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Just Semantics?

The Battle Between Two-Spirit and Berdache

By Jocelyn Baird
Illustration by Rebecca Bennett

When Spanish conquistadors first came across Native American villages in the 17th century, they observed behavior that deeply disturbed and disgusted them: men, dressed as women and performing women's work, and having sex with other men. Other European explorers also noted this behavior in other parts of the New World, and it seems that gender identity for pre-colonial Native Americans was far more fluid than the rigid binary gender divisions that colonists considered "normal." Because colonists brought their own worldviews and biases to the New World, the terminology used to describe much of what they encountered can be contested—none more so, perhaps, than the word used to describe the instances of men dressing and acting as women that they saw: berdache. The pejorative impact that this term, in juxtaposition with colonization, has had on Native American gender identity directly contrasts with the newly claimed term "Two-Spirit" to create a battle of labels that is a tangled mess of politics, semantics, and histories.

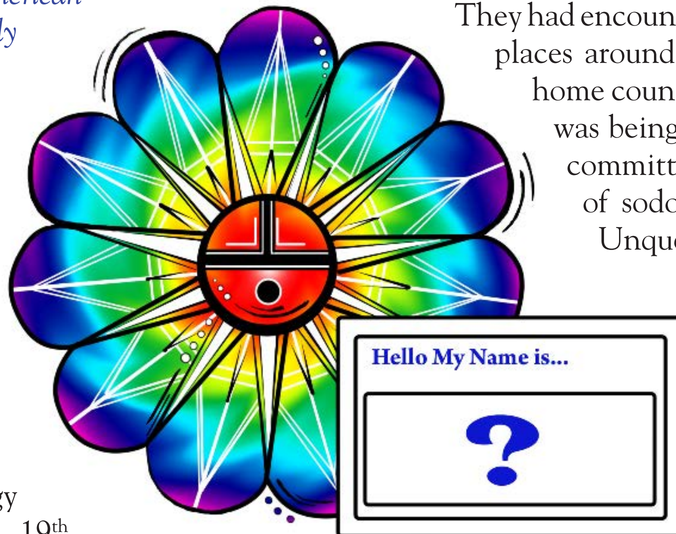
Berdache as a word comes from the Arabic bradaj, meaning, "slave" or "male prostitute." When the French and Spanish explorers reached the Americas and encountered males donning female garb and engaging in sexual acts with other males, they "asserted that these individuals were living in bradaje" (Gutiérrez, 2007, p. 20). Since its inception, and up until a couple of decades ago, berdache was the accepted academic term for such people, male and female. However, in 1990 at the third annual intertribal Native American/First Nations gay and lesbian conference, the term "Two-Spirit" was adopted as a more acceptable identifying term. The root of Two-Spirit is from the Ojibwa phrase niizh manidoowag, meaning "two spirits" and it also references the common native North American ideal that two spirits, one male and one female, resided inside the body of certain people.

To understand the arguments for and against these two terms, the history of the people they attempt to identify must be known. Perhaps the most conflicting and debated part of this history is that of the Two-Spirit[1] in pre-European contact native North America. Written records exist for the years after contact, but before that history relied on oral traditions which can be easily misinterpreted, especially when translating from original language to English. What is known is that to date, more than 150 different nations across native North America have been identified as having some form of male two-spirits, who took on the roles and dress of females in the nation and less than half of that as having female two-spirits[2], who likewise took on the dress and roles of men (Fur, 2007, p. 34). Long before "berdache" or "Two-Spirit", the languages of these individual nations had words that described these people—la'mana to the Zuñi, nádleehé to the Navajo, winkte to the Lakota, and so on (Gutiérrez, 2007, p. 19, & Lang, 1997, p. 104). One thing to keep in mind when contemplating Native American sexuality and gender identity is that the peoples collectively referred to, as Indians are a vast variety of different societies with their own languages, customs, and histories. How the Pueblo Indians of the southwest regarded sexuality and gender is not necessarily congruent with the way the Lakota of the northeast did. Many anthropologists and historians seem to forget this fact, resulting in misinformation

and misinterpretation. Compounding the issue is a lack of information regarding eastern societies, which author Jim Elledge (2002), who painstakingly searched out all existing myths for his anthology Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Myths: from the Arapaho to the Zuñi, explains in its introduction:

For the most part, the two-spirit myths that have been preserved by anthropologists and others belong to nations that live west of the Mississippi River because, unfortunately, the Native American societies east of it were so badly ravaged by European colonists that, in many cases, their people died out and many of their traditions were lost with them (p. xix).

