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Hotheads And Holy Men

THE ZUNI MAN-WOMAN, *By Will Roscoe (University of New Mexico Press: $24.95; 328 pp.)*

May 26, 1991 | Evan S. Connell | *Connell won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in 1985 for "Son of the Morning Star . "*

In 1885, after several months in the Southwest, anthropologist Matilda Coxe Stevenson and her husband returned to Washington with an unusual collection of Zuni artifacts. They were accompanied by a broad-shouldered, six-foot Zuni named We'wha, the tallest and strongest member of the tribe, described by the Washington Chronicle as "an Indian princess . . . guest of the wife of Col. Stevenson of the geological survey. Princess Wawa (sic) goes about every where at all of the receptions and teas of Washington wearing her native dress."

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We'wha spent at least six months in the capital, a visit crowned by a meeting with President Grover Cleveland, and what is astonishing is that nobody--not even anthropologist Stevenson--understood that We'wha was a man.

There were doubts, author Will Roscoe points out, which is not surprising because every photograph of We'wha indicates masculinity. The jaws and brow, the expression, the posture, the muscularity--it is hard to imagine how anyone so obviously male could be mistaken for a female.

We'wha was a berdache, derived from the Arabic *bardaj* , meaning slave or kept boy. This definition, however, is misleading because the role of a Zuni berdache was quite different. Although dressed as a woman, he did not inspire the hatred, contempt and ridicule endured by transvestites in Anglo-European society; instead, he was regarded as a third sex, an authentic member of the tribe, a man who combined the work and social status of both sexes. Very often he became a renowned weaver, potter or basket-maker, or an authority on religious ceremonies.

The existence of berdaches has been documented in at least 130 North American tribes, according to Roscoe, and Dr. Alfred Kroeber believed that cross-dressing and homosexuality among shamans existed in Siberia before the migration to North America 30,000 years ago.

Without doubt, the berdache has a long history. Excavation at the Zuni village of Hawikku, which was occupied until the Pueblo Revolt in 1680, turned up the skeleton of a man buried with a ball of clay, meaning that he was a potter. Other male skeletons were found with baskets. There also was the skeleton of a woman wearing a man's dance kilt as well as a dress.

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At Chaco canyon in northern New Mexico, deserted eight centuries ago, one man was buried in feathered cloth--traditionally female. Prehistoric pretroglyphs and kiva murals give further evidence. A painted figure in 14th-Century ruins east of Zuni holds a basketry plaque in one hand, but in the other hand she or he carries a hunting bow.

Activities and characteristics of the prehistoric berdache are to some extent speculative, but research among contemporary tribes suggests that all of these individuals functioned as intermediaries. They provided channels of understanding between the sexes--an office that has no equivalent in Anglo-European society--and they tried to communicate with the invasive, meddlesome whites.

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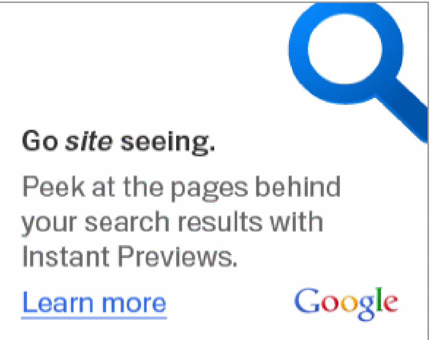

This was especially true of We'wha, who became friendly with Matilda Stevenson and often talked with her about Zuni values. By doing so, We'wha managed to win her sympathy for the needs and causes of the tribe. His famous visit to Washington, therefore, probably was a calculated adventure, implying considerable resolve and foresight.

He was born in 1849, and until age 5 or 6 his parents called him *cha'le'*, meaning simply that he was a child, but his berdache inclination had been observed much earlier. Among the Zuni this caused no alarm; it signified only that the boy had chosen an alternative road. Unlike Americans, sexual divergence did not threaten the Indians. In 1965, a Hopi woman was asked if she felt troubled by her grandson's feminine behavior. "No," she said, "I don't care. We tease him about it, but he doesn't care either."

We'wha during his adult years seems to have been a huge favorite with children, which perhaps is to be expected if one considers that he was a big man who dressed like a woman. But he also was a great favorite with Zuni adults, who respected his skill as a craftsman and who knew the importance of his role as ambassador to the whites.

His approach to this Anglo tide that almost submerged Zuni culture was not particularly feminine: He once spent six months in jail for defying a troop of 25 American soldiers who had come to arrest a Zuni. In fact, when the lieutenant leading this detachment tried to enter the pueblo governor's house We'wha bodily threw him out and slammed the door on the officer's coattails. A letter to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs states that the lieutenant "valiantly" unsheathed his saber and escaped by lopping off his coattails.

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We'wha died in 1896. Mrs. Stevenson visited him during the final hours. She found him crouched on a ledge beside the fireplace, suffering from heart disease. When asked why he did not lie down, We'wha said that he could not breathe. She sent to her camp for a comfortable chair and he seemed grateful. In a weak voice he asked her to tell President Cleveland and his other friends in Washington goodby. A foster brother had prepared the customary *te'likinawe* (prayer sticks).

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Mrs. Stevenson might have believed to the very end that We'wha was female, because this is how she writes of him: "The brother offered to hold the plumes and say the prayers, but We'wha feebly extended her hand for them, and clasping the prayer plumes between her hands, made a great effort to speak. She said but a few words and then sank back in her chair. Again the brother offered to hold the plumes and pray, but once more she refused. Her face was radiant in the belief that she was going to her gods. She leaned forward with the plumes tightly clasped. . . ."

"The Zuni Man-Woman" sketches We'wha's life as an exemplar of the berdache tradition against a backdrop of American curiosity about Indians. Anthropologists began arriving in the late 19th Century, notably Mrs. Stevenson and Frank Hamilton Cushing, followed by innumerable others. Indeed, says Roscoe, there is an old joke that a pueblo household consists of father, mother, children and the anthropologist.

Along with scientists came teachers and soldiers and missionaries determined to change the Zuni, which they did. The transvestite berdache is now a memory, or if he yet exists his presence is pretty well concealed.

Roscoe's scholarship is impressive; it seems unlikely that anybody will dispute his conclusions or the merit of his research. "The Zuni Man-Woman" is a readable and thorough exploration of an oblique approach to life.

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