*NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN*

*FINE ART PAINTING*

# *GAY AND TINSELLED BUCKS: REPRESENTATIONS OF SEXUALITY AND GENDER ROLES WITHIN THE BERDACHE TRADITION IN NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES*

*BY*

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*SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN AND COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES FOR THE DEGREE OF*

*FINE ART PAINTING*

*BACHELOR OF ARTS*

*1997*

# *ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS*

*I would like to thank Nonie Reyes for the warm hospitality and untiring assistance that she showed me while I was researching this thesis in San Francisco in the summer of 1996.*

*During my stay there I received a great deal of help and encouragement from various libraries, bookshops and native American institutions, to all of whom I am extremely grateful.*

*Finally, I would like to extend my utmost gratitude to my thesis Supervisor, Elaine Sisson, for her time, encouragement, excellent judgement and energy. Sincere thanks.*

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## Chapter 1.

### Introduction: Masquerading Gender Identities

In late 1885 Colonel James Stevenson of the United States Geological Survey, and his wife, Matilda Coxe Stevenson, returned from the Zuni Pueblo on the Arizona/New Mexico border to their home in Washington, DC. With them they had brought a "carload of rare and valuable curios"( Powell, 1887 ) and a native American friend, the Zuni "princess" ( Washington Chronicle, 1886), We'wha. We'wha was to spend the next six months or so as guest of honour in the Stevenson's home.

Although Washington society had received Indian delegations before now, these had only rarely involved the participation of women (Viola, 1981, pp. 76-77). For this reason, amongst others, We'wha enjoyed a high profile throughout her visit. She was the subject of lengthy articles and feature stories, and her time in the nations capital was filled with a broad range of social, diplomatic and scientific activities. According to Matilda Stevenson, We'wha "came into contact only with the highest conditions of culture, dining and receiving with some of the most distinguished women of the national capital" (Stevenson, 1904, p130). Another Washingtonian, Otis Mason, observed We'wha "with wonderful dignity and self-possession moving among the most enlightened society of the metropolis".(Mason 1886, p24)

We'wha's tour of Washington parlours and society took in the homes of many prominent statesmen. This included visits to John Carlisle, Speaker of the House of Representatives (Stevenson, 1904, p312) and, most notably, President and Mrs. Grover Cleveland. As the Washington Post reported, " We'wha, the Zuni princess walked up the broad entrance to the White House yesterday... in company with Mrs. Col. Stevenson.... She was dressed in her aboriginal costume, and wore a head-dress of feathers. Her conversation with the President was mainly in

*monosyllables, but Mrs. Stevenson and the President had quite an interesting talk " (Washington Post, 1886)*

*However,one aspect of the mysterious Indian figure did not make the newspapers, and when it did, some fifteen years later, it brought with it a murmer of scandal and a flush of red faces to those who had received her. Unbeknownst to Washington society at the time, including Mrs. Stevenson herself, We'wha was not the Indian " priestess, princess, maiden or girl " (Roscoe, 1991, p60)(as the press of the day variably described her) but a biological male who had assumed the traditional Zuni role of "lhamana".*

*Over the last century or so anthropologists and ethno-historians have termed this traditional role among Native American culture as "berdache". In brief, a berdache can be defined as a morphological male who does not fill a society's standard man's role and who has a non-masculine character. Such a person is often stereotyped as effeminate, but, as this thesis illustrates, would be accurately characterized as androgynous. Matilda Coxe Stevenson, referring to the five berdaches that she had encountered at Zuni, described them typically as men who "adopt woman's dress and do woman's work" (Stevenson, 1904, p374). As this thesis demonstrates such definitions of berdachism fail to represent fully all that is concomitant with the complex berdache tradition, often revealing modern Western values over a native understanding of the role.*

*Berdaches have been recorded in nearly 150 North American societies and in aboriginal cultures throughout the Americas. In nearly half of these groups, a social status for females who undertook a man's lifestyle has also been recorded. The terms "female berdache" or more recently "amazon" (Williams, 1992, p234) and "cross gender female" (Blackwood, 1984, p32) have been used to designate this status. Although a fascinating subject in itself, the topic is, unfortunately beyond the scope of this study.*

*Although the existance of berdaches has long been known to specialists in North American anthropology, the subject has largely been consigned to marginal references and to footnotes. Gay studies, informed by modern feminism, however, has regenerated a growing interest in this subject in the past twenty years. An expanding base of empirical data concerning the social, cultural and historical dimensions of berdache status has subsequently become available.*

*So how did it come about that such a berdache, the famous Zuni lhamana We'wha, shook hands with the President of the United States that June afternoon in 1886 without anyone knowing his sex? Taking this event as a starting point this thesis will examine briefly the background to cultural developments in American society in the last half of the nineteenth century that informed this bizarre encounter, and the effects that such developments had on Native American Indian traditions and beliefs.*

*Interestingly We'wha was not the only berdache to meet an American President. Some years after We'wha, Hastiin Klah (1867-1937)(see Fig 1) was to meet Franklin D. Roosevelt.(Roscoe, 1988, p63) Although Klah's biological sex would not have been in doubt (unlike We'wha, Klah usually dressed in men's clothing) his sexuality and gender status would almost certainly have been kept from the President.*

*Such misunderstandings and censorship, however, represent the more benign end of the spectrum of reactions that the berdache tradition has elicited in its history of contact with the more stringent and condemning values of the European Judeo-Christian tradition since the time of Colombus to the present day. The aim of this thesis is to examine in some detail various aspects of the berdache tradition in Native American*

*Fig 1:* *Hastiin Klah (Navajo), ca. 1925. Klah, the famous Navajo berdache, combine the knowledge of a medicine man with the female skill of weaving to create a new genre of Navajo textile with ceremonial designs.*

*culture particularly with regard to gender and sexuality including how these roles have been represented (or misrepresented) by Western observers. This dissertation charts the course of this "contact", from the first reports of "Hermaphrodites" and "Sodomites" in the New World by the Spanish invaders of the sixteenth century through to anthropological dissemination and cultural assimilation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by government agencies. In the course of this review it will examine how these often violent and harsh implementations of alien ideology have affected traditional berdache roles through almost 400 years of demegration, misrepresentation, denial and systematic eradication.*

*Various aspects and functions of the many berdache traditions that existed across the United States shall be looked at in greater depth. Will Roscoe, a leading contemporary expert on the subject, believes that a consensus of key features of berdache roles has began to develop. These include "supernatural sanction" (in the form of an authorization and/or bestowal of powers from extra-societal sources) "productive specialization" (usually crafts and domestic work) and "gender variation" (in relation to normative cultural expectations for male and female genders). As will become evident, in the case of gender variation, cross-dressing was the most common and visible marker, but it has proven a more variable and less reliable indicator of berdache status than previous assumed (Roscoe, 1994, pp332-35). Similarly, while most berdaches appear to be homosexual, there is evidence of variability in sexual behaviour.*

*To put these issues in perspective it will be necessary to view them in the broader context of general Native American attitudes towards fluidity, identity and transformation.*

*Finally, this thesis examines if and how the berdache tradition survives today and how it has informed (and how it differs from) the construction of a modern Gay identity. These views will be supported by a comparative and needfully brief examination of similar intermediate gender roles across the globe and throughout history.*

## Chapter 2.

## The Most enlightened Society: The Zuni Man-Woman in The Golden Age of Anthropology.

Matilda Coxe Stevenson had first met the famous lhamana We'wha in 1879, almost seven years beforehand, when she had accompanied her husband, geologist James Stevenson, on the United States' government's newly created Bureau of Ethnology's first expedition into the New Mexican desert (Roscoe, 1991, p8). Stevenson, at that time known as Tilly, was there in the rather humble role of dutiful wife and "unpaid assistant" (Ibid, p8) yet she would eventually outlive and outperform her husband as an anthropologist to become one of the leading authorities on the Zuni Indians. Indeed, when her husband died in 1888, the Bureau of Ethnology hired her to complete his studies, making her one of the first American women to receive full-time employment in the pursuit of science (Holmes, 1916, p553).