While Elledge does go on to point out that in exchange, a great wealth of information is known about the Two-Spirits of the western nations. However, the fact that all of the myths in the anthology were published after the late 19th century brings us full circle to the issue of not truly knowing how much of the original myth has been omitted since its inception. Anytime one language is translated into another, some of the original meaning is lost. As a result, even if the myth was perfectly preserved through oral tradition between the 16th century and the 19th-20th, it is likely not all survived in the transcription by European Americans. This leaves us with a heavy reliance upon the history provided by the conquering Europeans after contact, a history full of colonist bias.



According to Gunlög Fur (2007), author of Before Stonewall, "Native American sexuality caused comment, consternation, and condemnation widely among European travelers, missionaries, and colonial administrators from the very first occasions of contact and onward" (p. 32). These reactions and the reasons for them must be taken into consideration when analyzing any literature on Two-Spirits from centuries past. Spanish conquistadors who encountered males dressing as women and performing sexual acts with other men were not surprised by these actions. They had encountered such behavior in other places around the world, including their home country of Spain, where an effort was being made to punish those who committed the "abominable sin" of sodomy (Brown, 2007, p. 58). Unquestionably, the vision of the European sodomite had a huge effect on the way Two-Spirits were portrayed by colonists who encountered them in Indian nations.

One interesting glimpse into the European mindset is a set of engravings done by famed 16th century artist Theodorus de Bry depicting many aspects of Native American life, including male "hermaphrodites," (Gutiérrez, 2007, p. 22); as Two-Spirits were often mistakenly thought to be. One of the engravings, titled "Hermaphrodites as Laborers," shows the European's view of berdaches: tall, strong, with long curly blond hair. Berdaches are depicted carrying warriors from their tribe from battle on stretchers, and the contrast between both is striking. The non-"hermaphrodites" are smaller with dark hair and features more congruent with traditional Native

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portraits. From a modern perspective, it is obvious that this illustration does not depict actual Native Americans from the 1500s. Instead, the men-women pictured embody the European vision of sodomites at the time (Bucher, 1981, p.153). While this perhaps can be viewed as an extreme example of colonist perspective, one cannot deny the biases brought to native North America by its conquerors.

Berdache was one way in which Europeans could gain some of the control necessary to conquer the peoples of the newly discovered land. By using a European term with a completely derogatory history to describe a native practice that they could not have fully understood (and possibly did not care to), colonists were able to impose their moral codes regarding same-sex sexuality and gender upon Native Americans. Spanish descriptions of "berdache" activities among the Pueblo Indians in the 16th and 17th centuries are less than accepting. Conquistador Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca gave the following account in a 1542 published narrative about his first observations of native men-women in what is now northeastern Texas in 1536:

I saw a wicked behavior, and it is that I saw one man married to another, and these are effeminate, impotent men. And they go about covered like women, and they perform the tasks of women, and they do not use a bow, and they carry very great loads. And among these we saw many of them, thus unmanly as I say, and they are more muscular than other men and taller; they suffer very large loads" (Gutiérrez, 2007, p. 21).

Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca did not seek to understand what he encountered, rather he simply called it out for being wicked behavior that, in his European mind, needed punishment. The Spanish also jumped to other conclusions about the strange men-women they saw, claiming that they must be "eunuchs" or hermaphrodites since they were wearing women's clothing (Gutiérrez, 2007, p. 22). What Spanish, French, and other European colonists seemed most preoccupied with were not the female clothing or roles that these men took on, but their sexual behavior. The marriages and sexual acts between men in native North American tribes deeply disturbed European colonists, and so they sought to degrade this behavior and make it shameful. Subsequently by branding them with "berdache," a name that conjures images of slavery and passive male prostitution, they succeeded. Christian religious beliefs, had much to do with the motivations behind these efforts to morally control the native nations; but having moral control through religion also helped government authorities to have social control over them as well. It is estimated that by the 18th century in many Pueblo Indian communities the European attitudes that same-sex sexual interactions were an "abominable sin" had begun to gain some acceptance (Brown, 2007, p. 51-52).

