

WHO WERE THE PLAINS INDIAN BERDACHES?

by

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Abstract

The standard anthropological view of berdaches is that they were men who took up their society's version of the woman's role by choice -- male homosexuals who adopted women's dress and women's work without any loss of respect from their respective communities. There is very little in the ethnohistoric and ethnological literature to support this point of view, however. The scattered and varied references to berdaches among the Plains Indians reflect a more complex situation. Berdaches may not always have been homosexuals, sometimes did not wear women's clothing, performed roles that were not identical to women's roles, and, in at least some tribes, appear to have inherited their status.

It is probably misleading to assess Plains Indian berdaches in terms of the sex role and sexual identity variations recognized in our own society. The ideas and models implied by the terms homosexual, transvestite, and transsexual are not easily applied cross culturally. The processes of acquisition of sexual identity in Plains Indian societies were probably different enough from those in our own society (which are still poorly understood) to render analysis of them unrewarding at this time.

Introduction

Plains Indian tribes, like the other natives of North America, included in their number a few men who occupied a special status to which the term berdache has been applied. The roles and values associated with this status varied somewhat from tribe to tribe. Unlike other statuses, however, which anthropologists have eventually come to analyze in terms of the social systems in which they exist, the berdache is still interpreted primarily in terms of models taken from the context of modern western culture. It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that these models are not useful for interpreting berdaches and to clear up some misconceptions which have arisen from their use.

The standard anthropological view of berdaches is that they were male homosexuals who adopt women's dress and women's roles without the risk of censure by their respective societies. Aversion to the standard male role, homosexual tendencies, and parental behavior have been suggested as reasons why some Indian men became berdaches. In his cross-cultural survey of North American Cultures, for instance, Driver describes berdaches as follows:

Some men, however, had such a strong aversion to this ultra-masculine role that they would have been complete failures in the society if there had not been an escape for them. They donned the clothing of women, did women's work, and sometimes lived homosexually with another man. As Berdaches they were accepted by their societies, and were even allowed, like women, to carry scalps in the victory dance on the

return of a successful war party.

Driver 1961: 535

Ford and Beach provide a similar picture in their survey of sexual behavior:

The most common form of institutionalized homosexuality is that of the berdache or transvetite. The berdache is a male who dresses like a women, performs women's tasks, and adopts some aspects of the feminine role in sexual behavior with male partners. Less frequently, a women dresses like a man and seeks to adopt the male sex role.

Ford and Beach 1951: 130

When we turn to the ethnohistoric and ethnological literature on which this view is supposed to be based, however, the evidence for these conclusions is not altogether obvious. What is apparent is that anthropologists have taken concepts of male homosexuality and transvestism from their own culture and applied them uncritically to berdaches.

The term berdache (or bardache) is derived from the Persian bardah, a slave, through Arabic to the Italian bardascia or bardassi, French bardache, and Spanish bardaja or berdaje, with the meaning of slave boy. It may have entered English either from French or Spanish or possibly both. Webster's New International Dictionary has the Spanish berdaje as the source for the English usage, but the earliest appearance of the term as applied to Native Americans, in 1548, was in the portion of the New World controlled by the French (Thwaites 1959:LIX: 309-310). The Old World term was applied to a New World practice, the exact content of which was seldom made

clear, probably because of its abhorrent nature (from the point of view of the Europeans). Berdaches have been called eunuchs, hermaphrodites, male prostitutes, transvestites, and male homosexuals. Some of these attributions are grossly incorrect while others are more subtly misleading. The problem arising with respect to the use of each will be discussed in turn.

Eunuchs

Native American berdaches were apparently first recorded by Cabeza da Vaca, a Spaniard stranded on the coast of Texas in late 1520's.

In the time I was among these people, I witnessed a diabolical practice; a man living with a eunuch. Eunuchs go partly dressed, like women, and perform women's duties, but use the bow and arrow and carry very heavy loads. We saw many thus mutilated. They are more muscular and taller than other men and can lift tremendous weight.

