

Spiritual Essence: An Ode to the 'Two-Spirited' Native American Berdache

Now that the jack-o-lanterns, ersatz witches, skeletons and other Halloween decorations have been put away for another year, many of us are busy putting up decorative turkeys, Pilgrim hats and the occasional Native American chiefs' bonnets in preparation for Thanksgiving – and the mad commercial countdown to Christmas that follows.

While not everyone realizes it, Thanksgiving is our only national holiday that has Native roots. What has become known as the "First Thanksgiving" was, in fact, the Algonquins' annual celebration of the harvest, which they shared with the recently arrived European Pilgrims.

It is perhaps fitting, therefore, that the month of November in which we celebrate Thanksgiving is designated Native American Heritage Month.

Native harvest festivals to this day are about giving thanks to the Great Spirit, not only for the bounty of the harvest, but also for the ties that bind us all as a people, as we head into

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gious high priests, shamans, counselors and medicine men. They also did not live the way the Europeans expected males to live. To the contrary, they lived in a manner diametrically opposite.

These individuals, whom the French dubbed *berdaches*, often lived day-to-day the way most Native women lived – even dressing as women.

The Europeans also found that many berdaches lived as one of the multiple wives of Native hunters and warriors. Some warriors took more favorably to their berdache wives than to their female wives.

Indeed, the very word *berdache* is derived from the Persian word, *bardaj*, a derogato-

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the cold months of winter.

For centuries before the arrival of the Europeans, the festivals were often led by a person highly respected by the people of the tribe, a person said to be "two-spirited" – that is, having the spirit of both male and female.

These individuals – all of them biologically male – were known by many names. Among the Lakota, for example, they were known as the *winktes*. Among the Navaho, the *nadles*. Among the Cheyenne, the *hey-oehkaks*.

They were healers, reli-

ry term for a passive homosexual man or a feminine young boy.

In many Native tribes, young boys who either rejected traditional masculine pursuits or displayed distinctly feminine traits were recognized as being spiritually destined to follow a "third path" and were subsequently groomed into becoming berdaches.

This was too much for the virulently homophobic Europeans – especially the fiercely Roman Catholic Spaniards – to take, and as the European conquest of the Americas progressed in the 18th and 19th centuries, the

conquerors systematically and ruthlessly sought to eradicate all traces of the berdache from Native culture.

Yet the berdache still lives – if not in body, then certainly in spirit. Two spirits, actually. I should know, for I am a "two-spirit."

I am of mixed Creole, Cherokee and Chickasaw descent. When I was a little boy all of six years old in 1959, I played more with my sister's toys than with my own. I loved to "play house" – that is, pretend to be a housewife – playing with my sister's toy kitchen.

In fact, my mother even took a photograph of me dressed in drag! I wore a sarong, lipstick and rouge. I was impersonating my mom (even wearing her high-heeled pumps), but my mom thought I was impersonating Carmen Miranda, the great Latin American songstress of the 1950s.

I guess you could say that I was a six-year-old drag princess, since I was too young to be a drag queen. I wish I still had that photo, but we lost everything we owned in a 1980 fire.

My mother, God bless her soul, never once thought that what I was doing was "morally wrong," in spite of the fact that we were all Catholics – though Father Phillip Manion, our parish priest, would have freaked out had he seen me as Carmen.

My mom passed away in 1972, six years before I finally came out of the closet. For years, I've regretted not having the courage to come out before she died. But I suspect that she knew all along that I would grow up a "two-spirit." She's certainly known it in the 20 years since she crossed over to the Other Side.

And now that I'm approaching my 50th birthday – I'll hit the half-century mark next April – I'm seriously considering wearing my berdache outfit in public for the first time at next summer's Shelburne Museum Intertribal Pow Wow. Up to now, I've worn it only at Radical Faerie gatherings.

As I grow older, I'm finding myself more and more deeply drawn into fulfilling the spiritual and ceremonial roles of the berdache, and thus coming out publicly as a modern-day berdache to my Native community is a major event that I'm looking forward to. ▼

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