Between the 16th and 19th centuries as European Americans conquered and settled, then began systematically forcing Native American nations off of their lands, much was changed. Traditions were lost as

people were killed, entire nations at times wiped out by disease and slaughter. The Two-Spirit tradition stayed alive in many communities, as evidenced by the most famous Two-Spirit in history, a Zuñi la'mana named We'wha; but it was inevitably changed (Gutiérrez, 2007, p. 24). By the 19th century, when We'wha was alive, anthropologists had taken up great interest in the "berdache" and were eager to study them. One of

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the most common arguments for the sustained use of "berdache" as an identifying term is its heavy usage in the academic world, especially within anthropology. In fact, one of the most extensive studies ever done on the subject argues in favor of the term. Queer scholar and activist Will Roscoe (1998) defends berdache, arguing that words that were insulting or negative in the past can change to become identifiers without negative connotations. Roscoe concludes his argument by saying "There is no evidence that the first anthropologists to use the term were aware of its older European and Persian meanings" (Roscoe, 1998).

Those who argue in favor of Two-Spirit would argue differently. The debate between the terms is centered on its etymology. "Berdache" is a foreign word, bestowed upon them centuries ago by the people who conquered their ancestors and caused centuries of grief and pain. To insist that it be considered as the overall accepted term to identify any native person, past or present, can be viewed as greatly insulting. Two-Spirit is a term that comes from native language, chosen by native queers. It serves the purpose of not only helping to revive old traditions but separate native GLBT people from non-natives and foster community for them. Two-Spirit as a movement and a term has helped the native queer community to grow and flourish. It is difficult enough being native in a country full of non-natives, but being queer puts them at risk for being rejected by their own families and communities. Homophobia is prevalent in many native communities today, and many queer natives turn to alcohol or drugs, or even suicide to escape the shame of being out in the community (Leach, 2006, pp. 202-206). Since its 1990 inception, Two-Spirit has become a movement and many communities have sprung up, from the Denver Two-Spirit Society to the Northeast Two Spirit Society. For the past 21 years the International Two Spirit Gathering has been held once a year in various places in Canada and the United States (ITSG, 2008). The push for Two-Spirit can be looked at as one more way for native people to return to their roots and support their communities from within, without having to deal with outsiders.

One of the issues that those in favor of the term Two-Spirit face is the notion that they are simply romanticizing the past and creating positive queer

history where it never was. Much evidence exists to prove that not all Two-Spirits were treated with respect or decency in their communities pre-contact. Reports from Spanish conquistadors, such as Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, pointed to the use of "berdache" by certain native nations to teach their captured war enemies a lesson and degrade them. In fact, historian Richard Trexler (1995) wrote an entire book on the subject, titled Sex and Conquest, wherein he suggests that "berdaches" were nothing more than the sex slaves that colonists initially perceived them to be. What authors like Gutiérrez seem to ignore is the fact that not all native nations are the same, and most certainly do not all hold the exact same beliefs about gender and sexuality, and that over time certain traditions and roles were open to evolution and change. Two-Spirit as a term is not perfect, but then again, no identifying term is perfect, as evidenced by the amount of confusion and negotiating that goes on within the GLBTQ community on the topic.

Some natives insist that in the struggle between berdache and Two-Spirit the best choice is nothing at all. Clyde M. Hall (1997), a Lemhi Shoshoni, summed this argument up very well.

> Back home, when Sabine Lang came to do her fieldwork, she said she wanted to meet some 'warrior women,' so I told her, 'O.K., come to the reservation, I'll introduce you to some warrior women.' But Sabine came back one time from interviewing one of these individuals, and she said, 'You know, they're just the kind of women I am looking for but they do not know who they are.' Well, it is not that they do not know who they are, just because they do not know of the label anthropologists have put on them—because they are just who they are. They are just beings, that is the way the Great Mystery made them. They come out into this world like that. And they are just living their lives, of who they are and what they are interested in. And how they want to act. Do you think that the old-time people who are now referred to by anthropologists as 'berdache' for the most part used that word as a part of their vocabulary? I do not think so, because they were just manifesting who they were. And how they lived. It was something that was given to them by Spirit—this way of living (p. 274).

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For Hall and others, there can be no term that encompasses gender diversity in Native American past, present, and future.

If one wanted to simplify things, it could be said that all this boils down to is an argument of semantics. "Two-Spirit" vs. "berdache"—which one is more acceptable? The complexity of the history is enough

to make one wonder whether it could really be so simple as to be one or the other with no real difference between the two. Native American gender identity is a complicated and ill-understood subject that most likely will never be understood by those outsiders who seek to fully catch it in their grasp. Ultimately, "berdache" is a term that is highly contested because of its origins and offensive connotations. Those in the present, view Two-Spirit as a way to heal the wounds created by berdache and return to their traditions with a sense of pride and respect. Perhaps it is just semantics, or, perhaps Clyde Hall was right when he said "they are just beings" and that there cannot be one correct sweeping term that can be used by anyone, especially those looking in from the outside, to describe these people and do them justice.

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