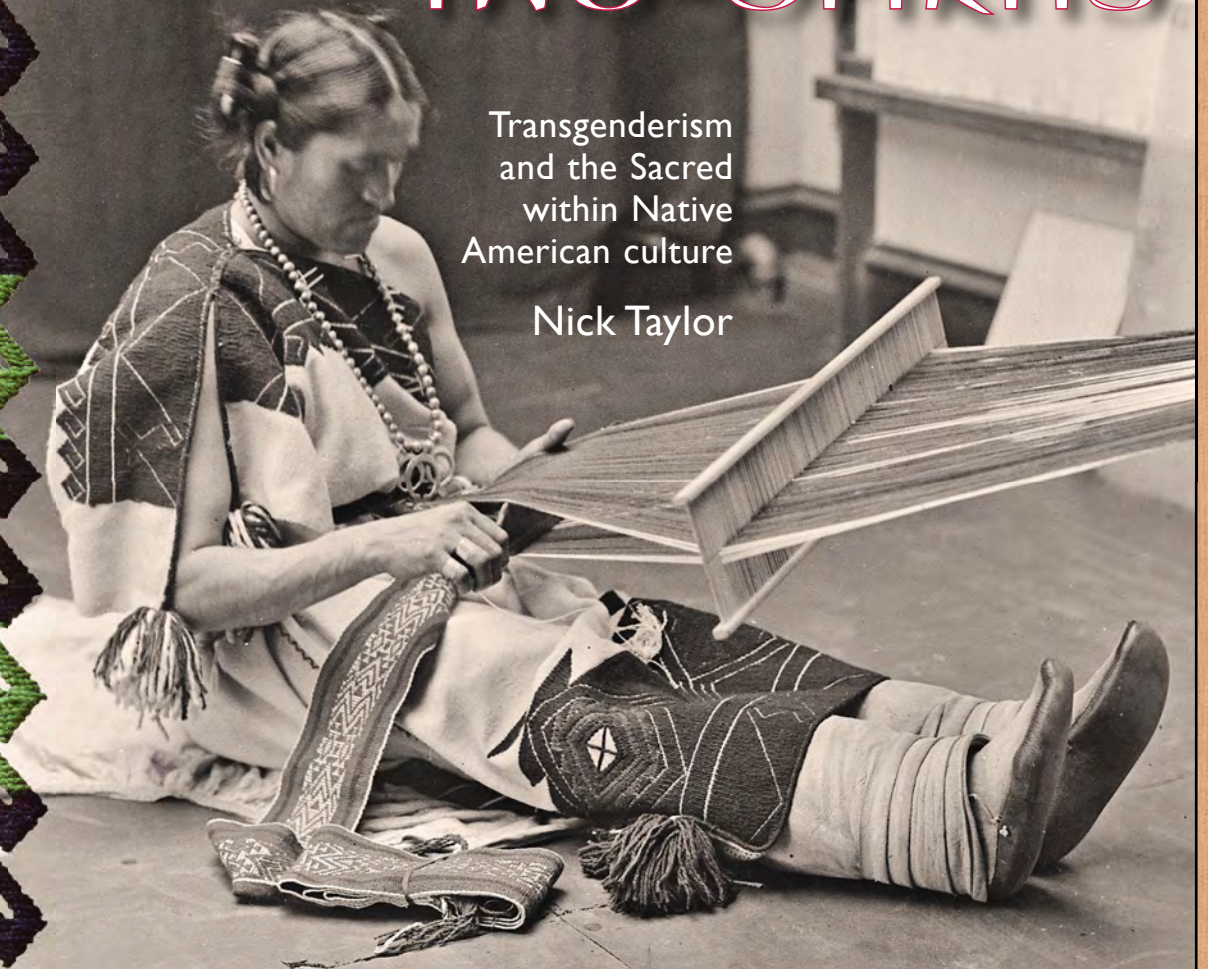


# IN THE TIME of TWO-SPIRITS

Transgenderism  
and the Sacred  
within Native  
American culture

Nick Taylor



It may seem odd to be talking about two spirits when, for many people living according to the rulebook of contemporary scientific materialism, even owning one spirit seems excessively irrational.

Yet among the indigenous peoples of what we think of now as North America, 'two-spirit' is a term that refers specifically to people who walk between the worlds of gender; who actively celebrate and contain the two spirits of masculine and feminine within one body, and who, as a result, are more often than not the medicine people of their tribe.

In his seminal 1991 book, 'The Zuni Man-Woman,' Will Roscoe noted that male and female 'two-spirits' have been 'documented in over 130 tribes, in every region of North America, among every type of native culture.'

A more recent estimate from an article by Harlan Pruden and Melissa

Hoskins, co-chairs of the North East Two Spirit Society, suggests that out of around 400 distinct indigenous Nations, 155 have documented multiple gender traditions.

There are many indigenous terms for these individuals in the various Native American languages, including the word *winkte* in Lakota, and in Navajo *nádleehé* (which means 'changing one' or 'one who is transformed'). The Mohave refer to such people as *alyha*, the Zuni as *Ihamana*, the Omaha as *mexoga*, the Aleut and Kodiak as *achnucek*, the Zapotec as *ira' muxe*, the Cheyenne as *he man eh*. This wealth of terms testifies to the familiarity of indigenous Americans with the concept of multi-gendered people.