Cabeza da Vaca 1961: 100

Since da Vaca describes the berdaches as going partly clothed (i.e., wearing skirts), there is no reason to take the term eunuch literally. In another passage, da Vaca refers to "sins against nature," a phrase which is usually a euphemism for male homosexuality. It is likely that this is another reference to his "eunuchs."

The only other mention of eunuchs in native North America of which I am aware (Kurz 1937: 182) also appears to be a

reference to berdaches, which are identified by the terms berdache and hermaphrodite elsewhere in the same work. (Ibid: 211).

Hermaphrodites

A much more common usage was to refer to berdaches as hermaphrodites (Clark 1884: 210, Simms 1903, Wied 1906: 283, Kurz 1937: 211, Dorsey 1906: 139-140). This practice appears to derive from the Plains Indian sign language, in which the sign for berdache was identical to the sign for an hermaphrodite animal.

Hermaphrodite. Conception: Half male, half female. Make sign for Male, then hold lower edge of right hand against breast, fingers extended and touching, back of hand nearly to left; move the hand to right, then make sign for Female, and holding hand as above, move it to left.

The Crow tribe of Indians seem to have had several well-authenticated cases of hermaphrodism.

Clark 1884: 210

The identity of the gestures for hermaphrodite animal and berdache in the sign language does not necessarily mean that any relationship between hermaphrodite animals and human berdaches was recognized by the Plains Indians. Rather, the gesture sign was simply a conventional gloss for the various terms in the many Plains Indian languages. The Crow term, bate (Lowie 1912: 226), the Cheyenne hee'maneh (Grinnell 1923 II: 39), and the Osage mixu'ga (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911: 132) are obviously not cognates, and the Omaha term means "instructed by the moon"

referring to the vision of the moon goddess which validates a man's identity as a berdache. Denig, who spent many years as a trader on the Upper Missouri and who was conversant with the Indian cultures of that area clearly states that berdaches were not hermaphrodites in the biological sense even though he too uses the term: "This does not proceed from any natural deformity, but from the habits of the child" (Denig 1961: 187).

Male Prostitutes

In addition to the references to berdaches as eunuchs and hermaphrodites, there is at least one definition of berdaches which describes them as male prostitutes (Webster's New International Dictionary, 2nd edition), an allegation for which there is no documentation in Plains Indian literature or, as far as I can determine, in any of the literature on Native American cultures.

Transvestites

Modern descriptions of berdaches tend to refer to them either as transvestites or as male homosexuals or both. These concepts, taken from the context of modern western civilization and applied to Plains Indian societies, are almost as misleading as the earlier references to eunuchs and hermaphrodites. This is not to say that some berdaches did not participate in homosexual behavior or did not wear women's clothing but that the referents to our terms homosexual and transvestite, whether used as folk concepts or scientific terms.

There is no doubt that most Plains Indian berdaches wore women's clothing (Cabeza da Vaca 1961: 100, Fletcher and La Flesche 1911: 132-133, Denig 1961: 187, Mallery 1894: 142, De Smet 1905: 1017, Simms 1903: 580-581, Wied 1906: 283). Even so, not all berdaches were thus attired: Cheyenne berdaches occasionally wore women's dress, but they were usually in the attire of old men (Grinnell 1923 II: 39). More important are the psychological factors assumed to underlie the behavior of transvestites. A typical textbook of psychosexual disorders lists five types of transvestism classified according to the "basic force causing the perversion" (Allen 1962: 243-252). They are: 1) heterosexual, 2) homosexual, 3) narcissistic, 4) asexual, and 5) bisexual. In addition, the author discusses fetishism and exhibitionism as other possible roots to transvestite behavior. The question here is which of these factors, if any, apply to the fact that Plains Indian berdaches usually wore women's clothing. I suggest that if we cannot answer this question the designation of berdaches as transvestites is inappropriate since the etiology and connotations of the behavior may be entirely different from those of transvestites in our own society.

Homosexuals

Similar problems apply to the designation of berdaches as homosexuals. It is important to distinguish between our folk concept of homosexuality as a life-long character trait and the more recent scientific approach which allows discussion

of homosexual behavior and homosexual fantasies but which avoids labeling persons as either homosexual or not except in discussion of those individuals whose self image has come to incorporate elements of the folk concept (Pomeroy 1969: 3).

