

THE PERSPECTIVE OF TWO-SPIRIT ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

by

Rishona J. Slutchuk

A Thesis

submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Native Studies

University of Manitoba

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RISHONA J. SLUTCHUK

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Rishona J Slutchuk

University of Manitoba

2002

Abstract

Historically, *berdache* were seen in a negative light in both Aboriginal and European cultures. Recently, the term *two-spirit* was chosen to identify these people thereby creating a positive spiritual path bridging the historical experience with the contemporary. In the modern sense, the term *two-spirit* has come to be seen as inclusive while allowing people to use the term in a way that fits their own personal ties.

This thesis will illustrate a few of the ways the term *two-spirit* can be used. It will also examine the historical and contemporary importance of the term. It will focus primarily on contemporary *two-spirit* Aboriginal people's opinions and provide a closer look at how they choose to define and identify themselves. The journey that *two-spirit* people have taken to get where they are now will also be examined. Further, a closer look at their history and the reclaiming of their voice, as well as qualitative interviews with people who identify as *two-spirited*, will be presented. In the final analysis, there is much more to identifying oneself as *two-spirited* than just speaking the words. It is a process, a journey and, for some, a dream. *Two-spirit* Aboriginal people were chosen by their Creator to walk in both worlds – the physical and spiritual and they were chosen to mediate between men and women. *Two-spirit* is a positive word with a beautiful and harmonious balance that encompasses all people and it has a definite place within Aboriginal culture.

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*Rishona Slutchuk
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Two-spirit Aboriginal people may not be who we think they are. In recent years, the term has been used to describe Aboriginal people who identify as gay or lesbian. However, not everyone who identifies as two-spirit is, in fact, part of the gay or lesbian lifestyle. The confusion over the term can be traced back to the arrival of the Europeans in North America and their misinterpretation of the people they met. The lack of understanding of Aboriginal customs and beliefs inevitably created stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes. As well, the language barrier made it most difficult to transfer thoughts and ideas. The language made it most difficult to appropriately speak about this phenomenon in the English language. The original term, *berdache*, is a European invention used to describe what the early Europeans perceived as a deviant role within Aboriginal societies. Europeans thought that the two-spirit people were homosexuals and cross-dressers because they saw a man wearing women's clothing or a man living with another man and they perceived this as deviant behaviour. Therefore, they postulated that these people were homosexuals and cross-dressers without inquiry into the reality of the situation.

Historically, *two-spirit* people were spiritual leaders, matchmakers, visionaries, artisans and role models for the rest of the community. Sexuality and sexual orientation were only a small component of the two-spirit lifestyle. Modern two-spirit Aboriginal people have chosen the term *two-spirit* to separate themselves from the derogatory terms used in the past. They, in effect, have distanced themselves from past experiences with a

fresh term that incorporates the spiritual component that has been misplaced for so many years.

Prior to 1990, the term used was *berdache*, a term used today almost exclusively by anthropologists to describe “an American Indian phenomenon” (Fulton & Anderson, 1992, p. 603). The word originates in the Arabic language from the word *berdag* and the Persian word *bardaj* (bardah). Courouve (1982) reports that by the 16th century, at least three languages – Italian, Spanish and French – had borrowed the Arabic term to denote passive male-male sexual intercourse (Fulton & Anderson, 1992, p.603).

The term *berdache* can be defined as a passive male partner in a homosexual relationship (Fulton and Anderson, 1992; Epple, 1998). This term is derogatory when applied to historical Aboriginal people; it is and was imposed upon them, was not defined as such by them, and is similar in connotation to the term “savage”.

Aboriginal people had their own terms and their own method of describing what was sacred and spiritual. These terms were far removed from the term *berdache*, and sexuality and sexual orientation may not have been included in their definition. Inevitably, the academic use of the term *berdache* caused the focus of the research to shift solely on to the sexual components surrounding the term.

Early literature on the berdache listed the qualifying characteristics possessed by the subjects, and homosexuality was the prominent factor. However, when the term *two-spirit* came into use, it replaced and took on everything that the term *berdache* stood for, including its assigned characteristic of homosexuality. Current literature suggests that the term was actually chosen by Aboriginal people to separate themselves from the previous

derogatory connotations of the European term *berdache* and to escape negative sexual perception.

Before colonization, people who became a part of the berdache did so because of a dream or vision undertaken to develop a supernatural gift. This ability was not defined by gender, and often the berdache could fill any male or female role during ceremonies. They were also often mediators between male and female spirits (Callender and Kochems, 1983; Clark, 1984; Williams, 1986; Roscoe, 1995).

