married a feminine female, to provide these complementary gender roles for economic survival. The gender-conforming spouse of Two Spirit people did not see themselves as "homosexual" or as anything other than "normal."

In the twentieth century, as homophobic European Christian influences increased among many Native Americans, respect for same-sex love and for androgynous persons greatly declined. Two Spirit people were often forced, either by government officials, Christian missionaries or their own community, to conform to standard gender roles. Some, who could not conform, either went underground or committed suicide. With the imposition of Euroamerican marriage laws, the same-sex marriages of Two Spirit people and their spouses were no longer legally recognized. But with the revitalization of Native American "Red Power" cultural pride in the 1960s and 1970s, and the rise of gay and lesbian liberation movements at the same time, a new respect for androgyny started slowly reemerging among Indian people.

Because of this tradition of respect, in the 1990s many gay and lesbian Native American activists in the United States and Canada rejected the French word *berdache* in favor of the term "Two Spirit People" to describe themselves. Many non-Indians have incorporated knowledge of Native American Two Spirit traditions into their increasing acceptance of same-sex love, androgyny and transgender diversity. Native American same-sex marriages have been used as a model for legalizing same-sex marriages in the new millennium, and the spiritual gifts of androgynous persons have started to become more recognized.

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