THE ZUNI
MAN-WOMAN

ON A COLD December day in 1896, six great warrior-birds, the Sha’lako, ten feet high with beaks that snapped and eyes that rolled in their sockets, descended from the southern mesas at dusk to the outskirts of the ancient village called the Anthill at the Middle of the World. That night they would dance in the six houses newly erected to receive them—for one night, all night—diving, bobbing, careening madly to the awe and delight of the onlookers. They would bestow their blessings of increase and health, and receive in turn the prayers of the people for snow and rain in the season to come.

There was little to distinguish the Sha’lako festival of 1896 from any other observed by the Zuni Indians from time immemorial up to the present day. The Zunis and their ancestors have occupied the same location in western New Mexico for two thousand years or more—long enough to view their homeland as the middle of the world. In 1896, however, one of the families selected to host a Sha’lako god included a “noted and prominent” Zuni named We’wha (WEE’wha). An accomplished artist and craftsman, an active participant in religious and ceremonial life, We’wha had served as a cultural ambassador for the Zunis when he traveled to Washington in 1886 and shook hands with the president. Six years later, he spent a month in jail for resisting soldiers sent by that same government to interfere in his community’s affairs.

We’wha was also a bérêchê, to use the currently accepted anthropological term, or hahé in the Zuni language, a man who combined the work and social roles of both men and women, an artist and a priest who dressed, at least in part, in women’s clothes.

In 1896, We’wha had labored long and hard in preparation for the Sha’lako, carefully laying the stone floor in the large room where the bird-god would dance. Not yet fifty, he nonetheless suffered from heart disease, and, according to his white friend, anthropologist Matilda Coxe Stevenson, the effort proved too much. When the time came for the arrival of the god, We’wha could not attend. He was “listless and remained alone as much as possible.” Stevenson, who refers to We’wha using female pronouns, joined her friend of over fifteen years in his final hours.

We’wha was found crouching on the ledge by the fireplace. . . . Only a few days before, this strong-minded, generous-hearted creature had labored to make ready for the reception of her gods; now she was preparing to go to her beloved [Sacred Lake, site of “Zuni heaven”] . . .

We’wha asked the writer to come close and in a feeble voice she said, in English: “Mother, I am going to the other world. I will tell the gods of you and Captain Stevenson. I will tell

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them of Captain Carlisle, the great seed priest, and his wife, whom I love. They are my friends. Tell them good-by. Tell all my friends in Washington good-by. Tell President Cleveland, my friend, good-by. Mother, love all my people; protect them; they are your children; you are their mother...."

She leaned forward with the [prayersticks] tightly clasped, and as the setting sun lighted up the western windows, darkness and desolation entered the hearts of the mourners, for We’wha was dead.¹

Among the Zunis, the death of the berdache We’wha elicited “universal regret and distress.” Similar sentiments existed in as many as 150 American Indian tribes known to have had male and female berdache roles.² What is it that American Indians saw in these men and women who bridged genders that Western civilization has overlooked or denied?

I have focused on the Zuni berdache in order to study how this role fits into a specific cultural context, to look at all its social, economic, and religious facets as well as sexuality and gender. I cannot share here all that I’ve learned about We’wha and the Zuni philosophy of gender (I am writing a book to cover that!), but I would like to describe how I arrived at my interpretation of the Zuni berdache and why, in particular, I have abandoned the cross-gender model. In the process, I hope to explain why I refer to the Zuni berdache—or llamana—as a “traditional gay role.”

Life and Times of We’wha

By any standards, We’wha was an important member of his community. Stevenson described him as “the strongest character and the most intelligent of the Zuni tribe.” The anthropologist Elsie Clews Parsons referred to him as “the celebrated llamana.” Robert Bunker, an Indian agent at Zuni in the 1940s, wrote, “We’wha, that man of enormous strength who lived a woman’s daily life in woman’s dress, but remained a power in his pueblo’s gravest councils.”³ Today, nearly a hundred years since his death, Zunis still remember stories about We’wha.

² Born in 1849, three years after the United States seized control of the Southwest from Mexico, he lived to witness the influx of U.S. anthropologists, missionaries, Indian agents, traders, tourists, and settlers that threatened to disrupt Zuni life and overrun Zuni lands. He made important contributions to his tribe’s response to these events. He helped develop commercial markets for traditional crafts, and he forged friendships with non-Indians who became advocates for Zuni interests.