As Stevenson would soon discover, the pueblo of Haloma:idiwana - "the Anthill at the Middle of the World" - was home to some seventeen hundred Zunis (they called themselves 'A:shiwi) whose ancient culture sustained social, religious, economic and artistic traditions of remarkable complexity. (Roscoe, 1991, p11).

Within this community, We'wha was a well known and influential figure and remains one of the chief heroes in Zuni history. Stevenson described him as "the strongest character and the most intelligent of the Zuni tribe" (Stevenson, p20), "the most remarkable member of the tribe" (Ibid, p310) and "the strongest, most active, and most progressive Indian in the tribe" (Ibid, p380). According to Will Roscoe, in his book The Zuni Man - Woman, Zunis to this day still recall the adventures and exploits of this famous berdache. And well they might, for We'wha was at the centre of some of the most dramatic events at Zuni in the late nineteenth century - events that shaped the

*course of Zuni history and left an impression that can be discerned to this day. (Roscoe, 1991, p29).*

*Stevenson observed almost immediately after her arrival in Zuni that We'wha "the Zuni girl" (Stevenson, 1904, p37) was held in such great esteem that "his strong character made his word law among both the men and the women with whom he associated" (Ibid, p37). Stevenson found We'wha accomplished in Zuni lore and "conspicuous in ceremonials" (Ibid, p37) that punctuate the Zuni religious calender.*

*She found him an excellent informant, eager to form friendships with outsiders and willing to learn English (Roscoe, 1991, p46). They began to cultivate a friendship that developed far beyond their respective roles of anthropologist and informant. In all, Matilda Coxe Stevenson visited and stayed at Zuni seven times spanning almost fifteen years, during which time a genuine bond grew between this remarkable couple - one of America's first women anthropologists and Zuni's most celebrated man-woman or lhamana (Ibid, p46).*

> *Of We'wha, Stevenson wrote:*
> *"She was perhaps the tallest person in Zuni; certainly the strongest, both mentally and physically..... She had a good memory, not only for the lore of her people, but for all that she heard of the outside world..... She possessed an indomitable will and an unsatiable thirst for knowledge. She would risk anything to save those she loved, but toward those who crossed her path she was vindictive..... She was the chief personage on many occasions. On account of her physical strength all the household work requiring great exertion was left to her, and while she willingly took the harder work from others of the family, she would not permit idleness; all had to labor or receive an upbraiding from We'wha, and*

*nothing was more dreaded than a scolding from her." (Stevenson, 1904, pp310-11).*

*At the same time, We'wha's loyalty to Stevenson was apparent in the extraordinary risks he took to assist her studies. Stevenson describes one of these occasions, during the ceremonies of January 1892, when We'wha went to great lengths to allow her access to the ceremonial chambers to witness the events against the often violent protestations of the Pueblo elders who considered such an inclusion a violation against the gods. (Ibid, p463).*

*However, Matilda Coxe Stevenson had considerably more to gain from their bond of friendship than did We'wha. Behind the ideal of an unbiased documentary testament to a "vanishing" culture Stevenson's writing and research reflect many of the ideologies of the day and the hidden agenda behind their implementation.*

*Towards the end of the nineteenth century social problems of various kinds - poverty, crime, industrial action and civil and racial unrest to name but a few of them - were coming to light across the United States. Thus, behind the elaborately regulated world of Washington "society" belied an increasingly disordered larger society. Washington professionals and scientists, like the Stevensons, believed that their training and specialized knowledge, grounded in a scientific outlook, qualified them to address these problems and recommend solutions for the good of all society. (Roscoe, 1991, p67)*

*Indeed, in the 1880s sciences of definition like anthropology and sexology, ethnology and psychology had become the guiding disciplines in a broad array of social discourses. Their findings and theories were thought to have direct bearing on current affairs, due, in large part, to the influence of Lewis Henry Morgan. (Morgan, 1877). In 'Ancient Society,' published in 1877, Morgan had defined these stages in the development of*

*every society; savagery, barbarism and civilization. According to Morgan, all societies went through these same three stages. His theories had a profound impact on the Victorian view of Indians as savage and primitive. The metaphor "Savagery is ethnic childhood" (Darrah, 1951, p262) steered government policy toward American Indians from the 1870s to the 1930s.*

*Most of the anthropological source material in circulation comes from this time, when Native American culture and traditions were at their most vulnerable. This period sits roughly between two acts of the United States Congress, the General Allotment Act of 1887 and the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. The former provided a means of dissolving Indian communities, the latter a step toward re-establishing them when, for much of their cultural heritage, it was too late. (Bierhorst, 1985, p2)*

*As historian Roy Harvey Pearce observed, nineteenth century Americans believed that they were making a new world. They were obsessed with learning who and what they were and where they were going. One way of accomplishing this was to compare themselves with Indians. The American Indian "lived as an example of the savage life out of which civilized Americans have long grown. He was, in fact, a means of measuring that growth " (Pearce, 1967, p200) This made savagery an indispensable complement of civilization; neither could be defined without reference to the other. American Indians provided a past that, as a nation a little over a century old, America lacked.*

*Such attitudes were succinctly encapsulated in a major society event, the annual Kirmes, that We'wha participated in during his stay in Washington in May 1886. That year's production consisted of a series of dances and tableaux vivants sharing the theme of a "gathering of the nations". (Roscoe, 1991, p63). The Evening Star newspaper wrote of the spectacle;*
*"The young people spared neither their good looks nor expense in their enthusiasm to look the part. They bronzed and blackened*

*their faces and wore the most barbarous costumes....The presence of the Zuni priestess WehWeh, adding to the realistic effect of the warlike spectacle. She was the actual central figure in several of the tableaux, being dressed in the complete costume of her tribe. The war-dance and song and peace tableaux were particularly striking"(Evening Star, 1886)*

*Popular diversions like the Indian dance of the Kirmes reaffirmed the all-important distinction between savagery and civilization essential to the American sense of identity. On stage, the wild savagery of the Indian - heroic, violent, primitive - was safely displayed and its relationship to civilization clearly drawn, even with We'wha incongruously placed in the centre of it all, a not-man, not-warrior from a tribe of peaceful village farmers.*

*While such events were clearly organized to reiterate Anglo-American supremacy over their aboriginal predecessors, We'wha remained somewhat unimpressed by the so-called merits of western culture. According to Edmund Wilson, who visited Zuni in the 1940's, "We'wha assured his compatriots that the white women were mostly frauds, for he had seen them, in the ladies room, taking out their false teeth and the 'rats' from their hair."(Wilson, 1956, p20)*

*There is no record of exactly when Stevenson discovered the "truth" about We'wha's sex and under what circumstances, although, from her writing, we know that this fact remained hidden form her for many years. This seems remarkable, considering Stevenson and her informant worked together closely and for extended periods of time over the years (Roscoe, 1992, p49). At one point she stated that "some declared him to be an hermaphrodite, but the writer gave no credence to the story, and continued to regard We'wha as a woman" (Stevenson, p310).*

*Even when Stevenson did discover We'wha's true sex, she wrote, "As the writer could never think of her faithful and*