After colonization, Aboriginal people who were granted this role and title feared for their lives and were often forced to live underground and to lead secret lives in order to protect themselves from possible execution by white settlers (Two-spirit People of the First Nations, 1997). Europeans imposed their male and female roles upon the Aboriginal people based on the teachings of Christianity. It is not surprising that, as a result, researchers found that the berdache seemed to vanish from many communities. In the last few decades, by means of political movements demanding social justice, Aboriginal people have commenced the long process of healing. At the same time, one specific group of Aboriginal people decided that it was no longer appropriate to hide from the reality of who they were that and they could feel comfortable again with being a *two-spirited* Aboriginal person. They recognized that embracing their lives as *two-spirit* people included embracing their history, which included the term *berdache*.

An intriguing aspect of the berdache is the spiritual component, a complex subject. It refers to a sophisticated understanding of the balance of the physical and emotional concepts surrounding life and death. People who recognize themselves as spiritual have a connection that allows them to respect and to be respected by themselves, by others, by

elements such as wind, fire, rain and properties such as earth, water, rocks and a greater being. In the literature there are, unfortunately, only clues and hints that point to this side of the berdache. In particular, researchers commented briefly on the supernatural gift that was seen as highly prestigious in some Aboriginal communities.

In order to overcome some of the negative interpretations, they selected a new title which would redefine themselves and, at the same time, shed any previous derogatory elements; the term they chose was *two-spirited*. The literature also shows that the purpose of the new term was to reclaim the spiritual side of “two-spiritedness”. Despite this, homosexuality continues to dominate the definition.

The concept of *two-spirited* recognizes people who house both the male and female spirit within themselves. These are individuals who have come to identify with this term and have taken it as their own. The concept also includes people who recognize themselves as the former berdache. Besides a recognition of the spiritual, another reason behind the establishment of the new term was to commence the healing process by taking control of their spiritual being and learning their own history. As well, an attempt was made to separate themselves from a non-Aboriginal perspective. This was the people’s choice with their voice.

The recent literature on *two-spirited* people ignores references to the spiritual aspect, and is closely related to the literature on the berdache, while the strong emphasis on homosexuality remains. However, recent literature is also more positive and there is less reference to deviant and submissive roles.

The question that arises is, do all Aboriginal people who see themselves as gay or lesbian identify as two-spirited? If yes, do they know their history and what it means to

identify as a two-spirit Aboriginal person? The previous literature on the berdache that documented sacred roles seems hidden in the term *two-spirit*. A preliminary interview with a person who defines himself as two-spirited heightened the awareness that the spiritual component had been misplaced; he is also unsure as to why homosexuality is so predominant (Interview #1, 1999). The subject of the interview does not see homosexuality as a defining characteristic, nor is he a homosexual. This is the voice of an Aboriginal Elder who has defined himself as two-spirited since he was an adolescent.

Contemporary two-spirit Aboriginal people are found in many places. This is the beauty behind the new definition of two-spirit. It is inclusive, rather than exclusive, and was brought forth by Aboriginal people themselves. The wheel is not being reinvented, just re-oiled. Inevitably, it is up to Aboriginal people themselves to determine how they identify as two-spirit. This thesis allows the Aboriginal voice to be heard in the literature with their own definitions. It demonstrates the reality that people are more complex than how they identify sexually, and that there is a spiritual component to their lives.

For years researchers have written about Aboriginal people. This thesis will act in conjunction with Aboriginal people. With the permission of Aboriginal two-spirit participants, I will ask them how they identify as two-spirited? The term is an inclusive term, which therefore allows anyone to identify as such using their own guidelines. The term leaves room for people to take from it what works for them in order to make a place for themselves. An interesting component is that historically Aboriginal spirituality has been misplaced from this term; however, it will be replaced with the aid of the voices of the present generation. Doing this, sheds a positive light on how two-spirited people think about themselves.

This thesis will also illustrate the lack of Aboriginal voices in historical literature on the berdache. The historical literature will also clearly point to the derogatory and deviant descriptions that were placed upon two-spirit Aboriginal people. Another component of this project will examine two-spirit organizations and other organizations that are affiliated with two-spirit Aboriginal people. For example, every year, a two-spirit gathering is hosted and held in North America by Aboriginal people who identify as such. These gatherings are increasingly popular and are a safe environment for two-spirit people to connect with one another on a sacred and spiritual level. This information is imperative in understanding the lives of two-spirit people today. In order to put forth a variety of definitions from the many people who choose to identify themselves as two-spirit, all the variables must be examined. The examination will include the historical identities of two-spirit Aboriginal people, the transition to the term *two-spirit* from *berdache* and the organizations that are affiliated with two-spirit Aboriginal people. Every two-spirit Aboriginal person has a story to tell; their feelings are real, how they got to the place they are in is real and, most importantly, their story is worth telling.