³ Traveling to Zuni on a government-sponsored expedition, James and Matilda Stevenson met We’wha in 1879. Matilda Stevenson found the berdache well-qualified as an anthropological informant. We’wha “possessed an indomitable will and an insatiable thirst for knowledge”; he was “especially versed in their ancient lore.”⁴ We’wha became a key informant for Stevenson’s exhaustive report on the Zunis, published in 1904.

⁴ Although We’wha wore female clothing, his masculine features seem obvious to us today.⁵ Stevenson described him as “the tallest
person in Zuni; certainly the strongest." Still, for many years, she believed We'wha was a woman. Other visitors were told by the Zunis themselves that We'wha was a man. "It was the comments of her own friends, Zunis," noted one traveler, "that first made me 'wise' to the situation as to her sex." When Stevenson did discover the truth, 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."  

The Zunis, however, never ignored the fact that We'wha was male. As Stevenson herself observed, the Zunis referred to Ihmamas by saying, "She is a man;" which is certainly misleading to one not familiar with Indian thought." In this usage, "she" connotes a social role, while in English "she" connotes biological sex. I use male pronouns in writing of We'wha to convey in English the same understanding a Zuni had: that We'wha was biologically male. In fact, Zuni berdaches underwent one of two male initiation rites, and they participated in the all-male societies responsible for portraying the gods, or kachinas, in sacred masked dances. In an 1881 census of the tribe, We'wha's occupations were listed as "Farmer; Weaver; Potter; Housekeeper"—the first two are traditionally men's activities, the last two women's.  

Like berdaches in many tribes, We'wha was a crafts specialist. He was known for his skill in both pottery and weaving. His early sales to collectors like Stevenson and the writer-lecturer George Wharton James prefigured a key development of the twentieth century—the emergence of commercial markets for native arts, an important source of economic independence for many Southwest Indians today. We'wha was also one of the first Zunis to earn cash. After Stevenson showed him the benefits of using soap to wash clothes, he went into business doing laundry for local whites.  

In 1886, We'wha spent six months with the Stevensons in Washington, D.C. While Indian visits to the national capital were frequent in the nineteenth century, few Indians stayed as long or maintained as high a profile as the Zuni berdache We'wha.  

According to Stevenson, We'wha "came in contact only with the highest conditions of culture, dining and receiving with some of the most distinguished women of the national capital." He met Speaker of the House John Carlisle and other dignitaries. In May, he appeared at the National Theatre in an amateur theatrical event sponsored by local society women to benefit charity. According to a newspaper account, We'wha received "deafening" applause from an audience that included senators, congressmen, diplomats and Supreme Court justices.  

In June, We'wha called on President Cleveland and presented him with a gift of his "handiwork."  

An article from a local paper illustrates the typical reaction of Washingtonians to the Zuni berdache:  

Folks who have formed poetic ideals of Indian maidens, after the pattern of Pocahontas or Minnehaha, might be disappointed in Wa-Wah on first sight. Her features, and especially her mouth, are rather large; her figure and carriage rather masculine... Wa-Wah, who speaks a little English, and whose manner is very gentle, said that it took her six days to weave the blanket she wears.  

During his stay, We'wha demonstrated weaving at the Smithsonian and helped Stevenson and other anthropologists document Zuni traditions. He continued to follow Zuni religious practices, offering corn meal daily and making prayerstick offerings (normally a male activity) for the summer solstice, an important Zuni religious occasion. Despite his easy adaptation to Washington society, however, We'wha remained unchanged. His attitude towards the white world is conveyed in a story that Edmund Wilson heard at Zuni in the 1940s: "When he returned to the pueblo, he assured his compatriots that the white women
were mostly frauds, for he had seen them, in the ladies’ rooms, taking out their false teeth and the ‘rats’ from their hair.”

One incident from We’wha’s life is especially revealing. In 1892, a young Zuni named Nick Tunaka was accused of witchcraft. Witchcraft—the anti-social use of tribal magic for revenge or personal gain—was the only real crime at Zuni. Nick came under suspicion because he had been raised by whites, spoke English, and rejected Zuni religion.