*devoted friend in any other light, she will continue to use the feminine gender when referring to We'wha" (Ibid, 1904, p310).*

*After 1886, Stevenson did not visit Zuni again until 1891 and then again in 1896, the year We'wha died. She probably learned the facts about We'wha on one of those two visits, perhaps not until she observed the preparation of his body for burial.(Roscoe, 1991, p49)*

*The irony is that We'wha's true sex was no secret among the Zunis, which is, in itself, revealing about Stevenson's relations with the tribe in general. Indeed, in the native view, We'wha's transcendence of gender was of paramount importance to his role as lhamana, imbuing him with spiritual and social power. Yet despite his strong facial features, the musculature in his arms and his height (See Fig. 2), many white people followed Stevenson's example in assuming that We'wha was biologically female.*

*Matilda Coxe Stevenson was at her friends' bedside that fall in 1896, when We'wha, not yet fifty but suffering from heart disease, passed away after rigorous preparations for the bird-god dance ceremony that took place every autumn. With his extended family around him, this extraordinary berdache saved all this remaining energy to bid farewell to his family and friends. As Stevenson recorded "Her face was radiant in the belief that she was going to her gods. She leaned forward with the plumes tightly grasped and as the setting sun lightened up the western windows, darkness and desolation entered the hearts of the mourners, for We'wha was dead." (Stevenson, 1904, pp311-12)*

*Among the Zunis the death of a berdache like We'wha elicited "universal regret and distress" (Roscoe, 1991, p4). But for the European invaders and settlers who flooded into North America after Colombus' discovery, the berdache became a figure that evoked dismay, disgust, anger, or, at the very least, ridicule. The history of white contact with the various berdache traditions originally indigenous to America has been a tragic, violent and often bloody one.*

## Chapter 3

## So Contaminated with So Many Sins; Euro-American Representation of Berdache Status

As Zuni's most famous and acclaimed berdache, We'wha enjoyed the prestige and respect of his people. His berdache status, however, was neither isolated nor particularly rare as documentary evidence from across the centuries can testify.

Shortly after Colombus discovered the New World, invaders and settlers from all parts of Europe began arriving in droves to stake a claim at the new territory. From the start these incoming hordes came face to face with people that modern anthropologists and ethno-historians would today describe as berdaches.

To these European invaders the berdaches they encountered were freaks of nature, deviants, anomalies. Over the centuries a bewildering wealth of terms were used to describe them, terms that often reveal the limited understanding of those who sought to define them. From Spanish, the labels "someticos" (sodomites), "amarionados" (from Mary, meaning "effeminate"), "mujerados" (literally "made women"), "putos" (male prostitutes), and "bardajes" (from bardaj, persian for the younger person in a homosexual relationship, synonymous with "catamite" or "ganymede") were employed. The French had "garcons effemines" (effeminate boys). English-speaking parties used the expressions "hermaphrodites","sodomites","men-women","inverts", "homosexuals", "transvestites" and "transsexuals".(Roscoe, 1991, pp4-5)

For clarity anthropologists have settled today in the term "berdache", a version of bardaje used by French explorers. Although the original meaning of the term has very little to do with the North American berdache role, Europeans had no better defining terms for such a status. Their languages forced them to

*make a choice between labelling the gender variation of berdaches (with terms like hermaphrodite and mujerado) or their sexual variation (expressions such as sodomite and berdache). (Ibid, p5)*

*Male and female berdaches (that is, women who assumed male roles as warriors and chief or engaged in male work or occupations) have been documented in every region of the North American continent and among every type of native culture. Amongst these traditional native societies berdaches were integral, productive and valued members of their communities. The European culture transplanted to America, however, lacked any comparable roles, and the Europeans who saw berdaches were unable to describe them accurately or comprehend their place in Indian societies. Indeed, through a long span of history, European social institutions have sought to suppress the very economic, social and sexual behaviours typical of berdaches. Few aspects of European and American Indian cultures conflicted as much as they did in this.*

*Consequently the four hundred year history of ethnographic documentation on Native American berdaches has been, at best, selective and biased (Midnight Sun, 1988, p32). The impact of colonization on native lifestyles and ideologies forced native constructions of gender identity and sexuality to conform to western types. As the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber noted: "While the (cross-gender) institution was in full bloom, the Caucasion attitude was one of repugnance and condemnation. This attitude ..... made subsequent personality inquiry difficult, the later berdaches leading repressed or disguised lives" (Kroeber, 1940, p20). While many berdaches gender systems are no longer in existence, there does exist a body of historical source material for study and analysis.*

*By the time European explorers landed in America, Christian Europe, and in particular Spain, were more firmly committed to persecuting sodomy and sexual diversity than any other culture in the world. Before 1492 the Spanish had so little*

*contact with outside cultures, except for their enemy the Moors, that they could not know that homosexual behaviour was commonly accepted among many of the world's cultures. To their horror, the Spanish soon discovered that the Native Americans accepted homosexual behaviour even more readily than the Moors. Since this was an inflammatory issue on which the Spanish had strong feelings, the battle lines were soon drawn. Sodomy became a major justification for Catholic conquest of the peoples called Indians (Williams, 1992, p134).*

*The Spanish soon found that same-sex acts were quite common. The chroniclers Lopez de Gomora reported that the Indians "are sodomitic like no other generation of men" (Requena, 1979, p7). The Spanish were also amazed to find that homosexuality was often associated with cross-dressing, and that the practice had religious connotations. Cieza de Leon wrote of the Indians of Peru in 1553 that "The devil held such sway in this land that , not satisfied with making them fall into so great sin, he made them believe that this vice was a kind of holiness and religion"(Guerra, 1971, p91). The Spanish viewed the Indians' acceptance of homosexuality as providing them with a major justification for their plunder, murder and rape of the Americas (Williams, 1992, p137).*

*The priests, of course, tried to convince the Indians to change voluntarily, but sometimes the military leaders did not even give the natives the opportunity to repent. Antonio de la Calancha, a Spanish official in Lima, sang the praises of Vasco Nunez de Balboa, who on his expedition across Panama "saw men dressed like women; Balboa learnt that they were sodomites and threw the king and forty others to be eaten by his dogs, a fine action of an honourable and Catholic Spaniard" (Guerra, 1971, p91) (See fig. 3)*

*Indian culture, however, was not merely damaged by the actions and dictates of the invading European but by the deadly germs that they had brought with them and to which the Indians has no immunity. To the onlooking Spanish the native decimation*

*Fig.3;* *Spanish explorer Balboa orders Indians accused of Sodomy to be eaten alive by dogs. Engraving by Theodor de Bry, 1594*

*from disease was seen as righteous punishment from God. Theologian Juan Gines de Sepulveda stated "How can we doubt that these people so uncivilized, so barbaric, so contaminated with so many sins and obscenities..... have been justly conquered by such a humane nation which is excellent in every kind of virtue?" (Hanke, 1965, p47).*

*As soon as control of the New World was established, representatives of the Church and the State began imposing their notions of proper behaviour on the Indians. As early as 1613 in Florida, Spanish priests were trying to get Timucua Indian men and boys in confessional to admit being "sodomites" (Katz, 1976, pp286-7).*

*The Spanish began a concerted effort to wipe out berdachism in California, and by the 1820's a missionary at San Juan Capistrano was able to report that while berdaches were once very numerous among the Mission Indians, "At the present time this horrible custom is entirely unknown among them." (Ibid, p614). Cieza de Léon complimented the Spanish authorities for having "given punishment to those who committed the..... sin, warning them how our all powerful God is displeased. And they put fear into them in such a way that now this sin is used little or not at all" (Guerra, 1971, p89).*