Chapter 2: Historical Identities Associated with the Aboriginal *Berdache*

Since the arrival of Europeans on the North American continent, the role of the two-spirit person within Aboriginal culture has been the source of much speculation, debate and intrigue among scholars. Despite an abundance of literature on the topic, few researchers have successfully captured the totality of this role. European scholars, ranging from 16th century Christian missionaries to contemporary ethnographers, have attempted to describe the definition, the history, the writings about, and the numerous historical identities associated with the Aboriginal two-spirit person. However, despite the diverse backgrounds of and the sheer number of writers/researchers, this focus has fluctuated somewhere between sexuality and spirituality. In order to gain an understanding of the many different interpretations that researchers have imposed on Aboriginal two-spirit people, it is imperative to comprehend the cultural biases in the literature, the overemphasis on sexuality, the discussion in the literature on spirituality, as well as the path undertaken to become a berdache.

In Western European culture, a same sex relationship is defined as being between two men or two women. In the Aboriginal culture, a relationship that is between a male two-spirit and a male is not viewed as a same sex relationship because the two-spirit is considered a separate gender. The two-spirit partner belongs to an alternative, or mixed gender, neither man nor woman (cf. Calender and Kochems 1983; Williams 1986a, 1986b; Lang 1990; Jacobs and Cromwell 1992; all sources in Jacobs, Thomas and Lang 1997). Therefore, a same sex relationship in many Native American cultures, at least traditionally, is not necessarily considered a same gender relationship. This can be interpreted to mean

that a relationship between a male two-spirit and a man or a female two-spirit and a woman may be seen as homosexual on the physical level but not on the level of gender¹. If you are a man and you are having a sexual relationship with a two-spirit, you are not having sex with another man, you are having sex with a two-spirit person. The same is true for a female having a sexual relationship with a two-spirit person. This means that the partners of a two-spirit are never having a same sex relationship because they are not having sex with the same gender (Terry Tafoya in Levy, Beauchemin, and Vogel in Jacobs, Thomas and Lang 1997). Choosing or deciding which sexual relationships are culturally acceptable depends on how each varying Aboriginal group defines gender and sexual behaviour.

One of the main objectives here is to thematically sort through the historical literature according to the limited information that is available. It is clear that sexuality was a focus, but the question that needs to be answered is “why?” Why was the focus not placed upon spirituality and what was involved in the spiritual side of two-spirit people? Describing and analysing the literature on the subject helps to reinforce the argument that there was an alternate focus; that spirituality was missing and that two-spirit is the ideal term for the present. Most importantly, understanding the literature gives the appropriate grounding to understand the path that was taken to come full circle back to a spiritual focus.

The majority of previous writings on two-spirit Aboriginal people, or the former *berdache*, focuses extensively on the sexual or gender aspects of the term. These writings deliberate on whether berdache are men, women, or a separate gender, with whom they

¹ For the purpose of this project gender refers to the role that someone plays and is not necessarily the European construction of the term gender, which is based on one’s physiological sex.

are having sexual relations, as well as the varying roles and dress. From Jonathon Katz (1976), an historical researcher who compiled the earliest references about Native homosexuality, to Will Roscoe (1998), who documented contemporary Aboriginal two-spirit culture, the writing on Aboriginal two-spirit people nearly always reverts to sexuality. The role of the two-spirit person, after years of such one-sided referencing, has become clouded. Inevitably, the true essence of the role is obscured by years of eurocentric, sexually-oriented analysis.

The variance in labels, definitions and terminology surrounding the concept of two-spirit Aboriginal people is a clear indication of the complexity of the issue, as well as the sexual focus. Over the past decade, Aboriginal people have identified themselves as *two-spirit*. This was a collective decision made to separate themselves from the label *berdache* that they felt was inaccurate and offensive. In effect, the term *two-spirit* is a “contested compromise to move forward the debate in eliminating culturally inappropriate terms and includes a wide variety of Native persons: cross-dressers, transvestites, lesbians, gays, transgendered or those otherwise ‘marked’ as alternatively gendered” (Jacobs & Thomas, 1993, as cited in Epple, 1998, p.274).