The etiology of homosexual behavior in our own society is the subject of much debate, the content of which need not be discussed here. One line of reasoning about the development of psychosexual identity which may prove applicable to some Plains Indian berdaches, however, is that developed by John Money (cf Money 1965 for a brief discussion). Money sees the acquisition of psychosexual identity in humans as essentially similar to imprinting in animals. Case studies of hermaphrodites have shown that an infant's sex can be reassigned without noticeable ill effect on its later development of the reassignment is made prior to 18 months of age (Ibid: 12-13). These data suggest that at least some cases of abnormal gender identities originate in infancy. Abnormal patterns of sexual identity established at this time may not become evident until puberty, however.

Puberty is also the time at which prior errors and defects of psychosexual differentiation announce themselves in full.... Whether or not psychosexual pathologies may be induced at puberty is arguable, but it is true that a great many of them have a long "psychoembryonic" period before puberty.

Money 1965: 14

The pattern Money describes finds a good fit in Crow theory and practice. According to Denig (1961: 187), the

Crow officially recognized the status of individuals as berdaches when they reached puberty. The preference for the roles and trappings of femininity was exhibited prior to puberty, however, and was thought by the Crow to be a natural and uncontrollable tendency. The berdache-to-be developed this disposition in the face of parental disapproval and contrary to an educational system which emphasized making "men out of boys and wives out of girls" (Kurz 1937: 179).

There were other roads to becoming a berdache which did not fit this pattern, however. In some tribes men appeared to have become berdaches through inheritance of a socially recognized and respected ceremonial status. This will be discussed below. It is interesting to note here, however, that in at least one tribe with this method of recruitment of berdaches, boys were not initiated into that status at puberty but in their late teens (Bowers 1965: 166).

Still another way to become a berdache was to enter this status by choice as an adult. This pattern occurred among the Osage for whom La Flesche and Tixier recorded a number of cases of warriors electing to become berdaches (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911: 133, Tixier 1940: 234). The men in these stories were successful warriors, making any supposition that they were reacting to failure in the male role unlikely (cf. Driver 1961: 535). It is possible that they fit into another pattern described by Money.

The human brain maintains its adult pattern of psychosexual differentiation relatively

stable and constant, for the most part, though as some people gain in age and experience, there may be a lifting of restraints against behavior they once tabooed.

Money 1965: 19

That the Osage warriors who became berdaches may have earlier suppressed a deviant gender identity seem quite possible, since, as we shall see below, the attitudes toward berdaches in Osage society appear to have been quite negative.

It must be emphasized before moving on to a discussion of the sexual behavior of berdaches that the suggestions made here about the psychosexual development of berdaches are tentative in the extreme. We know little enough about the development of deviant gender identities in our own cultural milieu, and the lack of a theoretical base is compounded by the lack of sufficient data for almost all Native American societies.

Turning to the actual sexual behavior of berdaches, we find that much of the evidence in the early literature consists of euphemistic references -- "sins against nature" (Cabeza da Vaca 1961: 79), "gross actions" (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911: 132), "unnatural practices" (Wied 1906: 282) -- but there are a few direct descriptions as well. From the early sources, we have David Thompson's statement that the Hidatsa "are much given to unnatural lusts and often prefer a young man to a woman. They have many berdaches amongst them who make it their business to satisfy such beastly passions" (Coues 1897: 348). Among the later studies, the best direct reference to homosexual

behavior by Plains Indian berdaches is Ford and Beach's description of Crow berdaches.

Sodomy apparently is absent among the Crow Indians, although oral-gential contacts are fairly frequent. A few Crow men adopt women's dress and mannerisms and live alone. Adolescent boys and occasionally men visit these bate, as they are called. The bate stimulates the boys genitals orally. One informant stated that there were such men in his community and that seventeen of his adolescent friends visited them occasionally.