*From these early Spanish and French accounts knowledge of berdaches had already spread among frontiersmen. As seen these accounts usually associated berdachism with sodomy. One of the earliest references in English to the direct observations of berdaches was written by Nicholas Biddle in an official journal entry of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. On December 22, 1804, he noted that he saw "men dressed in squars [squaws'] clothes" among the Mandan Indians. Biddle later wrote, in explanation of this practice among the Hidatsas that they were" sometimes married to men. They submit as women do to all the duties of a wife" (Katz, 1976, p293). Travelling in the West from 1832 to 1834 German prince Alexander Maximilian wrote that all*

*Indian tribes had berdaches and asserted that the Crows in particular had many such bades (berdaches) (Ibid, p615).*

*An even more famous writer was George Catlin whose eight years' travel in the West gave his writing a particular authority. Hugely popular, by the end of the nineteenth century it remained one of the key sources by which people learned about aboriginal Americans. Among the Sauk and Fox tribes in the 1830's, Catlin's attendance at the "feast of the Berdashe" publicized the custom. After making it clear that the warriors doing the dancing were the sexual partners of the berdache, Catlin concluded his description with a suddenly vehement denouncement:*

*. "This is one of the most unaccountable and disgusting customs that I have ever met in the Indian country.....For further account of it I am constrained to refer the reader to the country where it is practical, and where I should wish that it might be extinguished before it be more fully recorded" (Ibid, p302).*

*Describing the berdaches he encountered among the Mandan Indians, Catlin said "These gay and tinselled bucks may be seen ..... parading through or lounging about the village" (Catlin, 1973, pp112-13).*

*Throughout the frontier era, reference to berdaches continued to appear as the border of the "civilized" world pushed ever onwards into Indian territories. In 1851, referring to the berdaches (mujerados) among the Laguna and Acoma Pueblo Indians, army officer William Hammond claimed that "A mujerado is an essential person in the saturnalia or orgies, in which these Indians ...indulge. He is the chief passive agent in the pederastic ceremonies, which form so important a part in the performances. These take place in the Spring of every year". Every pueblo, he was told , had at least one mujerado, and toward them " the indians observed a great deal of reserve and mystery...He is protected and supported by the pueblo, is held*

*in some sort of honour and need not work unless he chooses" (Ibid, pp181-2).*

*Frontiersman Peter Grant, who lived among the Sauteux Chippewa (Ojibwa) at the beginning of the nineteenth century admitted that he had known several berdaches. He said that among the tribe the a-go-kwas were "respected as saints for beings in some degree inspired" (Williams, 1992, pp167-8). The famous frontiersmen John Tanner, a white man living among the Chippewa (Ojibwa) in the 1820's even admitted to being sexually approached by the berdache Ozaw-wen-dib or Yellow Head (Katz, 1976, p301).*

*The berdache tradition, of course, could not survive undisturbed when representatives of the established social order arrived. Their history after the frontier era is part of the wider story of the effect of the Anglo-American dominance on American Indian cultures generally. It is a story of cultural repression by the State and by the Church, lending to a decline in traditionalist lifestyles, and an acculturation to the new alien values.*

*During the 1840's the United States established its clear title to the West. By about 1850 massive numbers of settlers were moving to the far West. In the next two decades or so the interior gradually came under white control as successive waves of incoming workers sought to possess the land. Native Americans usually reacted to this invasion with armed defence of their homelands. Such clashes, however, were usually settled by negotiation, certified by treaties, which gradually restricted Indian lands to areas called reservations. In return, treaties guaranteed that tribes retained most rights of self-rule within their remaining reservation lands.*

*By the 1870's most Western tribes had been settled on reservations. They then began to renege on promises made in the treaties. In 1871 the Supreme Court ruled that Congress had the right to contradict treaties. Government officials threatened to*

*abrogate the treaties altogether, leaving Indians with no protection at all. In 1885, the year We'wha arrived in Washington, the Government granted federal courts the right to prosecute major crimes that occurred on reservations. The abolition of the power of the tribes to maintain their own justice systems violated numerous treaties. The Supreme Court ruled that Indian tribes were not states or nations, only "local dependent communities". Such a change was a significant demotion of status from the national recognition and powers of self-government promised in the treaties (Williams, 1984).*

*In 1887 Congress passed the Indian Allotment Act, by which it hoped to do away with reservations by dividing the remaining lands into individually allotted plots. Since land was allotted to male "heads of households", women and berdaches lost ownership rights. Non-citizen Indians became almost totally powerless without the protection of their treaty guarantees and their tribal governments. They were left with a legal status called "nationals", dependent wards under the paramount authority of Congress. By the end of the nineteenth century the federal government held virtually unlimited power over American Indians (Williams, 1980).*

*Allotment and forced assimilation became the hallmark of United States Indian policy, and as more land was lost each reservation became smaller and its resources overtaxed. The power of the federal bureaucracy over the daily lives of native peoples became virtually unchallenged. Native religions were outlawed, and though this violated the First Amendment provision for freedom of religion, Indians were not citizens and so had no protection. White social and economic moves were enforced and children forcibly taken from their families to be educated in distant boarding schools (Williams, 1992, p177).*

*Naturally enough sexuality was one of the aspects of American Indian life that came under attack from the assimilationist programmes. White standards were imposed on*

*Indian communities, mirroring the stringent anti-sexual attitudes of missionaries and public opinion. Between 1910 and 1920 lewd ceremonial dances were forcibly halted among many tribes (Dubermann, 1979, pp105;124). As sex is generally not regarded as dirty or anti-religious in the native view, and humour is not considered incongruous with ceremony, the indians must have been confounded by the whites' suppression of sex.*

*Berdaches were understandably targets of this suppression. By banning traditional healing and ceremonial practices many shamanistic berdaches were driven underground (Stern, 1965, p114). Berdaches were also attacked specifically as government Indian agents were encouraged to enforce standard men's role across the board. Conformity of men's clothing and style of hair were demanded of a tribe's berdaches. Sometimes these people escaped to more remote reservations or were vehemently protected by their tribes (Williams, pp178-9) but not all berdaches were so fortunate.*

*One Navajo informant, now an elderly woman, told Walter Williams how her cousin, a nadle (berdache) was discovered as male during a lice infestation at the boarding school to which they had both been sent. The nadle was taken away and the family has never heard from or about him ever since (Ibid, 1992, p180).*

*Whatever the influence of whites in general, it was missionaries who had arguably the greatest impact on Indians. They remained so convinced of the need for Christian civilization that they sought to spread their culture and beliefs to non-Western people across the country. The introduction of Western values, technology and material culture rapidly challenged the traditional order of life. Native American populations split into factions as those who converted to Christianity began to condemn traditionalists and with them, their berdaches traditions.*

*A Lakota Sioux traditionalist reported that by the 1940's, after most Indians had been educated in white schools or*

*lost to the army, much of the tribe "lost the traditions of respect for winktes (berdaches)". He added that the missionaries and their Christianised Indian followers "would not accept winktes into the cemetery, saying : their souls are lost " (Ibid, pp182-3).*

*Missionaries had a similar effect elsewhere. Among the Crows, the Baptist missionary condemned the badé (berdache) tradition and told congregation members to avoid Osh-Tisch, the famous berdache (otherwise known as "Finds-Them-And-Kills-Them" or "Squaw-Jim")(See Fig. 4), and the other badés. The informant in this case added that after Osh-Tisch died in the late 1920's no other took up the badé role for fear of church ostracization (Ibid, p183).*

