

## Two-Spirit People

Emigrants crossing the plains tended to view the land before them as something to be tamed and controlled. It was likely a great challenge to comprehend the lifestyles or belief systems of the American Indians they encountered in the West. Likewise, the cultures and customs of the white men and women must have bewildered the Indians, as emigration from the east began to impact their traditional ways of life.

Language barriers aside, these two cultural groups maintained fundamentally different philosophies about the ways of the world. These divergent viewpoints are illuminated when considering issues of sexual identity. Studies of Indian cultures across North America show an array of religious traditions that reaffirm, respect and honor alternative gender roles.

These traditional societies hold sacred a belief system based on equality and the inter-connection of all life forms. The spirit of any one thing -- human, animal, plant or the earth-- is not superior to the spirit of anything else. It is part of this tradition to continually seek balance, acknowledging duality in basic elements such as plants and animals, sky and earth, water and fire. Much like the yin and yang symbols in Chinese cultures, a fundamental concept of American Indian religions is that opposing elements are joined together by a mediator that holds the two polarities together.

Since gender is such a defining category for any culture, the mediator between male and female is a vital member of Indian societies. The 'two-spirit person'-- someone who combines elements of both genders-- has been documented in many different tribes across North America, including the Kutenai, Flathead and Nez Perce in the Northwest. A two-spirit person is commonly a biological male who identifies with the women of the tribe, and participates in their activities such as cooking and crafts, but many tribes also use the term to describe women who display male characteristics and who were renowned for their skills as hunters or warriors.

Two-spirit people played important roles in tribal societies, and many were considered to be a shaman or have extraordinary spiritual powers. Two-spirit males often became healers, surgeons, counselors, therapists, high religious priests, medicine men, and adoptive parents to tribal orphans.

Michael One Feather is a contemporary *winkte* (the Lakota word for a two-spirit person) who was born on a South Dakota reservation in 1958. He was raised by his grandparents, and offers this story about embracing the traditions of his identity:

My grandparents accept my being gay, and we have a really good relationship. My grandmother got over her Christian prejudices, and like others has returned more to the traditional Indian way of looking at it. She told me that one male out of every generation in our family is a *winkte* and she had to accept it. She explained that in the old days people let them live and did not ridicule or bother them...

Many early explorers in the west made note of their encounters with two-spirit people of various tribes. William Drummond Stewart, a mountain man of Scottish nobility, traveled throughout the west in the 1830's and '40's. During a visit with the Black Feet and Crow his journals noted a young man with "the duties and the dress of the women. There are youths of this description in every camp."

The artist George Catlin rendered a sketch and painting from a two-spirit ceremonial event during his visit with the Sac and Fox tribes on the plains in 1835. He writes in his letters:

Dance to the Berdashe is a very funny and amusing scene, which happens once a year or oftener, as they choose, when a feast is given to the "Berdashe," as he is called in French, (or I-coo-coo-a, in their own language), who is a man dressed in woman's clothes, as he is known to be all his life, and for extraordinary privileges which he is known to possess...

The respected role of two-spirit people in tribal cultures has led many modern gay and lesbian American Indians to feel a greater acceptance of their unique role in society.

Sources: Native American Sexual Diversity, Walter L. Williams, Beacon Press 1992; Two-Spirit People: American Indians Lesbian Women and Gay Men; ed. Lester B. Brown, Harrington Park Press, 1997; Luce Center, New York Historical Society Museum and Library.