Homework 2: Berdache Tradition & The Third Gender

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What is a gender? The answer to that question and many more regarding this subject will be answered in the following essay. The truth shall be thoroughly supplied with the collaborative knowledge of the videos “Third Gender” and “Two Spirit People” as well as the texts of “Berdache Tradition” by Walter L. Williams and “The Blessed Curse” by R.K. Williamson.

To reiterate the previous question, what is a gender? To understand that we must differentiate it from sex. Sex is the biological identification of an individual. For example, if you were born with a penis, you’re a male and if you were born with a vagina, you’re a woman. Gender, however, is different from that, being what a person personally identifies as. The “Third Gender” video states as much. The video also states that there is, as the title implies, a third gender instead of just male and female. This third gender is apparently everything in between male and female. A few examples include: hermaphrodites that are born with both sets of genitals, transgender people who identify as the opposite gender, and transsexual people who identify as the opposite sex. How genders are approached in societies shall be continued upon next.

Gender identification is evidently not as black and white as many western people would believe. This is shown by how it is treated by the Chinese, Native Americans, and Indians. The Eunuchs of Imperial China were people that would serve as the link between men and women as well as be the advisors to the Emperor. They were castrated as a means of preventing any sort of thoughts to overthrow the empire. Native Americans had many interpretations on gender, many of them being quite flexible. The Navajos of Native American origin tell a story about how there were the First Man and Woman, created equally. They did not like the first worlds they lived in and moved on to the third. There they found two twins, the Turquoise Boy and the White Shell Girl. These were the first berdaches or “two spirits.” Berdaches are found in multiple Native American lores, often held in a positive light and in high regard. If one were to continue listening to the story of the Navajos, one could see as much because the inventiveness of the Turquoise Boy and White Shell Girl is what allowed the First Man and Woman to travel to the fifth world aka this world. The Native American culture is shown to be far more respectful of the more diverse genders. This is opposed to the more Anglo-American religions and cultures that believed things like being a hermaphrodite to be demons as shown in “The Blessed Curse” story. From this essay’s understanding of “The Berdache Tradition,” a berdache can be a female with masculine tendencies but is more often a male with female tendencies. There are many means of testing whether or not someone is a berdache. Each tribe has its own method. Two examples would be the basket and bowl ceremony, in which a child is made to pick between a basket and bowl and his status as berdache is determined by the basket choice, and the dance ceremony, in which a child is surrounded by people and forced to listen to the music of his people and must decide whether or not to dance like a woman. The purpose of this classification system is, assumedly, to supply those that don’t feel comfortable in their gender roles a place in society without alienating them. Most Americans are unaware of this classification system because the world of Native Americans is much more free than their own. The languages we speak are all about cause and effect while the Native language is into simply stating things as they are. A nice metaphor for the western understanding of the Natives’ gender classification system. As for awareness of the third gender, it seems that the Native Americans were far more of the third gender before us westerners. Lastly, there was the Indian culture which has the Hijras who were people who were either hermaphrodites or men who were transsexual. They were viewed with more mystic power because Allah did not bless them with the ability to birth so they were instead blessed with a special place in society. They were also used as intermediaries between women and men and had places in the court. With all of these points of culture being made, it is clear that the binary concept of gender is not universal. It is, in fact, something that even people as strict as the Imperial Chinese can break past. Only in a select few cultures does binary gender seem to be the status quo and one of those cultures used to be western civilization.

Association with a certain gender is a key part in the development of one’s personal identity. This is especially proven in the text “The Blessed Curse” in which the writer, R.K. Williamson, is having constant trouble determining who they really are. The cause of this situation was actually their born status as a hermaphrodite. With the writer’s Christian family, they were constantly rebuked and taken to churches to get the “demon of mixed sex” out of them. With these events and treatments in mind, Williamson had a sense of being made wrong by God as some sort of punishment. However, on alternate occasions their grandmother would speak words of praise of their status, saying that they were truly blessed to have been granted this. Eventually, this got through to Williamson and made them see the true beauty in not only all of nature, but all of themselves as well.