*In the 1930's, anthropologist W.W. Hill recorded that while "nadles" generally were highly venerated among the Navajo, they were "not so much respected nowadays. The older attitude is giving way to one of ridicule". (He added that Hastiin Klah, the most famous Navajo nadle, "put on his pants" (that is dressed as a man) after schoolboys made fun of his feminine attire (Hill, 1935, pp274,279).*

*After almost four hundred years of systematic attack and erosion since the onset of the contact period the berdache tradition has been all but scratched from the history books. Yet the tradition never completely died and modern examination of the topic, by both gay and Native American scholars, is doing much to revive interest in the status. This complex intermediate gender role embodies a radically differing world view from our own and its implications are beginning to have profound affects on both a resurgent Indian identity and a modern gay one.*

*Fig.4;* *Finds-Them-And-Kills-Them (Crow), ca. 1877-8. This picture of Osh-Tisch (on the left) and an unidentified female, taken by John Fouch, is the earliest known photograph of a berdache.*

## Chapter 4

### They Believe They Are Honoured;
### An Examination of Various Aspects of the Berdache Tradition.

The French and Spanish missionaries, bringing with them values strongly rooted in the Western Christian tradition (with its condemnation of gender variations), could not comprehend the relationship between berdachism and religion. For most tribes, however, it was the spiritual question that beat at the heart of the berdache tradition. When the French Jesuit missionary Joseph Francois Lafitau wrote his book on American Indians in 1724, he condemned berdaches for acting like women. Yet he admitted that this was not the Native American view. "They believe they are honoured" he wrote uncomprehendingly. (Katz, 1976, p228).

Native American religions offered an explanation for human diversity by their creation stories and folk tales. Among the Kamia, for example, their chief god was a man-woman spirit named Warharmi (Gifford, 1931, p12). In Zuni mythology Ko'lhamana, a berdache spirit, acts as mediator in their creation story, using his peacemaking skills to merge the differing lifestyles of hunters and farmers (Roscoe, 1991, p149-69). Among the Navajo, two berdaches, Turquoise Boy and White Shell Girl, teach First Man and First Woman various skills and lead them safely into their present homeworld (Williams, 1992, pp18-20).

For American Indians, the important emphasis of their religions is on the spiritual nature of things. To understand the physical world, one must appreciate the underlying spiritual essence. In their view all things have spirit and this informs their nature and behaviour. Such a view promotes a sophisticated ecological awareness of the environment. Religion here functions not by seeking to change or condemn what exists, but by accepting diversity and difference and appreciating each spirit's contribution to the world. (Underhill, 1965)

*Within human society the polarities of woman and man are bridged and mediated by a being that combines the elements of both genders. This might mean a physical combination, as in the case of an hermaphrodite, but bearing in mind the aboriginal stress on spiritual dynamics this gender mixing can be expressed by a person's inherent "nature", his personality.*

*Individuals who are physically normal might have the spirit of the other sex, might be somewhere between the two sexes, have the spirit of both sexes, or might have a spirit that is distinct from either women or men. Within the Indian view, they are accepted spiritually as different, as "not man". Native American religions offer a range of spiritual explanations, from supernational gifts bestowed by birds or animals (Kroeber, 1902-7, p 1) to the simple product of one's "natural desire". Berdaches "gradually become women", which underscores the notion of women as a social category rather than as a fixed biological entity. Personal desire - one's spirit - is considered more important in gender classification than physical biological sex. (Williams, 1992, p 22). These attitudes support the Indian acceptance of human diversity. As a respected Mohave elder stated in the 1930's "From the very beginning of the world it was meant that there should be [berdaches], just as it was instituted that there should be shamans" (Devereux, 1937, p 501).*

*Significantly their myths and stories contain no prescriptions for trying to change berdaches. Indeed many stories recount the dangers inherent in trying to coerce a berdache to change against his will.(Williams, 1992, pp23-3)*

*The call of spirit to adopt a berdache lifestyle usually manifested itself at quite an early age, from anywhere between three and thirteen years old. A Mohave shaman related that at this time the boys relatives "began envisaging an initiation ceremony" (Devereux, 1939, pp508-9). This "initiation ceremony" took various different forms depending on the area and the tribe. Among the Mohave this involved a*

*ceremonial dance, after which the boy in question took on full alyha (berdache) status (Ibid, pp508-9). Among the Yuman the transformation was marked by a social gathering, in which the berdache prepared a meal for the friends of the family (Forde, 1931, p157). Ethnographer Ruth Underhill, working among the Papago Indians in the early 1930's recounts an initiation ceremony where a boy is given the choice of retrieving either a man's bow and arrow or a woman's basket from a burning enclosure. If he chose the latter his family "reconciled themselves to his being a berdache" (Underhill, 1938, p186).*

*What is important to recognize in all these practices is that the assumption of a berdache role was not forced on the boy by others. While adults might have been suspicious, it was only when the child made the proper move that he was considered a berdache. Indian children were not stupid, and knew beforehand the implications of such ceremonies. He was well aware that his choice would mark his assumption of the berdache status. Rather than being seen as an involuntary test of reflexes, these initiation ceremonies may be interpreted as an affirmative statement by the child as to chosen lifestyle option (Williams, 1992, pp 24-25).*

*While most of the sources indicate that once a person became a berdache it was a lifelong status, directions from the spirit world determined everything. (Stern, 1965, pp 20, 24). What seems to be important is that in both assuming berdache status and leaving it, supernatural dictate is the determining factor.*

*The Yuki explanation for berdachism, that the individual "feels a burning in his heart which tells him to do it" (Powers, 1976), seems to have prevailed among California Indians. Yokuts explained that their berdaches, tonogochim or tunosim, were not delegated to their status, but entered it "in response to an irresistible call of their natures" (Kroeber, 1953, p 497)*

*Many tribes see the berdache role as signifying an individual's proclivities as a dreamer and visionary. The Yumas believe that berdachism is the result of a child's dream at the time of puberty. Dreams containing motifs or images associated with transformation reflect inclinations toward berdachism. By Yuma belief, a person who has a particularly acute capability for dreaming has the potential for transforming his mind "from male to female" to become an elxá (berdache)(Forde, 1931, p 157).*

*Among the Northern Plains and related Great Lakes tribes the idea of supernatural dictate through dreaming - the vision guest - had its highest development. Gaining spiritual insight from his first vision, brought on by sensory deprivation and fasting, it would inform the individual what role he should take in adult life. Among the Lakota or Sioux there are several symbols for various types of vision. Each dream results in a different gift or talent. A white buffalo traditionally signifies berdachism, as do dreams involving the moon goddess, Double Woman (Powers, 1977, pp 57-59).*

*By interpreting the result of a vision as being the work of a spirit, the vision quest frees the person from feeling responsible for his transformation. The person might even claim that such a change was done against his will and without his control. Such a claim however, does not suggest a negative attitude towards berdaches. It was common for people to claim reluctance to fulfil any spiritual duty assigned them through dreams because the assumption of any sort of sacred role involves taking on various social responsibilities and burdens (Thayer, 1980, p 289).*

*Ritual explanation excuses the community about the cause of that person's difference or the feeling that it is their duty to try and change him. If nature makes a person different, many Indians would conclude, a mere human should not undertake to oppose this spiritual dictate. If someone is different from the average individual it implies that the spirits must have*

*taken particular care in creating that person. By this reasoning, such an individual must be especially close to the spirits. Berdachism is thus neither alien nor threatening, it is, instead, regarded as a reflection of spirituality. Thus, among the Lakotas a winkte (berdache) is described on "wakan", a term that means very sacred or holy (Williams, 1992, p86).*