Ford and Beach 1951: 133

An excellent reference to berdache homosexuality, but one which falls outside the area under consideration here, is Devereaux's (1937) description of Mohave berdaches.

In contrast to these statements are a number of indications that some berdaches did not engage in homosexual behavior. It may be significant, for instance, that Ford and Beach recorded intercourse per anum among only two of the fourteen North American Indian tribes in their sample which had berdaches. Fletcher and La Flesche wrote that Omaha berdaches "sometimes become subject to gross actions" (emphasis added), and they mention an Osage berdache who married a woman and had children (Ibid: 133). Denig (1961: 187-188) also describes a Crow berdache married to a woman: "One of these has been married and presents the anomaly of husband and wife in the same dress attending to the same domestic duties." Hoebel goes so far as to imply that Cheyenne berdaches tended to be asexual rather than homosexual:

These people, through sexual sublimation-- with their self-abstinence and denial of their natural born sex -- seem to achieve great power. Although we have no direct evidence for it, it appears probable that their presence on war parties is desired mainly because of their high "psychological" potential for stored up virility -- which is just what the Cheyenne feel is necessary for successful fighting.

Hoebel 1960: 77

The fact that Cheyenne berdaches usually wore the type of clothing appropriate for old men rather than women's clothing (Grinnell 1923 II: 39) may be a symbol of their non-sexual rather than homosexual nature.

Many berdaches appear to have married other men, but this arrangement may often have been more economic than sexual. Hoebel, for instance, specifies that Cheyenne berdaches "often serve as second wives in a married man's household" (Hoebel 1960: 77), and Tixier observed an Osage berdache living as second wife to an Osage chief (Tixier 1940: 234). The Hidatsa told Bowers that some berdaches lived as co-wives in extended households while others married "older men, generally without children and having trouble keeping their wives" (Bowers 1965: 167). On the other hand, Bowers informants also made it clear that a berdache was a significant economic asset to a household:

According to tradition, these were well-to-do households. The "man-woman" worked in the garden, did bead work, and butchered as did the women. Being stronger and more active than the women, the berdache could do many things more efficiently and was never burdened down with childbearing.

Accounts we have of the berdaches tell of industrious individuals working harder than the women of the village and exceeding the women in many common activities. Informants felt that separate households established around the berdache were very often better fixed than those where the men carried on active military duties.

Bowers 1965: 167

The weight of the evidence seem to indicate that berdaches were not preferred for first wives in spite of the economic advantages they could confer on a household. This has implications for the interpretation of the behavior of the men who married berdaches: we can assume that most of them were not preferential homosexuals.

Prevalence of Berdaches

Estimates of the numbers of berdaches among Plains tribes fall into two categories. There are vague references to many berdaches and there are specific counts which tend to be quite low. On the one hand are such phrases as "we saw many thus mutilated" (Cabeza da Vaca 1961: 100), "they have many berdaches or hermaphrodites among them" (Wied 1906: 283), "many berdaches" (Coues 1897: 348), and "hermaphrodites are frequent" (Kurz 1937: 211). On the other hand are the actual counts of the number of berdaches observed among the various tribes. According to Denig (1961: 187), writing in the mid-19th century, "there used to be some five or six of these hermaphrodites among the Crows, 'tho at the present time there are but two or three." At the turn of the century,

Simms (1903) found three berdaches among the Crow, and by 1912 Lowie reported only one. Similarly, Grinnell (1923 II: 39) named five Cheyenne berdaches alive at the beginning of the 19th century, a figure which he says was reduced to two by the latter half of the century. Again, although Maximillian reported many berdaches for the Crow whom he met only as visitors to a trading post, he reported "only one such among the Mandans, and only two or three among the Minitarries" whose villages he visited (Wied 1906: 283). A similar count may be inferred from the fact that La Flesche's informant provided him with tales of three Osage berdaches in 1898 (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911: 132-133).

The only specific reference to more than a handful of berdaches among any Plains tribe is the following description of the Hidatsa:

At the time this study was made, informants could remember two such people in the generation above them, but they had heard that in former times there were as many as 15 to 25 berdaches in their villages.

