

Berdaches

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The recent success of the movie *Dances With Wolves* reminded me of one of the most fascinating aspects of Native American culture: the role of the berdache. To simplify things, a berdache is a morphological male who does not fulfill a standard male role in Indian culture. Berdaches have special ceremonial roles in many Native American religions, and serve a mediating function between women and men, and between the physical and the spiritual.

In many Native American traditions, the Great Spiritual Being is conceived of as being neither male nor female, but a combination of both sexes. The berdache role was created by the deity for a special purpose, and this creation led to the improvement of society. In fact, many of the spiritual stories of Native Americans show that the very survival of society depends on the inventiveness of the berdaches. For instance, the Mohave believed that female shamans were spiritually stronger than male ones, but that berdache shamans were stronger than either women or men. Because of his special status, the Berdache mediates between women and men, as well as between the spirit and the flesh.

This attitude is quite in contrast to the patriarchal attitudes of most modern Judeo-Christian-Islam religions. Instead of being honored and valued as a spiritual being, in these traditions transsexuals are at best tolerated, at worst considered aberrant or even sinful.

The Development of a Berdache

A child is not forced into the role of the berdache. Like the transsexual, a child's tendencies to become a berdache are apparent early, between the ages of nine to twelve. Rather than being shocked, the parents generally let the young boy play with girls and do "girl thing." Generally, at puberty the boy begins dressing as a girl and being regarded as such socially be members of the tribe.

In Indian culture sex is not seen as solely for the purpose of reproduction, and is not restricted by marriage. It is seen as a gift from the spirit world to be enjoyed and appreciated. Sexually, berdaches are the passive partners in anal intercourse with masculine men. Younger berdaches are sought out by older masculine boys as partners, while older berdaches often take younger masculine men as partners.

Because of a type of incest taboo, berdaches do not generally have sex with each other. Moreover, almost universally, berdaches do not marry women. It is common for men who are widowers with children to take a berdache as a second wife, and berdaches are well-known for their ability to care for and raise children.

In some Indian tribes, berdaches marry men, and these relationships are respected by the tribe, although the husband of the berdache may be the recipient of some jokes. Spirituality, generosity, androgyny, women's work, and sex with men are equally

important reflections of the character of the berdache. The berdache's homosexuality is not denied or emphasized, but accepted by Indian society.

Western Thought

In some ways, Western thought tends to work in opposites: there are men, and there are women, and very little tolerance of anyone who doesn't fit in one of these categories. Persons who have a problem fitting into one of these roles will feel that they have only one alternative, to transfer themselves from one sex to the other. This is the case with transsexuals. Because Indian cultures provide for more than one gender role, Indians have options for those who don't fit in. One can only imagine how easier life would be in our culture if there were the Western equivalent of the berdache. It would be quite possible that some individuals, who feel uncomfortable in the male role and seek SRS as a cure, would fit in quite easily in a "third sex" role similar to a berdache. The cure in this case would not be surgery, but a culture that accepted such a variation.

For anyone interested in this phenomenon, the book *The Spirit and the Flesh*, by Walter L. Williams, published by Beacon Press in 1986 is very fascinating. I recommend it highly.