*In such a religious context, berdaches were seen as magical holders of unique ritual instructions and consequently played key roles in religious ceremonies. According to Alfred Bowers "their roles in ceremonies were many and exceeded those of the most distinguished tribal ceremonial leaders. There was an atmosphere of mystery about them" (Bowers, 1965, p326). Matilda Stevenson observed similar sacred privileges bestowed upon her friend the Zuni lhamana We'wha (Stevenson, 1904, pp 37-38)*

*On account of their close connection to the spirit world, berdaches were often natural candidates to adopt powerful shaman roles. Among the Navajos and Lakotas nadle and winkte shamans (respectively) were considered particularly excellent as chanters, with powers for love medicine and for aiding childbirth (Hill, 1935, p 275) (Williams, 1992, p 35). Cheyenne war parties almost always had a skilled "he man eh" (berdache) curer along to tend and heal the wounded (Hoebel, 1978, p 83). Because they were involved with the sick, California Indian berdaches also oversaw funeral rites. This role was also true of the Timucua berdaches sketched by Le Moyne(See Fig. 5). Among the Yokuts, they alone prepared bodies for burial and conducted the singing and dancing rites at funerals. (Kroeber, 1953, pp 46, 497). Among the Plains tribes, ethnographers' reports stated that it was a berdache who was responsible for blessing the tree central to the Sun Dance ceremony, the chief religious rite of Plains culture (Williams, 1992, pp36-7, 218).*

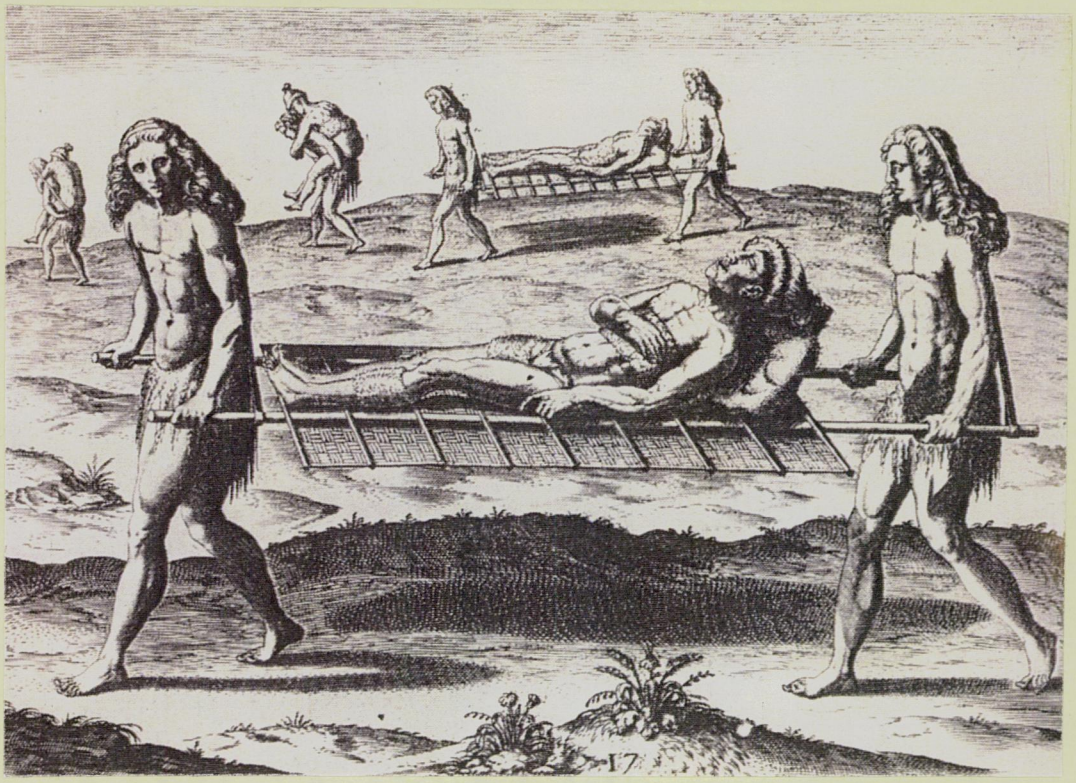

*Fig.5;* *Timucua berdaches transporting injured persons for medical treatment and deceased persons for burial. Based on a sketch by Jacques Le Moyne, 1564.*

*Among the Lakotas, a berdache can offer a boy a sacred winkte name. Such a name provides spiritual protection for the child and helps ensure good health and longevity (Powers, 1977, pp 57-58). The Lakota shaman Lame Deer said that "Sitting Bull, Black Elk even Crazy Horse had secret winkte names" (Fire and Erdoes, 1972, p 117). This power for ensuring luck and long life extended to the berdache himself and they were considered hard to kill on account of their holiness (Bowers, 1965, p 256).*

*Not all aboriginal American cultures appeared to recognize berdaches as a respected status (the Iroquois, Apaches, Pimas and Comanches, for example) and attitudes certainly varied in those tribes that did. Yet even in tribes like the Lakotas, Cheyennes and Navajos, where their berdaches were very highly regarded, there still appear occasional statements in the literature where Indians ridicule or joke about berdaches, implying, to our way of thinking, a lack of respect for the role (Williams, 1992, pp39-4). However, in many Indian cultures joking relationships and mockery served a positive social function. David Greenburg suggests there is no reason to conclude that this taunting denotes a rejection of homosexuality (Greenberg, 1985, pp 179 - 189). Moreover, Greenberg notes, the ridicule may have been more likely directed at his prestige that at his sexuality or personal character. By mocking potentially pretensious and self-important people a basic egalitarianism was maintained and social stratification inhibited (Ibid, pp 183-85).*

*While the spiritual explanation of berdachism provides an important justification for acceptability, it is the supportive family structures found in most Indian cultures that allows berdaches to be raised as proud and productive members of society. The extended family and clan systems serve many of the functions that government institutions provide in a society that is state-based. Because of the way berdaches are raised and the economic role they fulfil, many kinships systems provide a secure place for them.*

*Some white writers have suggested that children accept berdache roles as a way of escaping the ultra-masculine, aggressively individualistic and often dangerous role of the adult male (Devereux, 1937, p 517) (Forgay, 1975, p 12). This interpretation is not sufficient in itself. It might have prompted some boys in warlike cultures but it does not exist in all warlike tribes, like the Comanches or Iroquois for example, or, more significantly, explain why berdachism can be found in a wealth of native cultures that are not warlike. There is no simple correlation between aggressive male roles and berdachism (Callender and Kochems, 1983, pp 443 - 7). Rather than being seen as outside causes like overmothering or a flight from masculinity, the main thrust of American Indian explanations is, yet again, that berdachism is a reflection of the child's individual character.*

*S. C. Simms recalled meeting a Crow berdache who was "almost gigantic in stature, but was decidedly effeminate in voice and manner". He was told that these people asserted a preference for things pertaining to female work at a very early age. Even if parents tried to incite such children to take a standard male role, they invariably resisted (Simms, 1903, pp 580 - 81). It was more a matter of the family adjusting to the child than vice versa. Such a pattern of uniqueness was also observed by the family of a Yaqui berdache, who described him as being more androgynous than feminine. (Williams, 1992, p 51). This is a distinction that Western observers, used to thinking in binary polar opposites, are likely to miss.*

*The family of a berdache is more interested in accepting the contribution the child can offer to the family than in finding a supposed cause for his difference. Not being stigmatized and alienated, a berdache can offer positive advantages to both his family and his community. One of these talents is their acclaimed ability with children (Ibid, p 54).*