One night the Zuni governor gave Nick some whiskey. Nick got drunk and claimed to have witch-like powers. The bow priests—leaders of the warrior society—attempted to try Nick, which meant hanging him from the rafters of the old mission until he confessed. Nick called for help and was rescued by white friends who sent for soldiers from nearby Fort Wingate.

A small army detachment arrived to arrest the Zuni governor. At his doorway, however, the soldiers were met by the governor’s “younger brother”—We’wha, one of the “tallest and strongest” members of the tribe. Lina Zuni told the story of what happened next to anthropologist Ruth Bunzel:

[The soldiers] were going to take my sister’s husband.... His younger brother, although he was a man in woman’s dress, got angry. He hit the soldiers. When they were going to take his brother, although he pretended to be a woman, he hit them. He was strong. He stood, holding the door posts, and would not let them come in.”

The soldiers returned in full force—nearly two hundred men armed with guns and field artillery. The circumstances, and the potential for disaster, were similar to those at Wounded Knee, where three hundred Indians had been killed in 1890 by trigger-happy soldiers. We’wha, the governor, and the leading bow priest were arrested. We’wha spent a month in jail at Fort Wingate.” These arrests were an attack on the political and cultural independence of the Zunis. It was in this same period that the Pueblo Indian agent wrote to a school teacher at Zuni, “It is going to be quite a task to do away with their custom of the men wearing female dress, but I have made up my mind to make an effort to do so.”

The Puzzle of the Pants
We’wha’s physical resistance against U.S. soldiers was uncharacteristic of Zuni men, let alone someone who had presumably crossed genders to become a woman. In fact, as my research proceeded, it became clear that We’wha was not crossing genders, but bridging or combining the social roles of men and women.

In terms of religion, for example, We’wha had been initiated into a male kiva society and fulfilled such male religious roles as reciting prayers on ceremonial occasions and making prayersticks. At the same time, he was knowledgeable in the religious lore of women—for example, the rites and observances that surrounded pottery making.

In terms of economic roles, We’wha participated in both male and female activities. He specialized in weaving and pottery, which were male and female crafts, respectively, in most pueblos. He apparently engaged in farming, too—another male role. At the same time, he helped manage his family’s household, a woman’s role.

We’wha bridged genders in terms of kinship roles as well. The Lina Zuni used the kinship term for “younger brother” to refer to We’wha. The part he took within his household, however, was that of daughter or sister.

Finally, in terms of behavior, We’wha’s self-assurance and independence stood out from both men and women. He traveled widely in the white world at a time when few Zunis had ever left the reservation, and his resistance against the soldiers was particularly remarkable.

In short, although We’wha wore a woman’s dress, he didn’t “act the part.”
The inappropriateness of a cross-gender model is best illustrated in the rites observed by We'wha's family following his death in 1896. According to Stevenson, "After the body was bathed and rubbed with meal, a pair of white cotton trousers were drawn over the legs, the first male attire she had worn since she had adopted woman's dress years ago." The body was carried to the cemetery in front of the old Zuni Mission. According to Zuni custom, men were buried on the south side of this cemetery, women on the north. Where was We'wha buried?

When Elise Parsons asked a Zuni elder this question, he replied, "On the south side, the men's side, of course.... Is this not a man?" If We'wha had crossed genders to become a woman, as the gender-crossing model posits, why the pants, and why was he buried on the men's side? I call this problem "the dilemma of the dress" or "the puzzle of the pants."

Zuni Gender: Raw and Cooked

Answers came from my study of Zuni philosophy and two key concepts in Zuni thought: the categories of the "raw" (by'apin) and the "cooked" (a'bas). "Raw" people include animals, natural elements, and supernatural beings. They are unfixed and can change form easily. They are powerful and, for this reason, dangerous.

The Zunis extend these concepts to human beings. "Cooking" is a metaphor for individual development. Newborn infants are "raw" because they are unsocialized. Adult Zunis are "cooked" because they have learned the forms of Zuni culture and have assumed adult roles in the social and religious life of the tribe. In Western terms, the "cooked person" might be described as "civilized" or "cultured."