However, something was missing in this sexually-focussed *berdache* terminology; Aboriginal people felt they were more than sexual beings and that the spiritual component of the role had been displaced. Despite this realization, even in recent literature, the term *berdache* appears frequently. It is therefore impossible to give an historical overview of two-spirit people without examining the history of the berdache. To early writers and researchers, the sexuality of the berdache was often depicted as a foreign, deviant, or even supernatural phenomenon. Due to the variety of people putting forth definitions on a

group of people who held sacred and spiritual roles in their communities, it is very difficult to know which definition is most suitable or accurate.

The term *berdache* refers to special gender roles in Native American cultures that anthropologists have interpreted and described as ceremonial transvestism, homosexuality, and gender variance/multiple genders (Jacobs, Thomas & Lang, 1997; Lang, 1998). Epple (1998), a more recent researcher, states that the term *berdache* is a “catch all term that ethnographers use to describe males who in some way take on at least some of the garments, occupations and/or sexual partners culturally prescribed for what Anglo-Europeans might call the opposite sex” (p.269). This type of relationship was attacked and described as “sodomy” by the Europeans. It was a concept framed by European ideals, the collapse of Aboriginal religious traditions, and the reluctance or inability of contemporary Aboriginal informants to describe the position of two-spirit Aboriginal people in precolonial life (Fulton & Anderson, 1992, p. 604).

To further illustrate the variance of definitions, the following are examples of how a number of influential researchers define berdache. Jacobs, Angelino, Shedd and Whitehead define berdache as “one who behaves and dresses like a member of the opposite sex” (Goulet, 1986, p. 684). Callender and Kochems (1986) define berdache as a person, usually male, who was anatomically normal but assumed the dress, occupation and behaviour of the other sex to effect a change in gender status. Therefore, without having the appropriate sex organs, the person was able to change gender status merely by assuming the dress, occupation and behaviour of the opposite gender. It was also a movement toward a somewhat intermediate status (Callender & Kochems, 1986, p. 443). Herdt (1994) states that the berdache, as a biological and psychological destiny, would

automatically assume socially deviant roles (Goulet, 1986, p. 684). In other words, they were destined to live their lives as “deviant” homosexuals. Blackwood (1984) describes berdache as a separate gender within a multiple gender system. Roscoe (1998) suggests that the berdache occupied a third and fourth gender role. By third and fourth gender, he is referring to the possibility that there is something other than men and women. This would be the space that two-spirit people would occupy, it is for those individuals who identify as having a male and female spirit, not a combination of male and female sex organs. The idea being that because they treat both spirits as equals and are considered to be an elevated status that they are not the same as a female or male that do not treat their spirits as equal.

Just as there are many opinions on the suitable definition of the berdache, there are also a wide range of views on the role of berdache in Aboriginal society, as well as the path taken to assume that role. Early writings on the berdache were heavily influenced by the Christian world view of the European colonialists and focussed on the “deviant” aspects of the role. Unfortunately, this influence has resulted in a biased and incomplete view of the berdache.

The Bible states that men and women were put on this earth to procreate and have children. Western European ideology uses the binary system of men and women. Men are at one end of the spectrum; women are at the other. For Christian writers, the berdache, who arguably fell somewhere in the middle of that spectrum, were a source of great interest and, as a result, there is an abundance of early European documentation on the role.

In the Keres Pueblos of New Mexico, male berdaches were seen as equals, however, they talked, dressed and acted like women. Miller (1980) references White (1943), who describes boys as being manipulated and pressured to take on the needed role of berdaches in the society during the 1940's.

Hauser (1990) introduces his theme by describing the term *berdache*. He defines the term as a male Aboriginal who takes on a female role, dresses in women's clothing, performs women's work, has similar restrictions placed upon him as women, and pursues "sexual relationships with both males and females" (Hauser, 1990, p. 45). Hauser states that from the earliest recorded encounters with the Illinois, French observers described their disapproval of males who aspired to be like women and "glory in demeaning themselves to do everything that the women do" (Marquette, 1959, p.129; cf. Deliette, 1934, p.329, in Hauser, 1990, p.45). For the French, women were not considered equal to men and it was not seen as a positive trait to aspire to be like a woman or to do women's work.

Hauser (1990) uses four hypotheses to explain the berdache phenomenon among Aboriginal groups: 1) to accommodate homosexuality, 2) male berdache were unable to fulfil demanding male roles, especially that of the Warrior, 3) a religious phenomenon including a widespread pattern of transvestitism and 4) occupational prestige. This creation of theory and labels regarding the "phenomenon" of the berdache is itself an indication of narrow-mindedness, prejudice, or moral objection – an implication that there is something wrong with the berdache. If it were normal and acceptable, no one would need to develop theories, to look to accommodate homosexuality, or to fill a "weaker" role. Hauser's emphasis on sexuality allows him to establish a sense of order amongst a

non-Judeo-Christian group of Aboriginal people. For Hauser, it is important to have a sense of order and to have answers because the European world view is based largely on questions, answers and theories. Hauser probably felt safe with the semblance of order he created in a culture that he did not understand.