*Berdaches usually enjoy great economic wealth, prestige and productivity, part of which could be due to their freedom from child-care responsibilities. Without having an infant to nurse, berdaches could put all their efforts into production. But the high-quality work associated with them is also a result of rising to one's level of expectations. With religious or social ideas propounding the notion that berdaches will be successful, this provides a powerful incentive to become so. Indeed, exceptional ability itself can be regarded as an indicator of supernatural power. The expectation of one contributes to the other within the berdache tradition. We'wha's reputation for handwork attests to this (Stevenson, 1904, pp 37-38, 310-13).*

*However, a berdache can easily take on a parental role if he so desires, as adoption of orphaned children or children from overcrowded families within one's kin group is commonly accepted in most American Indian societies (Williams, 1992, p 55).*

*Incidently, while considerable variation in the tradition existed between different tribal groupings, the taking on of, at least in part, some woman's occupational roles seems to be one of the most important aspects of defining berdachism (Callender and Kochems, 1983). This, and an androgynous character, seem to be universal characteristics of the berdache, and stresses their important economic role in their societies.*

*To more fully understand berdache gender status it is necessary to consider how Native Americans view women. According to Walter Williams most specialists in the field stress that the majority of aboriginal Indian societies operated on a gender-equal basis. Williams suggests that, as a rule of thumb,"the status of berdaches in a society is directly related to the status of women..... where women have high status, there is no lowering of social role for a male to move in a feminine direction. For example, among the Navajo, women have very high*

*position of respect, and this is reflected in the virtual deification of the nadle" (Williams, 1992, p 66).*

*A berdache may, therefore, especially in an economic sense, take on a role that is similar to that of a woman, but his prestige in women's work does not mean that he thereby dominated females by becoming a "superior woman" as Harriet Whitehead has suggested, simply because the berdache is not a woman and is not regarded as one (Whitehead, 1981).*

*Clearly the berdache status offers an alternative gender role rather than a cross from one to another. As economic and social mediators between the poles of "women's work" and "man's work" they offer a unique and unifying connection between the two clearly demarcated camps. Western accounts of berdache gender roles remain hugely flawed with their insistence on using bipolar terms of definition. For example, much of the anthropological literature refers to berdaches as transvestites but this, for several reasons, is an inaccurate and misleading term. Firstly, not all Indian men wearing women's clothing did so from spiritual dictate, and were not seen as connected in any way to berdachism (Angelino and Shedd, 1955, p125)(Callendar and Kochems, 1983, p 443).*

*Secondly, berdaches did not always wear women's clothing. Much appears to have depended on the occasion, the individual's inclination and their marital status (Hill, 1935, p 273).*

*Early accounts of berdaches often mistook them for "hermaphrodites", people born with physically ambiguous genitalia. While this is occasionally true, a wealth of documented evidence confirms that the vast majority of berdaches were normal morphological males (Williams, 1992, pp 76-79). Among the Navajo the term "nadle" applies to physical hermaphrodites as well as malen and female berdaches (Hill, 1935, p 273) but this appears to be the exception, not the rule.*

*Native American terms used to define berdachism often emphasize the dual (male and female) nature of their status (Williams, 1992, p 76). For this reason Indian scholars and revisionist anthropologists are using the English term "Two-Spirit" to describe the berdache tradition (Hall, 1994, p 123). In the aboriginal view, it is the mixture of male and female that is important, with categories less rigid and gender concepts more fluid. They are seen as combining the attributes of both male and female and adding alternative aspects that are unique to the berdache status.*

*Some anthropologists have seen this type of evidence as indicating that berdaches occupy a distinct gender, a third intermediate category, like the Crow translations for badé: "not man, not woman" (Katz, 1976, pp 312 - 13). The English language does not have an adequate label to communicate such a complex concept as berdachism, although the term androgene is perhaps the closest synonym.*

*Another important aspect of the berdache tradition involves sexual behaviour. Berdaches are partly recognized by their sexual contacts with men. This is one of the first things about them that European explorers noticed.*

*While there is much variation in sexuality across Native American cultures, we can draw certain conclusions. Firstly, berdaches usually participate in sex with men, but homosexual acts are not limited to berdaches alone. Secondly, sexuality in many Indian societies is not seen as solely for the purpose of reproduction, and is not restricted by the institution of marriage. It is instead conceived of as a gift from this spirit world, to be enjoyed and appreciated.*

*George Devereux, an ethnographer, who lived among the Mohave of the Colorado River in the 1930s wrote that "there is little or no objection to homosexuality among the Mohave". (Devereux, 1937, pp 498-99). Though sexual experimentation, with both*

*sexes, was enjoyed in a lighthearted way from an early age, Devereux wrote, "Even the most casual coitus implied, by definition, also an involvement of the 'soul' : body, cohabiting with body and soul with soul" (Devereux, 1969, pp xii - xiii).*

*In the event that a man is known to have had sex with a berdache or to have been the passive partner in sex with another non-berdache man, this has no effect on his gender identity. As long as he retains his masculine personality, he will not be considered a berdache (Devereux, 1937, pp 507 - 8). It is important to stress that same-sex eroticism is by no means limited to the berdache role, yet it is in the berdache that aboriginal male-male sexuality is mainly focused. Because traditional cultures assume that androgynous males are homosexual, berdaches become the most visible practitioners of that behaviour.*

*Interestingly, most tribes do not consider it proper behaviour for two berdaches to have sex with each other. Among the Lakotas, while non-berdahce men might have sex with other in secret, berdaches never do. Because of a sense of "sisterhood" that operates between them, for a berdache to have sex with another is like incest. The incest taboo operates to restrict sexual relations between males in the same way that it does hetero-sexually; rather than forbidding all homosexual behaviour this taboo limits sexual relations only to people outside of one's kin group. Berdaches are in essence a fictive kin group (White, 1980, p100).*

*Gay anthropologist Walter Williams states that some ethnographers' claims that berdaches are not usually homosexual needs to be rigorously questioned. From his own experience with berdaches from many different tribes, they all eventually specified their sexual activities with men, but only after he had gained their confidence, adding that they would not have imparted such information to a heterosexual researcher (Williams, 1992, p 105).*

*With the homosexual role of the berdache institutionalized and emphasized within Native American cultures, the berdache served the sexual needs of many men without competing against the institution of heterosexual marriage. If a man so wished he could take a berdache as his wife. In such a marriage the berdache supplied women's work and a network of kin, like any other wife. Lakota chief Crazy Horse, for example, had one or two winkte wives, along with his female wives (Ibid, 1992, p 112).*

*From the Indian viewpoint generosity and spirituality, not homosexual behaviour, are what underlie the social prestige enjoyed by berdaches, but these qualities are emphasized without denying the berdache's sexuality. Androgyny, spirituality, woman's work and sex with men are equally important indicators of berdache status. All of these factors are seen as aspects of the whole, reflecting the basic two-spirit character of a person. This assured sense of balance and interconnectedness has been sadly lacking in writings on the sexual diversity of Native American Indians. It seems strangely ironic that homosexual behaviour, just one aspect of the rich and complex berdache role, has been either totally denied or else grossly emphasized by Western recorded documents, much to the detriment of our own understanding of gender, identity and human diversity.*

## Chapter 5.

## Conclusion: the Berdahce - A blueprint for Gay Identity?

To the uninformed outsider the berdache status seems fabulous and somewhat mystifying. It's virtual exclusion from American history, and its frequent misinterpretation when it is mentioned, has served to keep comprehension and discussion of this complex and established gender role outside of the public arena of knowledge and debate.

