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# Who are the Two Spirits?

Q &amp; A with Will Roscoe



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Cheyenne hetaneman, female two spirit

## Who are the Native American Two Spirits?

Native American two-spirits were male, female, and sometimes intersexed individuals who combined activities of both men and women with traits unique to their status as two spirits. In most tribes, they were considered neither men nor women; they occupied a distinct, alternative gender status. In tribes where male and female two spirits were referred to with the same term, this status amounted to a third gender. In other cases, female two spirits were referred to with a distinct term and, therefore, constituted a fourth gender.

Although there were important variations in two-spirit roles across North America, they share some common traits:

**Specialized work roles.** Male and female two spirits were typically described in terms of their preference for and achievements in the work of the "opposite" sex or in activities specific to their role. Two spirits were experts in traditional arts—such as pottery making, basket weaving, and the manufacture and decoration of items made from leather. Among the Navajo, male two-spirits often became weavers, usually women's work, as well as healers, which was a male role. By combining these activities, they were often among the wealthier members of the tribe. Female two spirits engaged in activities such as hunting and warfare, and became leaders in war and even chiefs.

**Gender variation.** A variety of other traits distinguished two spirits from men and women, including temperament, dress, lifestyle, and social roles.

**Spiritual sanction.** Two-spirit identity was widely believed to be the result of supernatural intervention in the form of visions or dreams and sanctioned by tribal mythology. In many tribes, two-spirit people filled special religious roles as healers, shamans, and ceremonial leaders.

**Same-sex relations.** Two spirits typically formed sexual and emotional relationships with non-two-spirit members of their own sex. Male and female two spirits were often sexually active, forming both short- and long-term relationships. Among the Lakota, Mohave, Crow, Cheyenne, and others, two spirits were believed to be lucky in love, and able to bestow this luck on others.

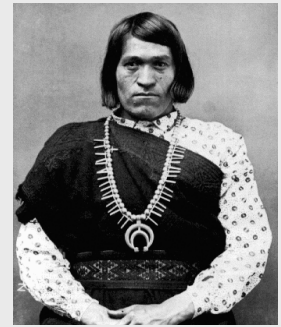
*"Two-spirit roles were one of the most widely shared features of North American societies. They have been documented in every region of the continent, among speakers of every major language group, and in every kind of tribe, from the hunters of the arctic, to the foragers of native California, the Pueblo*

farmers of the Southwest, and the nomadic warrior-hunters of the Great Plains."

### **What is the origin of the term "two spirits"? What other terms are they known by?**

Every tribe had its own terms for two-spirit individuals. In Crow they were called *boté* (bō-TAY); in Lakota, *winkte* (wing-TAY); in Zuni, *lhamana* (LHA-mana); in Navajo, *nádleehí* (NAHD-lay). Some of these literally mean as "man-woman," but many cannot be easily translated. The Navajo term, *nádleehí*, for example, literally means, "the one is changing," in the sense of undergoing constant transformation.

The term "two-spirit" was adopted by native people in the early 1990s as an alternative to Western labels, such as "homosexual," "gay," and "transsexual."



We'wha, Zuni

### **What about the "berdache"? Is it a derogatory term?**

In the early twentieth century, "berdache" became the accepted anthropological term for alternative gender roles in Native America, but it has an unlikely etymology that reaches all the way back to an Indo-European root, *\*wela-* "to strike, wound," from which the Old Iranian *\*varta-*, "seized, prisoner," is derived. In Persia, "berdache" referred to a young captive or slave (male or female). The term entered western European languages perhaps from Muslim Spain or as a result of contact with Muslims. By the Renaissance it was current in Italian as *bardascia* and *bardasso*, in Spanish as *bardaje* (or *bardaxe*), in French as *berdache*, and in English as "bardash" with the meaning of "catamite"—the younger partner in an age-differentiated homosexual relationship. Over time its meaning began to shift, losing its reference to age and to active/passive sexual roles and becoming a general term for male homosexual. In some places, it lost its sexual connotations altogether. By the mid-nineteenth century, its use in Europe had lapsed almost entirely.

It remained current only in North America, but with a significantly different meaning. Its first use in reference to two spirits appears in a 1704 memoir by Deliette. Eventually, its use spread to every part of North America the French entered, and it became a pidgin term used on the frontier by Euro-Americans and native people alike. Its first use by an anthropologist occurs in a publication by Washington Matthews in 1877. In describing Hidatsa *miáti* he wrote, "Such are called by the French Canadians 'berdaches.'" The next anthropological use was in J. Owen Dorsey's 1890 study of Siouan cults. Like Matthews, he described "berdache" as a French Canadian frontier term. Following Alfred Kroeber's use of the word in his 1902 ethnography of the Arapaho, it became part of standard anthropological terminology.