"Cooking" is marked by a series of initiations which occur at key points in the life cycle. In these rites, individuals are identified with symbols of an ideal natural and social order. These include gender symbols which are relatively undifferentiated at infancy, but increasingly specialized as the individual reaches adulthood. The Zunis view gender as an acquired trait, an outcome of becoming a "cooked" person.

Of course, the Zunis are aware of the biological differences between males and females. The first religious symbol bestowed on the child is a perfect ear of corn. Male infants are given a single ear of corn; females a double ear, in which two ears have grown together. The "raw" material of both is the same, however—seeds of corn. And like seed, biological sex represents only a potential—it requires nurtur-
I’m giving a slide show at Zuni!

My San Francisco Indian friends were impressed but skeptical. Many had left reservations—the “rez”—to escape homophobia and sexism. Now I was about to take my slide show on Zuni berdaches back to the rez. “You’ll love it!” one gay Indian assured me. “You’re brave!” another warned.

For the past fifteen years lesbians and gay men, Indian and non-Indian, have been recovering the history of the berdache role in North America. But the connection between the sexual definition of gay identity in Western culture and the economic definition of berdaches typical of American Indians (individuals who do the work of the other sex) is not immediately apparent. Randy Burns, cofounder of Gay American Indians, declares, “These are our traditional gay Indian ancestors.” But getting there (dressing up men and women in traditional garb) has taken inquiry, reflection, and dialogue.

In 1988, I began presenting my research on the Zuni Indians of New Mexico in a slide-lecture, “The Zuni Man-Woman: A Traditional Gay Role.” I argue that the berdache role included not only sexual but social, economic, and religious dimensions, and that this multi-dimensional model can help us redefine our more limited category of “homosexuality.” As the scope of my research grew, however, I felt the need to present my work to Zunis before I could consider my project complete. How to do this, however, eluded me until two anthropologists working with the tribe attended my slide show. They provided me with detailed advice on how to approach the tribe. “Zuni runs a little like Latin America,” I was warned, “but in its own special way.”

I began by writing to the tribal council requesting permission to present a lecture in the pueblo. I wanted to benefit from the reactions of a Zuni audience, I explained. My program would describe “key events and personalities” of the late nineteenth century: “I also have a good deal of new material on We’wha,” I added, “a weaver and potter who spent six months in Washington in 1886, and the unique role he filled in the tribe.”

The tribal council approved my request and referred the letter to the tribal archivist. By happy coincidence, I ran into her a few days later at the Museum of the American Indian in New York City. That personal connection helped the process that followed. We eventually scheduled presentations at both the tribal building and Zuni High School for November 1987.

The plane from Los Angeles to Albuquerque flew directly over Zuni. The village sprawled below us with Corn Mountain, the dramatic red and white mesa, to the south, and Twin Buttes to the north. Backtrack-
could count on their interest in Zuni culture and history. I felt I could build a bridge to We'wha by placing him in the context of traditional society. I made the idea of "continuity in change" my theme, and I identified four traditional Zuni strategies for dealing with change, tracing them from prehistory through the European period. These were: friendship (forming alliances with outsiders), adapting (accepting new products and practices but integrating them into existing categories), adopting (transforming individuals and groups into Zunis by teaching them Zuni culture), and resisting (confrontation with outsiders).

After introducing these strategies, I discussed how they were used by four Zuni leaders a hundred years ago—and here I included We'wha, placing him on the same level as governors, war leaders, diplomats, and priests. If I was wrong about Zuni acceptance of berdaches and the high regard for We'wha, I would surely find out.

That my first presentation would be at the high school certainly added to my anticipation. My worst fear was that once the students saw pictures of We'wha they would start to giggle—and not stop. Adult Indians, of course, might simply denounce me on any number of grounds.

But my fears were unrealized. We'wha provoked giggles—but in the end, as I described his trip to Washington, D.C. in 1886 the laughs were on white society, so willing to accept the six-foot tall Zuni berdache as an "Indian maiden" and "princess." The public presentation that evening was also a pleasant surprise. Despite a variety of scheduling problems, we filled the room. When the archivist showed up with a tray of cheese and jars of punch I felt at home—food is always a part of successful Indian events.

