

THE BERDACHE AS SHAMAN: AN ANALYSIS

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The phenomenon of berdache sexual inversion among the Northern Plains Indians continues to be both a source of interest and confusion for anthropologists. Early ethno-historic literature and later causal analyses of the role of the berdache have tended to be biased by either western morality or western psychological paradigms. This problem was clearly described by Blakeslee (1979). Yet even recent interpretations have tended to circumvent the issues of role transgression in regards to the maintenance of the role in Plains cultures and the ritualistic importance of the berdache to those groups. What has been missing in the analysis of the berdache is the process of native conceptualization of sex roles and the process by which these cultures accommodate individuals who do not conform to the norm. A comparative analysis of belief systems can be useful in demonstrating the integration of atypical roles into society, for it appears that the berdache is intimately associated with shamanism.

The sanctioned normative function of sex in society is procreation. This activity is as basic in a culture as subsistence. Justly, sex roles are very basic in society and tend to be ascribed from birth. Mead (1949:120) states: "because primary sex differences are of such enormous importance . . . most children take maleness or femaleness as their first identification of themselves." But this does not apply to all individuals or groups of individuals within any one particular culture. A sociobiological explanation of the drive for perpetuation of the species cannot explain sanctioned, institutional non-reproductive roles. Monastic communities are often set aside from procreative activities. In many cases celibacy or at least isolation from reproduction merits special status. Sexual atypicalness (celibacy, inversion) can utilize the powerful symbol of sex, rather, the control over sexuality, for attainment of religious goals.

The term berdache has been used rather loosely in various historic accounts, describing everyone from eunuchs to hermaphrodites (Blakeslee 1979:45). A more precise definition might be those individuals who assume some of the duties and

often the mannerisms and attire of the opposite sex, either briefly or permanently, according to the psychological and spiritual needs of the various North American Indian groups. A true berdache is a sex-role invert who has a special relationship (either sanctioned or non-sanctioned) with the larger group. It is important to try to understand that relationship.

The berdache was usually initiated upon reaching maturity, either by the individual's declaration or by the larger group. The latter incidence, obviously, tended to be more positively sanctioned. Among the North American Indians, the vision quest was often an appropriate occasion for the transformation into the berdache role. It was an atypical rite of passage, not from childhood to adulthood, but from a normative role to an atypical one.

Shamanism and the Berdache in Ethnography

The berdache existed in many tribes throughout North America. The occurrence of this role was especially great among the Northern Plains groups. The berdache as a socially sanctioned role with shamanistic characteristics was found in the Assinaboine, Crow, Cheyenne, Mandan, Omaha, Teton, Yankton, Santee Sioux, Cree, Hidatsa, Blackfeet (Schaeffer 1965:200), and others. In general, the institution of the berdache consisted of men and women, who during a vision quest (a formal projection) were instructed by the spirits to wear the clothing of the opposite sex and/or perform certain duties of the opposite sex. Yet the acquired roles were by no means identical to the normative male or female roles.

Among the Winnebago, the berdache was considered a man who had obtained his transsexual form from the spirit of the moon (Lurie 1953). These berdaches performed female tasks "better than any woman," according to some informants, but were clearly not limited to them. They foretold future events and functioned as shamans, yet not all shamans were berdaches (342). However, the initiation into the role of either shaman or berdache-shaman seems to be structurally similar.

Many Winnebago berdaches carried their inversion to the point of marriage with other men and the adoption of children. Generally the Winnebago berdache were highly respected.

Lurie states that the Winnebago berdache institution was similar to those of adjacent tribes such as the Omaha and Pona (354). Noting the widespread occurrence of sexual inversion throughout the Siouan groups, Lurie suggested diffusion.

Shaeffer's account of the Blackfeet clearly shows berdache-shaman affiliation (1965:207); Four Bears was a male berdache who was believed to have obtained his role from the spirits of the sun and moon. He obtained the powers of shaman and weather controller after his initiation as berdache. Four Bears wore female garb only during certain rituals, and normally functioned in the male role. As a berdache, he was particularly important during the initiation of new warriors. Four Bears held the powers of supernatural communication and was called upon to bless all young novice warriors before their first raid. Eliade (1964) notes that one of the primary attributes of shamanism is communication with the spirit world.

Perhaps the most positively sanctioned and culturally integrated berdache institution was found among the Cheyenne (Grinnell 1923). In fact, Shaeffer (211) accounts for an entire kindred whose males were all berdaches. These individuals were high status shamans; their medicines were love potions and they often acted as go-between in marriage propositions. Their status was based on the native concept that stored sexual power transformed itself into great spiritual power - a notion common to mystic initiates throughout the world. The transposition of sex roles is a symbolic device which affects entry into the realms of the sacred.