In recent years, calls have been made to replace berdache with "two spirit." In 1993, a group of anthropologists and



We'wha, Zuni



Osh-Tisch, Crow



Hastin Klah, Navajo



Charlie the Weaver (on right) and friend, Navajo

that the spirit. In 1990, a group of anthropologists and natives issued guidelines that formalized these preferences. "Berdache," they argued, is a term "that has its origins in Western thought and languages." Scholars were asked to drop its use altogether and to insert "[sic]" following its appearance in quoted texts. In its place they were encouraged to use tribally specific terms for multiple genders or the term "two spirit." Two spirit was also identified as the preferred label of contemporary gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender natives.

Unfortunately, these guidelines create as many problems as they solve, beginning with a mischaracterization of the history of the word "berdache." As a Persian term, its origin are Eastern not Western. Nor is it a derogatory term, except to the extent that all terms for nonmarital sexuality in European societies carried a measure of condemnation. It was rarely used with the force of "faggot," but more often as a euphemism with the sense of "lover" or "boyfriend." Its history, in this regard, is akin to that of "gay," "black," and "Chicano"—terms that also lost negative connotations over time.

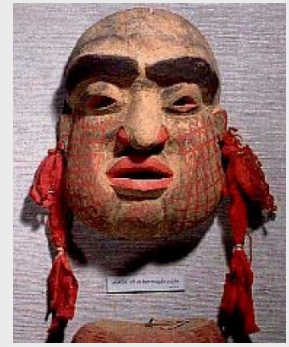
The 1955 article by anthropologists Angelino and Shedd has done much to perpetuate these misconceptions (and inspire attempts to find alternative terminology). The authors trace the term back to its Persian form but then state, "While the word underwent considerable change the meaning in each instance remained constant, being a 'kept boy,' a 'male prostitute,' and 'catamite.'" This is certainly wrong. As outlined above, the meaning and use of the word underwent significant change when it was imported into Europe (where there were no "slave boys") and even more change when it was carried to North America (where there was no tradition of age- or status-differentiated homosexuality). If the first generation of French visitors to North America used the term in a derogatory sense it soon lost this connotation as it came to be used not only as a pantribal term by natives themselves but as a personal name as well. There is no evidence that the first anthropologists to use the term were aware of its older European and Persian meanings.

In fact, the term "berdache" is just one of various jargon terms that came to be use North American frontier zones by both natives and Europeans. Other examples include *joya*, used in California, *mujerado*, used in New Mexico, and *schupans*, used in Alaska. Derived from either European or tribal terminology, these terms came to be used by both Europeans and natives to refer to two-spirit people across tribes—much as the term "squaw," the Algonkian word for "woman," came to be used in reference to native women throughout the continent.

### How common were two-spirit roles?

Two-spirit roles were one of the most widely shared features of North American societies. They have been documented in every region of the continent, among speakers of every major language group, and in every kind of tribe, from the hunters of the arctic, to the foragers of native California, the Pueblo farmers of the Southwest, and the nomadic warrior-hunters of the Great Plains. Nonetheless, because of the catastrophic disruption experienced by so many tribes as a result of their contact with Europeans we can never know the absolute frequency of two spirit people. In my research, I have been able to identify alternative gender roles for males in over 150 tribes in North America and comparable roles for females in about half that number.

Archaeological evidence, including burials, paintings, rock carvings, and artifacts, indicates that these roles were ancient as well as widespread. Very likely they were part of the cultures of the Asiatic people who began populating the Americas tens of thousands of years ago.



*Skhints, Bella Coola two-spirit  
god*



*Shoshone Woman Lassoing a Horse*

### ***Were there tribes that did not have two-spirit roles?***

The number of tribes in which the existence of such roles has been denied (by native informants or outside observers) is quite few. In some tribes, the existence of two-spirits has been denied or hidden to prevent condemnation from non-native outsiders. In other cases where existence of two spirits has been denied (whether by natives or anthropologists), no research has been done to confirm these claims or establish why, given their presence in so many other tribes, they were absent.