After I spoke, members of the tribal council made closing comments. "This was a very good program," one of the councilmen began, "and we thank Mr. Roscoe very much, but..." Brad and I exchanged nervous glances. "But have our children seen this history?" To that, of course, the archivist and I could reply that his children had indeed seen the program, that afternoon.

Soon after our arrival, we were befriended by a young Zuni who became an unexpected source of introductions and information. Like We'wha, he had "an insatiable thirst for knowledge." The time we spent together driving around Zuni and the outlying countryside proved constantly interesting as he drilled us in our pronunciation of Zuni words and shared endless details about Zuni customs, places, and people. He took a particular interest in the berdache kachina. He Zeroed an illustration from an old anthropological report and took it to an older relative to learn more about the figure. We left Zuni excited by our new contacts and touched by the warmth shown us.
ing and cultivation before it will yield anything of social value. In the Zuni view, biological sex may distinguish male and female infants, but it does not make them men or women—that takes social intervention, “cooking.”

Traditionally, until children receive a name at the age of five or six, they are addressed simply as “child,” without reference to gender. Boys, to achieve adulthood, undergo two initiations. The first emphasizes the symbols of agriculture and the role of men as farmers. In the second, the initiates encounter fearful warrior kachinas who represent male roles in hunting and warfare.

With this insight into the Zuni philosophy of gender, it is possible to unravel the “puzzle of the pants.”

Zuni berdaches receive the first male initiation “just like the other boys.” However, boys who manifest berdache interests do not receive the second male initiation. This means that, while they are eligible to participate in some male religious activities, berdaches were not eligible to participate in the male activities of hunting and warfare. The Zuni berdache, in Zuni terms, is an “unfinished” male—not an ersatz female.

These concepts explain the rites observed at We’wha’s burial. At birth, in his raw state, We’wha was male. In the process of becoming a cooked person, however, he specialized in the roles of women, combining these with male roles. At death, he became raw again, returning to the spirit world the way he had arrived in this one, as a biological male. Therefore, he was buried on the male side of the cemetery. He was clothed in a woman’s dress to symbolize his outward, social identity, with pants beneath the dress to symbolize his original state as a male.

We’wha was a specialist not just in women’s work but in cultural work in general. Bridging genders meant drawing from the economic, social, and religious roles of both men and women to create a unique synthesis, neither male nor female.

In the Zuni theory of individuation, males and females begin from the same raw material. Gender arises through “cooking” and it becomes the basis for other specializations—work roles, social roles, kinship, and religion. At the same time, the Zunis recognized a danger in too much division of the sexes. The differences between men and women could become mutually exclusive, their interests at odds, the basis for mutuality undermined. The supernatural counterpart of the berdache, the kachina, Ko’thamana, helps bridge this division. Ko’thamana (thamana, or berdache, plus Ko-, the prefix for “supernatural”), appears in a key episode in the Zuni origin myth. The Zunis and their gods encounter an enemy god people and a war erupts. The Zunis are farmers, while the enemy gods are hunters. The Zunis are led by male war gods, while the enemies are led by a warrior woman. At first, neither side can win. Then, the enemy gods capture three of the Zuni kachinas, including Ko’thamana, and they hold a dance to celebrate. But Ko’thamana is unruly and uncooperative. The warrior woman puts him in a woman’s dress and tells him, “You will now perhaps be less angry.”

While there are several variants of this myth, the outcome is always the same—the warring people merge, and balance is restored between hunting and farming, male and female. These events were commemorated in a ceremony held every four years. The enemy gods entered the Zuni village bearing freshly killed game. Ko’thamana was the first of the captured kachinas.

Ko’thamana’s costume symbolizes the economic and sexual themes of the myth. The mask is the same as that of the rain dancer and farmer kachina, Kok’okshi. But Ko’thamana also carries the warrior’s bow and arrow. Normally, these symbols would never be combined, since the violence of warfare and hunting is inimical to agriculture. Ko’thamana

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The Problem of Terms

Harriet Whitehead has argued that the cross-gender features of berdache roles were society’s way of constraining individuals to one or another role, by re-integrating variance into gender norms with the requirement that male berdaches pretend they are female. In this way, society prevents a potential opportunism—individuals who seek both male and female sources of prestige and power.24

The Zunis did indeed expect berdaches to contribute to the community—as all individuals were expected to do—but their contribution actually derived from their variance. They were valued precisely because they contributed something neither men nor women offered. Their variance was not ignored or disguised by the social fiction of gender crossing. The Zunis always acknowledged the biological gender of berdaches. At the same time, they looked for the positive potentials of berdache variance and encouraged berdaches to apply these potentials for the good of all.