Avid viewers of modern cinema may have encountered the tradition in passing from Arthur Penn's 1970 film version of "Little Big Man", based on the book of the same name by Thomas Berger. This well researched satirical account of Cheyenne life and death during the mid-1800s included a berdache (hee-man-eh), Little Horse, foster-brother to the story's hero, Jack Crabb (played in the film by Dustin Hoffmann), among its chief characters (Berger, 1964). A comparable role among the Moari people of New Zealand is also hinted at peripherally in Jane Campion's Oscar-winning film "The Piano" (Campion, 1993). Apart from these marginalized inclusions berdache and similar gender variations have remained well outside of a general public perception.

However, it is important to point out that American Indian cultures are not unique in recognizing a special status and respected role for individuals like berdaches and amazons (female berdaches) but that gender diversity, in various forms, is a worldwide phenomenon, represented in most culture areas as well as in certain historical periods of Western societies. Informed and revisionist anthropology and ethnothistory are only now bringing some of these roles, and their cultural, social and frequently religious significances, to light.

Probably the closest institution to berdachism outside the Americas is among the reindeer - herding peoples of Siberia.

*The ancestors of Native Americans migrated from this area between 30,000 and 15,000 years ago. The presence of a tradition similar to berdachism among the people of Siberia suggests the antiquity of this role among at least some American Indian tribes from their earliest arrival in the North American continent.*

*Russian anthropologist Waldemar Bogoras, living among the Chukchi in Eastern Siberia at the turn of the century, wrote of an indigenous social role linking homosexual behaviour, gender variance and spiritual power. The Chukchi refer to such a person as a "soft man (yirka-la ul) meaning a man transformed into a being of a softer sex". Like the berdache, this transformation is considered to be the result of supernatural influences (Bogoras, 1907, pp 449-51). Although often very strong physically, the softman takes up the pursuits and mannerisms of women and will often marry men and engage in (mostly passive) male-male sexual intercourse (Ibid, pp 450-55), again just like the berdache.*

*Polynesian societies also institutionalized male gender variance in the "mahu" tradition, which in many ways also resembles the berdache role. Similar customs exist in Hawaii, in Samoa (where the role is called "fafafine" ["like a lady"] and among the Moari of New Zealand (Williams, 1992, p 257). The wide-spread acceptance of mahu gender variance across Pacific cultures may point toward the institution's ancientness. Like berdaches, polynesian gender variants are usually androgynous in character, do women's work as well as men's, may dress in unisex clothing or a mixture of women's and men's clothing, are sexually active with men, and have certain special roles in traditional religious ceremonies (Ibid, p 257)(Besnier, 1994).*

*In modern northern India an alternative gender exists in the male cult known as hijras. Like berdaches, hijras are seen as spiritually inspired and considered to bestow luck at weddings and baptisms. They dress either as women or in a combination of women's and men's clothing and take on women's*

*tasks and mannerisms. Like berdaches they are also sexually active with men, but their self-imposed physical emasculation means they are restricted to being passive partners only (Nanda, 1994).*

*Countless other culture groups and historical eras contained sanctioned and accepted comparable gender variance roles (Roscoe, 1995) (Lewin and Leap, 1996) (Williams, 1992, pp 260 - 269) (Herdt, 1994).*

*It has taken the emergence of feminist theory and its critique of biological determinism to make a serious re-evaluation of the berdache role possible. Trailblazers like Elsie Clews Parsons and Ruth Benedict set the ball rolling in the early twentieth century with their brief but insightful examination of berdache status, informed by a feminist understanding of the social construction of gender roles (Roscoe, 1994, pp 331 - 32). Their pioneering example was followed by a plethora of other women anthropologists and academics who further advanced a modern discussion on the subject of the berdache.*

*Beginning tentatively in the 1950's and more visibly by the 1970's gay theoreticians, researchers and fieldworkers began to make their own contributions to the general consensus of opinion concerning the berdache that had began to develop. The rise of the gay liberation movement in Western culture, which was informing this re-evaluation, had in turn an impact on younger contemporary Indians. With this two-way cultural exchange, the status of gay people and the status of Native American people have grown parallel to each other, each nurturing the other.*

*One of the most influential figures on the modern gay activist movement is Harry Hay. The Mattachine Society, founded by Hay and others in 1951, was a radical organization who began questioning the status quo of homosexual identity and heritage and paved the way for the Post-Stonewall emergence of the Gay*

*Liberation Front (Williams, 1992, pp 202 - 115). In numerous interviews given Hay has cited time and again his early contact with Native Americans during his Californian childhood and his early knowledge of the berdache tradition (Hay, 1994, pp 79 - 96).*

*In 1970 Clark Taylor introduced a resolution at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in San Diego. This resolution supported gay and lesbian rights and the study of gay and lesbian topics by anthropologists. This lead (in 1974) to the formation of ARGOH, the Anthropological Research Group on Homosexuality, which in turn became SOLGA, the Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists in 1987. This organization has lent an increasing weight of support to documentary research and enlightened fieldwork by gay and lesbian anthropologists, something that has broadened general understanding of the role and status that the berdache enjoyed in traditional American Indian cultures. (Lewin and Leap, 1996, pp vii - xi).*

*As has been made apparent throughout the course of this thesis, the berdache phenomenon within aboriginal American culture has been the subject of much controversy since it was first encountered over four hundred years ago. It has elicited reactions from misunderstanding and denial to condemnation, repression and genocide, and it is only within recent years that a truly unified and comprehensive knowledge of this intermediate or third gender role has began to emerge.*

*The few documentary reports and historical records that have been unearthed on the subject tend, in general, to reveal more about the values that their Euro-American authors attributed to the berdaches than the considerations and attitudes of the Native American communities within which they functioned. Coming from the strict and intolerent Judeo-Christian tradition, the incoming white observers lacked the social and linguistic categories capable of translating the patterns of beliefs,*

*behaviour and customs represented by North American berdaches and consequently demonized it. Although cultural relativity has been central to twentieth - century anthropology its application to differences in sexuality and gender has somewhat trailed behind. It has taken feminist and gay and lesbien theory, as well as an increasingly audible native voice, to seriously challenge and re-assess the berdache role.*

*Knowledge of berdachism has greatly influenced the formulation of a modern gay identity in the West, providing, as it were, a history and heritage, and consequently a foundation for positive self-identity and acceptance. In 1979 the Quebec gay movement even went so far as to name its magazine 'Le Berdache' (Williams, 1992, p 206). When the Lesbian poet Judy Grahn wrote her worldwide survey of words related to homosexuality Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds, the berdache was prominently highlighted. (Grahn, 1990).*

*However, while both berdachism and gayness involve sex with men, there are a number of disparities. Some homosexually inclined Indians today see themselves as gay men and not as berdaches, which carries with it implications of gender androgyny and sexual passivity. Socialized in the urban gay subculture, they expect a flexible exchange of roles and resist the social restrictions that berdache status involves. While they may be similar sexually in a mechanistic sense, the meanings that the two societies construct around these relationships differ considerably.*

*Institutions like the berdache tradition, however, offer us new ways of looking at sexual variance and flexibility in gender roles. The American Indian concept of spirituality provides a way out of the deviancy model of homosexuality and is thus able to fully integrate socially and cutturally a group that in modern Western Society is regarded as a barely tolerated marginal anomaly. At the very least, our awareness of alternative attitudes and roles can allow us to appreciate the*

*diversity of human existence, and the similarities that we share across the boundaries of culture.*

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