People of multi-gender are also afforded valuable stories within the traditional Native American

creation myths and stories of the spirit pantheons. Among the Navajo, the survival of humanity was said to depend upon the inventiveness of two-spirited deities. Among the Zuni, legend tells of a battle between the agricultural and hunting spirits in which a two-spirited deity brought peace to the warring parties.

But it was French fur traders arriving in North America who coined the term *berdache*. This was an attempt to sum up the complexities of two-spirited people by labeling them with a derogatory name, meaning 'those who practiced anal intercourse.' The word *berdache* is derived from the Arabian word *bardai*, meaning 'captive.'

The term 'two-spirit' came out of the third Native American Gay Conference in Winnipeg, Canada in 1990. It is a direct translation of the Ojibwe term *Niizh*

*manidoowag*, and a 'two-spirit' is usually used to represent someone who has both a masculine and feminine spirit.

People who identify as 'two-spirit' fulfill one of many mixed gender roles, including adopting the dress and practices associated with the gendered spirit opposite to the sex of their body. Often times such people are what the West would refer to as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer, but in embracing the mantle of 'two-spirit,' such people are reaching back into a far older and more revered heritage, to a time when diversity in sexuality, as with gender, was prized and welcomed, rather than treated with contempt and correctional therapy.

### EUROPEAN ATTITUDES

Historically, there is at least one report from Bacqueville de la Potherie, a French chronicler writing in the late C17th. In his book 'Histoire de l'Amérique Septentrionale,' he writes that that an alternative gender existed among the indigenous peoples, but more abundant historical references to the traditions, ideas and practices of Native American two-spirited people is mostly obvious by its absence.

It can't be overlooked that the arrival of the western colonists brought an attitude that said anything that strayed beyond the binary of male or female was unnerving and dangerous, and this imposed European worldview had no place for the possibility of inter-sex individuals, or those who effortlessly wove together the masculine and feminine. To European Americans, as author Will Roscoe says in his book, 'two-spirits' were seen as 'freaks of nature, demons, deviants, perverts, sinners, and corrupters.'

Pruden and Hoskins point to sketches, housed at the New York City public library, which depict two-spirited people being attacked by coloniser's dogs, and word of this brutal treatment most likely spread quickly from Native American nation to nation, with many of those nations hiding those



with two-spirits by asking them to replace their chosen dress with the attire of their biological sex.

After decades of colonisation, some of those very same nations denied ever having a tradition that celebrated and honoured their two-spirit people. By the 1950's there was often scant evidence that such people ever existed, and by the time of the coining of the term 'two-spirit' in 1990, many confused, indigenous two-spirited people, coming out for the first time, in reservations and cities, would wonder where their ancestors had gone; whether indeed they had ever existed or were merely being dreamt into reality by a western world now less fearful of its homosexual and transgender components.

### SEEKING A BALANCED VIEW

If we look back to the anthropological evidence of the early twentieth century, we find evidence of two-spirited people, even though the language concerning them is hardly neutral.

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One ritual of the Papago people of Arizona's Sonoran Desert to ascertain if one of the children was two-spirited is as follows. If parents noticed that a son was disinterested in boyish play or manly work, they would set up a ceremony to determine which way the boy would be brought up. They would make an enclosure of brush, and place in the center both a man's bow and a woman's basket.

The boy was told to go inside the circle of brush and to bring something out, and as he entered the brush would be set on fire. If he emerged with the basket, then his 'two-spirit' persona would be identified. However, when this ritual was described by American anthropologist Ruth Underhill in her 1938 book 'Social Organization of the Papago Indians,' her interpretation of the event was that the families would 'reconcile themselves to his being a Berdache.'



*Opposite page and above: We Wha, a Zuni lhamana and cultural and political leader, at one point serving as an emissary from the Zuni nation to Washington, D.C.' He was described as the strongest, wisest, and most esteemed member of his community.*

*Right: 'Balboa's Dogs Attacking a Group of Panamanian Sodomites' Copper engraving by Theodor de Bry 1528-1598*



Similar bias can be found in French-American ethnologist and psychoanalyst George Devereux's 1937 paper 'Institutionalized Homosexuality of the Mohave Indians,' where he gives an account of a Mohave ritual.

Devereux writes that the ritual was usually carried out when the child was between the ages of nine and twelve. 'A singing circle would be prepared, unbeknownst to the boy, involving the whole community as well as distant friends and relatives.

On the day of the ceremony everyone would gather round and the boy would be led into the middle of the circle. If he remained there, the singer, hidden in the crowd, began to sing the ritual songs and the boy, if he was destined to follow the 'two-spirit' road, started to dance in the fashion of a woman. After the fourth song the boy was declared to be a 'two-spirit' person and is raised from then on in the appropriate manner.'

The idea that the Mohave respond to such a result with the phrase "He cannot help it," says as much about how this information was processed by Devereux in his essay as it does about whether indigenous people of the 1930's believed a 'two-spirit' destiny was a cause for celebration or not. Given the decades of persecution it would scarcely be surprising if inherited bigotry and contemporary opinions coalesced in a chorus of fearful resignation.

