

# Two-Spirit

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(Redirected from Two-spirit)

**Two-Spirit** (also **two spirit** or **twospirit**) people are American Indians who fulfill one of many mixed gender role found traditionally among many American Indian and Canadian First Nations indigenous groups. Traditionally the roles included the wearing the clothing and performing the work of both male and female genders. The terms usually implies a masculine spirit and a feminine spirit living in the same body and was coined by contemporary gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Native Americans to describe themselves and the traditional roles they are reclaiming. There are many indigenous terms for these individuals in the various Native American languages as "what scholars generically refer to as 'Native American gender diversity' was a fundamental institution among most tribal peoples"<sup>[1]</sup>.

As of 1991 male and female bodied Two-Spirit people have been "documented in over 130 North American tribes, in every region of the continent, among every type of native culture"<sup>[2]</sup>.

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## Terminology

The older term "*berdache*" is a generic term used primarily by anthropologists, and is frequently rejected as inappropriate and offensive by Native Americans. This may be largely due to its pejorative etymology as it is a loan from French *bardache* via Spanish *bardaxa* or *bardaje/bardaja* via Italian *bardasso* or *berdasia* via

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Arabic *bardaj* meaning "kept boy; male prostitute, catamite" from Persian *bardaj* < Middle Persian *vartak* < Old Iranian *\*varta-*, cognate to Avestan *varəta-* "seized, prisoner," formed from an Indo-European root *\*welə-* meaning "to strike, wound" (which is the same in English as *vulnerable*). It has widely been replaced with *two-spirit*.<sup>[3][4][5]</sup>

"*Two-spirit*" originated in Winnipeg, Canada in 1990 during the third annual intertribal Native American/First Nations gay and lesbian conference. It is a calque of the Ojibwa phrase *niizh manidoowag* (two spirits). It was chosen to distance Native/First Nations people from non-natives as well as from the words "berdache" and "gay."<sup>[6]</sup>

## Definition and historic societal role

These individuals are often viewed as having two spirits occupying one body. Their dress is usually a mixture of traditionally male and traditionally female articles. They have distinct gender and social roles in their tribes.

Two-spirited individuals perform specific social functions in their communities. In some tribes male-bodied two-spirits held active roles such as:

- healers or medicine persons
- gravediggers, undertakers, handling and burying of the deceased
- conduct mourning and sexual rites
- conveyers of oral traditions and songs
- nurses during war expeditions
- foretold the future
- conferred lucky names on children or adults
- wove, made pottery, made beadwork and quillwork
- arranged marriages
- made feather regalia for dances
- special skills in games of chance
- led scalp-dances
- fulfilled special functions in connection with the setting up of the central post for the Sun Dance

In some tribes female-bodied two-spirits typically took on roles such as:

- chief, council
- trader
- hunter, trapper, fisher
- warrior, raider
- guides
- peace missions



Detail of *Dance to the Berdache*, painted by George Catlin

- vision quests, prophets
- medicine persons

Some examples of two-spirited people in history include the accounts by Spanish conquistadors who spotted a two-spirited individual(s) in almost every village they entered in Central America. There are descriptions of two-spirited individuals having strong mystical powers. In one account, raiding soldiers of a rival tribe begin to attack a group of foraging women. When they perceive that one of the women, the one that does not run away, is a two-spirit, they halt their attack and retreat after the two-spirit counters them with a stick, determining that the two-spirit will have great power which they will not be able to overcome.

Native people have often been perceived as "warriors," and with the acknowledgment of two-spirit people that romanticized identity becomes broken. In order to justify this new "Indian" identity many explained it away as a "form of social failure, women-men are seen as individuals who are not in a position to adapt themselves to the masculine role prescribed by their culture" (Lang, 28). Lang goes on to suggest that two-spirit people lost masculine power socially, so they took on female social roles to climb back up the social ladder within the tribe.

Cross dressing of two-spirit people was not always an indicator of cross acting (taking on other gender roles and social status within the tribe). Lang explains "the mere fact that a male wears women's clothing does not say something about his role behavior, his gender status, or even his choice of partner..." (62). Often within tribes a child's gender was decided by depending on either their inclination toward either masculine or feminine activities, or their intersex status. Puberty was about the time frame by which clothing choices were made to physically display their gender choice.