We might conceptualize berdache status as a distinct gender. If we do so, we should talk of four genders, not three, since the many tribes with both male and female berdaches used distinct terminology for the two cases—a point that anthropologist Evelyn Blackwood stresses.25

Why do I refer to the berdache as “a traditional gay role”?

Discussing alternative gender roles in the English language is difficult. The question is, what English words best describe Indian berdaches? The earliest European accounts called them sodomites or hermaphrodites. But these terms already force us to choose between sexuality and gender. In fact, in the twentieth century this same dichotomy has been perpetuated by the choice between homosexual and transvestite or transsexual.

The meaning of transvestite has been smudged by anthropologists. This term was coined in 1910 by the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld to refer to men with an erotic desire to wear female clothing—an act usually performed in private by men who, in daily life, fulfilled normal roles. This is still the meaning of the term today as it is used by those who call themselves transvestites. Given this definition, we can see that We’wha’s perforatory cross-dressing does not qualify.

Was We’wha a transsexual? This is an even newer category, introduced in 1948 to refer to individuals who wish to change gender permanently. But if this were the motivation in We’wha’s case, why didn’t she attempt to act and look more feminine? As I’ve shown, We’wha’s behavior was not typical of Zuni women.

Finally, there is homosexual. We do know that some Zuni berdaches married non-berdache men and that others enjoyed more casual relationships with men. In Kinsey’s terms, this qualifies as homosexual behavior. Such contact was not pseudo-heterosexual, in the sense that berdaches were substitute women, because, as I’ve shown, the Zunis did not deny the biological gender of berdaches. The problem with homosexual lies elsewhere. In American Indian societies, berdaches were viewed in terms of their religious, economic, kinship, and social—not just sexual—roles. There are simply no Zuni equivalents for our single-dimensional categories of homosexual and heterosexual.

In short, we need a term which connotes more than sexuality and, for that matter, more
than gender variance—a term that refers to a multi-dimensional social role, not just a single dimensional trait. I believe gay is the closest equivalent in English. Even so, the berdache category was broader than any of our categories. Some of the individuals who once filled this role might today identify themselves as transsexuals, bisexuals, or transvestites—as well as homosexuals. However, even if the Zunis had had such a thing as transsexual surgery, they still would have had a berdache role, because the social, economic, and religious contributions of berdaches were unique, different from those of either men or women.

A second reason for my use of gay is the evidence I’ve found of continuity between traditional berdache roles and contemporary gay American Indians. By the mid-twentieth century, Zuni boys considered “berdache material” no longer adopted women’s dress. According to John Adair, they often moved to Gallup and did “women’s work” in the white world—cooking, cleaning, laundry, child care, etc. At this juncture, Indian men who might have become berdaches begin to look and act like gay men in today’s terms.

But the most interesting evidence regarding this transition is the testimony of Zunis themselves. While at Zuni recently, I was told that as the berdache role has changed, so has the Zuni word for berdaches. Instead of lha-mana, people now say lhalha, and the word is used to mean “homosexual.” Zunis discuss the subject among themselves all the time, I was told, but talking about it with Anglos is considered “dirty” or “pornographic”—i.e., sexual.

A final reason that I refer to berdache status as a “gay role” is the result of my conversations and dialogues over the past four years with gay and lesbian American Indians. I found that some knew about the berdache as a living tribal tradition, while others have learned about the role the same way I have—through research. But all affirmed a continuity between the berdache tradition and their own lives as gay Indians today. They never used the terms transvestite or berdache, and they disliked homosexual because of its narrow focus. All preferred gay.

For example, I asked Beth Brant, a Mohawk, “What does the berdache have to do with gay roles today?” She said, “It has everything to do with who we are now. As gay Indians, we feel that connection with our ancestors.” Randy Burns, a Northern Paiute and cofounder of Gay American Indians, told me, “We are living in the spirit of our traditional gay Indian people. The gay Indian person is probably more traditional and spiritual and more creative than his or her straight counterpart because that was the traditional role we played.”