### A SIGN OF THE TIMES

It is up to contemporary indigenous voices to offer examples of how the process is neither about reconciliation nor suffering, but a matter of fact calling to identity.

In his essays on Indigenous American culture, American author Andrew Calimach quotes Terry Calling Eagle, a Lakota man, who says, "*Winktes* have to be born that way. People know that a person is going to become a *winkte* very early in his life. At about age twelve parents will take him to a ceremony to communicate with past *winktes* who had power, to verify if it is just a phase or a permanent thing for his lifetime. If the proper vision takes place, and communication with a past *winkte* is established, then everybody accepts him as a *winkte*."

One of the reason it is becoming easier to remember



left: Khwerhame, a two-spirit. Quechan people

The social respect given to such people meant that to partner them was one of the highest honors. Female medicine people often took on male characteristics and modes of dress and female partners. Conversely male medicine people often took female characteristics and dress and male partners.

As cultural anthropologist and shamanic healer Barbara Tedlock puts it: 'The most powerful shamans of either sex work with both masculine and feminine forms of energy.'

Such work requires a transformation of gender or frequent gender bending and blending. Claire R. Farrer, an anthropologist, has said of the present situation among the Mescalero Apache that, 'Multi-gendered adult people at Mescalero are usually presumed to be people of power, because they have both maleness and femaleness totally entwined in one body, they are known to be able to 'see' with the eyes of both proper men and proper women.'

The sense that the whole tribe needs 'two-spirits' can be seen in the sometimes fractious manner in which men and women try, but sometime fail, to understand each other. Western culture uses the imagery that 'women are from Venus and men are from Mars.' In many American Indian communities, men and women's styles of speech were known to be distinct, and sometimes even used different dialects. The 'two-spirit' people knew how to speak in both the male and female tongues and were the only ones allowed to go between the men's and the women's camps. They brokered marriages, divorces, settled arguments, and fostered open lines of communication between the sexes.

Their proficiency in mediation often included their work as communicators between the physical world of the seen and that of the unseen, spirit worlds. They walked between the ordinary and extraordinary worlds so comfortably because they had done so between the worlds of the male and the female since birth.

Despite the prolonged attack on both their customs and

ways of being with multiple gender is due to the cultural rebalancing taking place across the globe, reminding all of us that the feminine is needed in balance with the masculine.

In many traditional Indigenous communities, roles and activities were gendered, but those genders were not given the sort of inextricable morality that judged one kind good and the other bad. So there was an expectation that women farmed, gathered food and cooked, while men hunted big game, but there was no gender-role hierarchy. Within the Native American social construct of gender, a community could not survive without both of the equal halves of a whole. Their commitment to gender equality opened the door for the possibility of multiple genders, without the idea that a man was taking on a lesser gender by placing himself in a women's role.

### PEOPLE OF POWER

Those male and females who showed a powerful alternatively gendered spirit, or who had attraction to those of the same sex, were seen as being remarkable individuals with extraordinary powers, and their welcome into the circle was guaranteed. More often than not, such individuals became the medicine people and healers of the tribe.

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practices in general, and their being in particular, Native two-spirited peoples could be said to be experiencing a reawakening to the validity. Many who had sought escape from isolation and rejection by adopting modern gay identities have reconnected with their heritage by way of groups like the Native Gay and Lesbian Gathering. They have begun reinterpreting their identity in terms of both white culture and their own ancient customs, resulting in a mix that itself is appropriately two-spirited. Certain groups of elders and activists have quietly kept the 'two-spirit' tradition alive, while some nations have revived this tradition or brought it once again into the light.

Two-spirited people are again fulfilling some of the roles and regaining the honor and respect of

their communities. We should all remember that there was a time when people who engaged in same-sex relationships were accepted and honored for their special qualities. The tragic events of 2001, when a two-spirited Navajo student, 16 year old Fred Martinez, was attacked and killed by Shaun Murphy in Arizona, like the abuse and murder of any gay or transgender person, should remind us exactly how far this last age moved us from a place of harmony and respect for difference, not to mention how vital that difference is for all life on earth.

Whether named 'riot girls,' 'lady boys,' 'dykes,' 'fags' or indeed 'two-spirits,' there is a growing acceptance of the commonality of fuzzy genders and an acknowledgment that these people have always been here; mute

witnesses to a story written by their detractors. It has been a struggle for sexualities that differ from the common to be permitted, let alone celebrated over this last 5,000 year age.

Yet as the circles return, the alleged negative can no longer be banished. Even to see one sort as positive and the other as negative is to miss the recipe for diversity that indigenous cultures have long since understood.

There is a sense that we are approaching a time when sexualities, like genders and sexes, can be embraced in their multiplicity and diversity; where children can feel their first sense of sexuality without fear of abuse or violation and where variants of gender are once more seen as a blessing and a boon to the circle; where everyone's power is encouraged, however many spirits they have.

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*Below: Native Americans on the 7th Annual Trans March in San Francisco, 2010*