Two-spirit people, specifically male-bodied (biologically male, gender female), could go to war and have access to male activities such as sweat lodges.<sup>[7]</sup> However, they also took on female roles such as cooking and other domestic responsibilities. Today's societal standards look down upon feminine males, and this perception of that identity has trickled into Native society. The acculturation of these attitudes has created a sense of shame towards two-spirit males who live or dress as females and there is no longer a wish to understand the dual lifestyle they possess.

Two-spirits might have relationships with people of either sex.<sup>[8]</sup> Female-bodied two-spirits usually had sexual relations or marriages with only females.<sup>[9]</sup> In the Lakota tribe, two-spirits commonly married widowers; a male-bodied two-spirit could perform the function of parenting the children of her husband's late wife without any risk of bearing new children to whom she might give priority.<sup>[10]</sup> Partners of two-spirits did not take on any special recognition, although some believed that after having sexual relations with a two-spirit they would obtain magical abilities, given obscene nicknames by the two-spirited person which they believed held "good luck," or in the case of male partners, boosted their masculinity. Relationships between two two-spirited individuals is absent in the literature with one tribe as an exception, the Tewa.<sup>[11]</sup> Male-bodied two-spirits regarded each other as "sisters," it is speculated that it may have been seen as incestuous to have a relationship with another two-spirit.<sup>[12]</sup> It is known that in certain tribes a relationship between a two-spirit and non-two-spirit was seen on the most part as neither heterosexual nor homosexual (in modern day terms) but more "hetero-gender," Europeans however saw them as being homosexual. Partners of two-spirits did not experience themselves as "homosexual," and moreover drew a sharp conceptual line between themselves and

two-spirits.<sup>[13]</sup>

Although two-spirits were both respected and feared in many tribes, the two-spirit was not beyond reproach or even being killed for bad deeds. In the Mohave tribe for instance, they frequently became medicine persons and were likely to be suspected of witchcraft in cases of failed harvest or of death. They were, like any other medicine person, frequently killed over these suspicions (such as the female-bodied two-spirit named Sahaykwisa).<sup>[14]</sup> Another instance in the late 1840s was of a Crow male-bodied two-spirit who was caught, possibly raiding horses, by the Lakota and was killed.<sup>[15]</sup>

According to certain reports there had never been an alternative gender among the Comanche.<sup>[16]</sup> This is true of some Apache bands as well, except for the Lipan, Chiricahua, Mescalero, and southern Dilzhe'e.<sup>[17][18]</sup> One tribe in particular, the Eyak, has a single report from 1938 that they did not have an alternative gender and they held such individuals in low esteem, although whether this sentiment is the result of acculturation or not is unknown.<sup>[19][20]</sup> It has been claimed that the Iroquois did not either,<sup>[16]</sup> although there is a single report from Bacqueville de La Potherie in his book published in 1722, *Histoire de l'Amérique septentrionale*, that indicates that an alternative gender existed among them (vol. 3, pg. 41).<sup>[21]</sup> Although all tribes were influenced by European homophobia/transphobia,<sup>[22][23][24][25][26][27]</sup> certain tribes were particularly so, such as the Acoma, Atsugewi, Dilzhe'e (Tonto) Apache, Cocopa, Costanoan, Klamath, Maidu, Mohave, Nomlaki, Omaha, Oto, Pima, Wind River Shoshone, Tolowa, and Winnebago.<sup>[28]</sup>

It has been claimed that the Aztecs and Incas had laws against such individuals,<sup>[29][30][31]</sup> though there are some authors who feel that this was exaggerated or the result of acculturation as all of the documents indicating this are post-conquest and any that existed before had been destroyed by the Spanish.<sup>[26][32]</sup> The belief that these laws existed, at least for the Aztecs, comes from the Florentine Codex. According to Dr. Nancy Fitch Professor of History at California State University,

*"There is evidence that indigenous peoples authored many codices, but the Spaniards destroyed most of them in their attempt to eradicate ancient beliefs." ... "The Florentine Codex is unquestionably a troubling primary source. Natives writing in Nahuatl under the supervision of the Spanish Fray Bernardino de Sahagún apparently produced the manuscript in the 1500s. The facts of its production raise serious questions about whether the manuscript represents the vision of the vanquished or of the colonizers" ... "colonization of the natives' minds loomed large in the Spanish project" ... "To make matters worse, while it appears that the original manuscript was completed in Nahuatl some time around 1555, no evidence of it remains. Authorities in New Spain confiscated his manuscripts in 1575, and at various times, the Spanish monarchy ordered him to stop his work. The earliest known version of the manuscript is, thus, Sahagún's summary of it written in Spanish. In 1585, he published a revised version of the codex, which, he argued, corrected some errors and integrated some things ignored in his earlier summary. Sahagún's revised version is the manuscript commonly known as the Florentine Codex."<sup>[33]</sup>*