### ***How and why did individuals become two spirits?***

In most tribes, individuals were identified as two-spirit in childhood based on their interests and skills. Female relatives were often supportive of boys interested in women's work because of the contribution they made to household chores. In many tribes, dreams and visions were credited with confirming or inspiring two-spirit identity. Indeed, in some groups, gender assignments were highly flexible. Among the Inuit children were given the names of ancestors before they were born and then raised according to the gender of those names, regardless of the child's biological sex. This could result in mixed as well as cross-gender identities, which could be changed by the individual at a later stage in life.



*Ko'hamana, Zuni two-spirit  
kachina*



*He-e-e, Hopi warrior maiden  
kachina*

### ***Were two-spirits gay and lesbian or were they transsexuals?***

All of the above. The two-spirit tradition accommodated a diverse range of individuals and individual differences. Western terms, which focus on a single trait, such as sexual preference or gender identity, fail to capture the range and nuances of two-spirit roles, especially their economic and spiritual dimensions. Although many two-spirit people cross-dressed,







Cheyenne he'emaneo (on right) leading scalp dance

others did not, and some dressed in styles distinct from both men and women. And while two-spirits typically formed relationships with members of their own biological sex who were not two spirits these were not viewed as "homosexual" relationships because the gender identity of two spirits was considered different from the gender identity of their partner.

### **What happened to the traditional two-spirit role? Has the role survived to the present?**

The disruptions caused by conquest and disease, together with the efforts of missionaries, government agents, boarding schools, and white settlers resulted in the loss of many traditions in native communities. Two-spirit roles, in particular, were singled out for condemnation, interference, and many times violence. As a result, two-spirit traditions and practices went underground or disappeared in many tribes.

Today, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender native people throughout North America are reviving the two-spirit role and its traditions. National gatherings of two spirits have been held since the early 1990s, and regional gatherings are held in many parts of the country. Organizations such as the Bay Area American Indian Two Spirits in San Francisco, provide invaluable cultural and social services to lgbt and two-spirit native people and their families.

The film *Two Spirits* by Lydia Nibley and Russell Martin provides moving testimony of this growing pride and sense of place among lgbt native people today.



Olabi, Greenland Eskimo



Quechan khwerhame, female two spirit

### **Do we know about the lives of any historical two spirits?**

In my books, *The Zuni Man-Woman* and *Changing Ones*, I tell the stories of three individuals who were two spirits, each of whom played an important role in their tribe and in the history of contact between native and European peoples. The Zuni *lhamana*, We'wha (WAY-wah), was born around 1849 and lived until 1896. We'wha befriended the American anthropologist Mathilda Coxe Stevenson, who first visited Zuni in 1879, and, in 1885, travelled with her to Washington, D.C., where s/he and met President Grover Cleveland and other national leaders.

The Crow *boté*, Osh-Tisch gained fame in 1879 by joining a battle against the Sioux and Cheyenne, and earning the name Finds-Them-and-Kills-Them. Osh-Tisch was one of the most accomplished craftspeople in his tribe, making large tipis and other leather goods intricately decorated with quill- and beadwork.

Equally notable was the Navajo *nádleehí* Hastiin Klah. His family recognized him as one of the "changing ones" when he



Kullix, Pend d'Oreilles

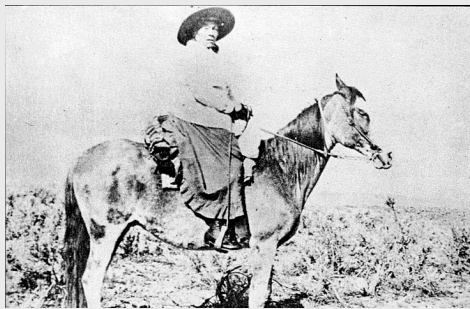




Peace Medal from 1676 depicting the defeated  
Pocasset warrior queen, Weetamo

### **Are there alternative gender roles in cultures outside of North America?**

Alternative gender roles and identities have existed—and still exist—in many parts of the world, including South America, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Polynesia. You can learn more about these at my website and in the various books by Stephen O. Murray, including our edited volumes, *Islamic Homosexualities* and *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*.



Muksamse'lapli (White Cindy), Klamath

was a boy. He became an expert weaver and a powerful medicine man, who mastered numerous complex ceremonies. Before his death in 1936, he helped found the Wheelwright Museum of the Native American in Santa Fe. In *Changing Ones* I also write about several fascinating female chiefs and warriors, including the mysterious Apache medicine woman, Lozen. I recently uploaded a PowerPoint presentation about her life on my website.

[click to see a map of third gender roles in Eurasia](#)

### **How can I learn more?**

See my books, *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America* (Palgrave/St. Martin's Press, 1998) and *The Zuni Man-Woman* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991) and explore this website.

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