Bowers 1965: 167

This statement is in stark contrast to Maximillain's count of "two or three" made a century earlier.

I am inclined to accept the actual counts rather than the vague references to "many" berdaches among the Plains Indians. There small numbers, compared with tribal populations that numbered in the thousands (cf Lewis and Clark 1905: 81-113 for estimates made at the beginning of the 19th century) indicate

that berdaches comprised less than one percent of the adult male population of the tribes considered here.

The Status of Berdache

If we view berdaches as people who occupied a particular status rather than individuals who shared certain deviant behavior patterns, some references to Plains Indian berdaches are clarified. A status is associated with specific roles, modes of recruitment, and ranking relative to other statuses. These facets of a status can be expected to vary from culture to culture, and this seems to be the case among the Plains tribes.

There were at least two patterns of recruitment of berdaches on the Plains. In some tribes, the status appears to have been inherited, while in others it was open to all who had what was considered either a natural proclivity for it or a supernatural claim to it. The clearest description of the inheritance of the status is provided by Bowers in his study of the Hidatsa:

The berdache was a brother or the son of a man holding tribal ceremonial rights in the Woman Above and Holy Woman bundles. There are no known instances of exceptions to this rule, and the Hidatsa believed that only those persons standing in these relationships to those bundles ever assumed the woman's role. The berdache commonly adopted orphans from the village or secured young daughters and sons through the capture of prisoners by their relatives, transmitting their property and their ceremonial knowledge to their younger adopted children.

Bowers 1965: 167

The Cheyenne, who had close ties to the Hidatsa in the protohistoric period, also appear to have recruited berdaches through inheritance. At any rate, all of the recorded Cheyenne berdaches belonged to the Bare Legs band, one of ten such groups that made up the Cheyenne tribe. Since Grinnell records the presence of seven berdaches among the Cheyenne during the 19th century, the likelihood that all seven occurred in the one band by chance is quite low. To conclude that this distribution was determined by some sort of inheritance seems quite reasonable.

In other tribes, there is no hint of inheritance of the status of berdache. Among the Crow, for instance, the people who became berdaches gave early indications of a preference for female pursuits, a predeliction which was formally recognized at puberty when they became berdaches.

This does not proceed from any natural deformity but from the habits of the child. Occasionally, a male child, when arrived at the age of 10 or 12 years or less, cannot be brought to join in any of the work or play of the boys, but on the contrary associates entirely with the girls...

Children of different sexes seldom associate either in their work or play, 'tho as has been observed, instances do occur in which a boy acquires all the habits of a girl, notwithstanding every effort on the part of his parents to prevent it. The disposition appears to be natural and cannot be controlled. When arrived at the age of 12 or 14, and his habits are formed, the parents clothe him in a girl's dress and his whole life is devoted to the labors assigned to the females.

Denig 1961: 187

There is no hint in this passage of any formal inheritance of the status, nor is there any indication of supernatural

sanction approving access to the status. For many Plains tribes, on the other hand, we have records of visions of supernatural beings which require that the individual become a berdache (Dorsey 1906: 139-140, Fletcher and La Flesche 1911: 132-133, Bowers 1965: 166). These visions differ only in their specific content from the visions which ensured success in warfare for warriors or which provided the supernatural powers of shamans and medicine men. The visions reported by men who became berdaches provided them with the supernatural power needed for that status just as visions provided other men with the power for the statuses they entered.

The roles performed by berdaches appear to have varied considerably from tribe to tribe. One set of roles were associated with warfare. Berdaches accompanied war parties of the Cheyenne (Grinnell 1923 II: 40, Hoebel 1960: 77), Sioux (Grinnell 1956: 237-238), Caddo and other tribes (Swanton 1942: 189). The Cheyenne berdaches observed the course of battle and treated the wounded (Grinnell 1923 II: 40), and Sioux berdaches predicted the outcome of battle (Grinnell 1956: 237-238). Marquette (1959: 129) asserts that Sioux and Illinois berdaches took part in the fighting, using clubs rather than bows and arrows. Cheyenne berdaches directed the scalp dance when a successful war party returned (Grinnell 1923 II: 39-44), and Mandan and Hidatsa berdaches danced naked in the ceremonial dances of the warrior societies (Kurz 1937: 182). Crow berdaches had a special role in the Sun Dance which ensured the success of a war party setting out to revenge the