Hauser's article is divided into sections. One section, simply titled "Homosexuality," includes the following introductory definition of the term to which the title refers: "any description of the berdache must deal with the question of sexual orientation, insofar as this is possible, even though social standing is more important" (Hauser, 1990, p. 50). If the latter statement is true, then why is the focus on sexuality? There is much more to the status and culture of the berdache and Hauser clearly admits this. Hauser uses Walter Williams to point out that not all berdache were homosexuals (Williams, 1986, p. 93) and Pierre Deliette to emphasize that not all Illinois homosexuals were berdache (Deliette, 1934, p. 329, as cited in Hauser, 1990, p.50). Hauser also quotes LaSalle (1901), saying "they are accused of being addicted to the sin against nature, having men set apart from childhood for this detestable purpose" (LaSalle, 1901, p. 45, in Hauser, 1990, p. 50). It must be noted that Hauser does state that "it is possible that observers merely assumed that the Illinois transvestites they saw were homosexual" (Hauser, 1990, p. 50). Hauser's statement illustrates that a focus and fascination on sexuality does exist, along with a lack of Aboriginal participation in deciding the focus. As well, Hauser's statement is also an example of the dependency of chronological referencing. Finally, such literature also depicts Aboriginal people as subjects, not participants. The people were not asked for their opinions or voices.

Centuries of researchers would fall into a similar trap of trusting previous researchers by citing the errors of the generations that proceeded them. This process creates a bias in chronological referencing; If an error was made, there is a good chance it has been documented as fact by more recent researchers. In other words, alternate methods needs to be used, not just chronological referencing. An incorrect reference can lead to decades of false interpretations. This makes it extremely difficult to sort through the references. In addition, many of the terms and definitions used were externally determined, and Aboriginal people had little, if any, voice in the documentation. For example, Miller (1980) cites an earlier reference by White (1943) who obtained a reference from 1851 that showed boys being pressured to fill the role of a berdache to argue his point that these berdaches clearly occupy a separate gender status. He points out that “the berdache can be seen even more clearly as occupying a separate status, belonging to neither gender but standing somewhere between them”(Miller, 1980, p. 279). This means that individuals have a choice, or can be forced to switch their gender identity. If this concept were true, then the berdache would have had a similar choice. “This implies that there is not so much a continuum of human variation in Native America, as there is a set of cultural categories with which individuals can affiliate at will or via supernatural sanctions” (Miller, 1980, p. 279). It could be argued that the French European researchers had an agenda when visiting these groups – to purposefully paint a picture of abnormality and primitive behaviour. What better way to complete this picture than by including a discussion on sodomy, an act clearly contradicting European Christian morals?

According to Hauser (1990), a heterosexual or bisexual berdache created serious problems for his female partners. Hauser goes no further in discussing what types of problems this created, or how he knows the subject's sexual preference. This demonstrates the point that information is missing and that sexuality is the focus. Why else would Hauser mention that a heterosexual or bisexual berdache causes a problem for the female counterpart and not say why? Such literature is biased and skewed. Hauser again uses Deliette to help argue his point, stating that "the women and girls who prostitute themselves to these wretches are desolate creatures" (Liette 1702, as cited in Katz, 1976, p.10 and Deliette, 1934, p.329-330, as cited in Hauser 1990, p.51). Hauser follows this with another equally disturbing statement:

The dilemma was compounded for married partners, because a cuckolded husband might attempt the revenge characteristic of the double standard maintained by Illinois men: he might drive his wife from his home; have her scalped, murdered, or gang-raped; or cut off her ears and nose. (Hauser, 1973, p.302, as cited in Hauser, 1990, p.51)

This statement's sole purpose is to illustrate the horror that would be experienced if a woman were to look to a berdache for sexual or personal fulfilment. The literature is clearly biased to persuade people to think of Aboriginal people in a negative light. This aids the Europeans in their quest to disregard the Aboriginal people, and has no place in an objective discussion on the berdache.

Nevertheless, Hauser acknowledges the vast differences in opinion by many of the researchers regarding views on the berdache. Some researchers feel that the Aboriginal communities were ashamed of the berdache, while more recent researchers feel that reverence was the more appropriate emotion. Hauser points out that this difference in