Berdaches were not branded as threats to gender ideology; they were viewed as an affirmation of humanity’s original, pre-gendered unity—a representation of collective solidarity that overcomes the division of male and female.
All affirmed a continuity between the berdache tradition and their own lives as gay Indians today. They never used the terms transvestite or berdache, and they disliked homosexual because of its narrow focus. All preferred gay.

Drawing from the wisdom of her Navajo background as well as a contemporary feminist perspective, Erna Pahe best explains the special contribution of the gay role—and her comments provide a fitting closing to this discussion:

In our culture, in our little gay world, anybody can do anything. I mean, you find some very good mothers that are men. And you find very good fathers that are women. We can sympathize, we can really feel how the other sex feels. More so than the straight community. The straight community is so worried about staying within their little box and making sure that I look like a female when I'm out there, or that I really play the role of the male image.

I think that society is ready for that kind of atmosphere where we don't have to compete against each other over sexual orientation, or we don't have to feel like the men play a bigger role in society than women do. I think it's time for that neutrality, where people can understand just how to be people....

There's a lot of caring in gay people that is towards all lifestyles, from children, all the way up to grandparents. Society is getting used to it now because of this sensitivity. I think it might wear off after a while—we'll get everybody thinking like us. Even dealing in politics, we're a lot more aware of everything....We are special, because we're able to deal with all of life in general. It's very special.

As Paula Gunn Allen points out, in seeking political and cultural recognition today lesbians and gay men are only restoring to America the gayness it once had. ▼

References

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Harry Hay first drew my attention to the berdache in 1932, when he shared with me his extensive research and notes compiled thirty years earlier. In 1983, he arranged a trip to New Mexico, to explore its pueblos, ruins, villages, and people, inaugurating my love affair with that fascinating and beautiful land. Bradley Rose has also shared this odyssey and knows its joys and frustrations. Paula Gunn Allen, Clifford Barnett, Evelyn Blackwood, Randy Burns, John Burnside, John DeCoco, Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Erna Pahe, David Thomas, and Mark Thompson all deserve thanks. I cannot name them here, but I would also like to acknowledge the individuals and groups throughout the country that have sponsored my slide-lecture and shared their homes and hearts with me. I have benefited as well from my work with Gay American Indians of San Francisco. In 1987 I received a fellowship from the Van Waveren Foundation, and this made it possible for me to present my work at Zuni and begin writing a book. Finally, thanks are due to the tribal council and the people of Zuni.


4 Stevenson, "The Zushi Indians." 27, 311.

5 One of the common misconceptions regarding berdaches is that they always or completely cross-dressed. A closer look at the evidence from many tribes reveals that berdaches often combined male and female clothing, or dressed in a unique (neither male nor female) manner.

6 Stevenson, "The Zushi Indians" 310.

7 George Wharton James, New Mexico: The Land of the Delight Makers (Boston: The Page Co., 1920), 63-64.
Zuni pueblo, circa 1895.

8 Stevenson, "The Zuti Indians" 310. In fact, Stevenson used both male and female terms in referring to beryades.
9 Stevenson, "The Zuti Indians" 37.
10 Frank H. Cushing, "Nominal and Numerical Census of the Genes of the Ashiwit or Zuni Indian," ms. 3915, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Weaving was a men's activity among most Pueblo Indians, although less strictly so at Zuni.
11 Stevenson, "The Zuti Indians" 130.
13 Stevenson to Daniel S. Lamont, 18 June 1886, Grover Cleveland Papers, Library of Congress.
14 Evening Star (Washington), 12 June 1886.
17 I have researched these events in Pueblo Agency Records, RG 75, National Archives, Denver and Records of the United States Army Continental Commands, RG 393, National Archives, Washington.
18 Robertson to DeSete, 19 August 1892, Pueblo Agency Records.
19 Stevenson, "The Zuti Indians" 312-13.
21 Parsons, "The Zuti La'mana," 527.
22 Stevenson, "The Zuti Indians" 37.
23 This ceremony lapsed when the caretaker of key songs and predators died without an apprentice.
28 Ibid., 75.