death of a member of the tribe (Lowie 1915: 312). That Hidatsa berdaches, who had the same role in the Hidatsa Sun Dance, were intimately associated with warfare is strongly implied by Bower's (1965: 168) statement, "Berdaches tended to disappear once warfare had ceased and their ceremonial system had collapsed."

In other tribes, there may have been no association of berdaches with warfare. Among the Osage, berdaches either did not go on war parties at all, or, if they did, it was as warriors in male clothing rather than as berdaches (Tixier 1940: 234, Fletcher and La Flesche 1911: 133). Even here, Driver's (1961: 535) suggestion that the men who became berdaches were reacting against the "ultra-masculine role" of the warrior appears to be contradicted since some Osage berdaches were formerly successful war leaders and at least one continued to participate in war parties after he became a berdache (although he abandoned his female attire for the clothing of a warrior when he did so).

Berdaches in some tribes were considered to be medicine men with the ability to cure wounds or diseases (Grinnell 1923 II: 40) or who had other unspecified supernatural powers.

The berdache performed many ceremonial roles. When the Sun Dance ceremonies were performed, it was the berdache's duty to locate the log for the central post from driftwood in the river. Whenever a major ceremony was being given, the berdache would dress like the other members of the Holy Woman society and receive gifts as an equal member with the women of the society.

The berdaches comprised the most active

ceremonial class in the village. Their roles were many and exceeded those of the most distinguished tribal ceremonial leaders.

Bowers 1965: 167

It is obvious from the foregoing discussion that the roles of many berdaches were not identical to women's roles. The exact nature of the differences is not always clear, however, and berdaches are often referred to in feminine terms. Furthermore, they often followed female patterns of behavior in both overt and subtle ways. Osage berdaches used the feminine forms of speech (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911: 132), and the Sioux winter counts record the suicide of a berdache by hanging, which was the women's way of taking their own life (Howard 1960: 375).

The attitudes toward berdaches on the part of the other members of their societies varied considerably. Interestingly, this variation appears to be correlated with the mode of recruitment to the status. In the two tribes in which the status of berdache appears to have been inherited, attitudes toward them were positive. Grinnell (1923 II: 39) describes Cheyenne berdaches as "very popular," and Bowers writes of Hidatsa berdaches as respected and feared people with a great deal of supernatural power (Bowers 1965: 167-168). In tribes in which the status does not appear to have been inherited, on the other hand, attitudes toward berdaches seem to have been negative. The Crow parents of a berdache "regret it very much" (Denig 1961: 187), and when a Crow berdache participated in the Sun Dance, he had to be dragged from hiding by the police, much to

the amusement of the crowd (Lowie 1915: 312). A Pawnee who had visions telling him to become a berdache felt shame (Dorsey 1906: 139-140), and among the Omaha suicides occasionally resulted from this circumstance.

Instances are known in which the unfortunante dreamer, even with the help of his parents, could not ward off the evil influence of the dream and resorted to suicides as the only means of escape.

Fletcher and La Flesche
1911: 132

Summary

The nature of the Plains Indian berdache has been poorly understood. Ethnohistoric and early ethnographic sources refer to berdaches as eunuchs and hermaphrodites. Later works have identified them as male prostitutes, transvestites and homosexuals. All of these terms represent concepts taken from cultures other than those native to North America and are misleading when applied to berdaches. I have suggested that it is more fruitful to consider the berdache as a status. In that light, the modes of recruitment, roles, and prestige associated with the status were examined, and evidence suggestive of two different patterns was found. In at least two Plains tribes, the status of berdache was inherited and a good deal of prestige was attached to it. In other tribes anyone who had the appropriate vision or personal characteristics could become a berdache, but in these societies, berdaches tended to be despised rather than respected or admired.

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