## Modern societal role

The term "Two-Spirit" is most comfortably applied to contemporary individuals and groups who identify as

such and Two-Spirit men may distinguish between spiritual and cultural practitioners, or "Two-Spirits", and "gay Indians". Modern Two-Spirit activities include:

- Knowledge in ritual, ceremonial, religious, and culture
- Knowledge and skill in crafts, especially women's
- Teaching
- Child-care for family and community

Two-Spirit and gay Indian men often report accepting female relatives and communities willing to enforce the closet. Native cultures may be considered to have "indiscriminately" adopted European values including sexism and homophobia and it is commonly argued that being "gay" or "cross-dressing" is not "traditional" or not "Indian". The re-adoption of Two-Spirit roles may be seen then as a healing for both Two-Spirit individuals and Native cultures, and modern Two-Spirit identity is fundamentally concerned with tradition.

## People

### Historical "Two-Spirits"

- Arroh-ah-och
- Co'pak
- Hosteen Klah
- Kaska Girl
- Kaúxuma Núpika
- Kinipai
- Kwiwishdi
- Lele'ks
- Osh-Tisch
- Pine Leaf
- Sahaykwisa
- We'wha
- Yellow Head

### Modern Self-identified Two-Spirits

- Beth Brant
- Terry Calling Eagle
- Chrystos
- Qwo-Li Driskill
- Connie Fife
- Raven E. Heavy Runner
- Carole LaFavor
- Richard LaFortune
- Rod Michano
- Fred Martinez
- Bernard Second
- Terry Tafoya

- Wesley Thomas
- Karen Vigneault
- Art Zoccole

## See also

- List of tribes' terms for two-spirits
- List of transgender-related topics
- List of gay-related topics
- Hijra (South Asia)

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## External links

- NativeOUT (<http://www.nativeout.com>) A Two-Spirit group in Phoenix, Arizona. Website has Native American LGBT/Two-Spirit News & Information.
- Two-Spirit Society of Denver (<http://www.denvertwospirit.com>) Traditional Two-Spirit group in Denver, Colorado.
- Bay Area American Indian Two-Spirits (<http://www.baaits.org>) includes links to other two-spirits groups
- NorthEast Two-Spirit Society (<http://ne2ss.typepad.com>) Based in New York City
- Nations of the 4 Directions (<http://www.notfd.blogspot.com/>) San Diego TS organisation
- *Directions in Gender Research in American Indian Societies: Two Spirits and Other Categories* by Beatrice Medicine (<http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~culture/medicine.htm>)
- Berdache (<http://www.glbtc.com/social-sciences/berdache.html>) on glbtq.com
- Indigenous Literature with a Queer/LGBT/Two-Spirit Sensibility (<http://oncampus.richmond.edu/faculty/ASAIL/Two-Spirit.htm>)
- International Two Spirit Gathering (<http://www.itsg.20m.com>)
- [1] (<http://www.makingaripple.com>) Two Spirit Author, J. Spencer Rowe MA
- Northwest Two-Spirit Society (<http://groups.msn.com/NorthwestTwoSpiritSociety>)
- The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture ([http://www.ifge.org/books/spirit\\_and\\_flesh.htm](http://www.ifge.org/books/spirit_and_flesh.htm)) by Walter L. Williams
- Two Spirits: A Story of Life With the Navajo (<http://www.tobyjohnson.com/twospirits.html>) by Walter L. Williams & Toby Johnson
- The Two-Spirit Tradition (<http://androgynous0catch.com/2spiritx.htm>) collection of articles at the Androgynous Online site
- The Two-Spirit Tradition (<http://www.androphile.org/preview/Culture/NativeAmerica/amerindian.htm>) article in the Androphile Project site
- In Search of "Berdache": Multiple Genders and Other Myths (<http://laurenhasen.com/berdache.htm>)

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