Female sexual inversion and shamanism was not as common as male-to-female inversion, but it did exist. Recent studies seem to overlook its occurrence. The Sioux had an institution wherein women could assume certain male duties. Such females were not women warriors as such, but served as warrior's aides-de-camp during battle (Schaeffer:215). Among the Cheyenne, female berdaches gathered arrows and cooked for the men at battle camps, and performed other duties that were typically male oriented. Such women had very high status - to kill such a woman would provide many coups to the assailant (Ibid).

There was a case of a female chief among the Crow who was a powerful warrior and shaman. Despite her role inversion, Yellow Weasel Woman did not wear male clothing, even in battle. (Ibid:216).

Perhaps the most notable of all female role inverters was the Kutenai berdache, Ko-Come-Ni-Pi-Ka. David Thompson's journal mentions her, as have others, and traces of her memory seems to have lingered among the Kutenai for quite some time (Ibid:190). She was apparently unattractive and had an oversized physique. She was greatly teased because of this. According to Thompson, Ko-Come-Ni-Pi-Ka married one of her male White servants. This husband, so the berdache claimed, had performed an operation transforming her into a man. She explained to her people that the White Man had great spiritual power and had caused this transformation. The berdache attired herself in

leggings, breech clothes, and other male articles, and carried a gun and bow. In an attempt to further substantiate her male role, she desired to marry a female. The girls refused at first and were punished for the disrespect of the berdache's newly acquired status.

The Kutenai berdache assumed the role of a warrior. This was extremely unusual for this normally peace-loving tribe. A warrior, and a female at that, had to possess incredible courage and skill to face the martially oriented tribes across the Rockies (Blackfeet). Ko-Come-Ni-Pi-Ka eventually left the Kutenai and became a prophetess among the Chinook. There she predicted disasters, disease, lowered fertility and the establishment of reservations. Accordingly, she played an important role in the spread of the Prophet Dance. This wide travelling berdache was credited for the introduction of the ritual among the Mackenzie Athapaskans in 1812 (Ibid:201).

In future years, Ko-Come-Ni-Pi-Ka was an interpreter for the Kutenai, and was a noted shaman who healed the sick. On occasion she served as a mediator between the Blackfeet and the Flathead. She died trying to save the Flathead from a raid. So great was her shamanistic status that her Blackfoot killer received dishonor rather than coups from his own people.

Oscar Lewis (1941) documents the existence of "manly-hearted women: among the Northern Piegan. These women assumed the roles of men and were accorded high status. In this capacity, they expressed aggressiveness, independence, ambition, and 'manly courage.' They were especially important in religious events, and played a key role in the Sun Dance (184). Apparently they did not outwardly manifest male dress, rather, they assumed the 'inner' qualities of men.

The fact that women were berdaches indicates that the process of symbolic sex role inversion, rather than either the outward signs of inversion or the pre-initiatory male or femaleness of the participant, was the primary characteristic of the sacred role.

Although occurring less frequently than on the Great Plains, male berdaches were common among the Kutenai and other Salishan tribes. Berdaches have been associated with the Flathead and Pend d'Oriell (Cline 1938). As with the Plains Indians, many of these berdaches were initiated during adolescence or early youth by the vision quest ritual.

A Nez Pierce berdache male was reported in 1875, and was noted by Cline to be sexless (23). Verne Ray (1932:121) reported berdaches present in the same area, and referred to

them as being hermaphroditic. As noted by Blakeslee (45), early anthropologists and explorers looked to biological explanations of the berdache.

Cross-cultural Comparisons

Hassrick (1964) found that the high frequency of berdaches among the Plains Indians was correlated with a high emphasis on warfare. A Dakota boy, for example, who was unable to meet the rigorous demands of the war system escaped by taking a female role (65). This might seem functionally logical, yet the aggressive Gros Ventre and Arapaho had no berdaches. The idea of sexual inversion as a cultural 'safety valve' seems inconsistent with the high status and ritualistic obligations often accorded the berdache. There is no conclusive evidence to credit Hassrick's hypothesis.

This problem was considered by Goldberg (in Munroe 1969: 88). Through cross-cultural analysis, a high warfare-berdache correlation was refuted by Monroe. Factors other than warfare precipitated sexual inversion, according to Munroe. In those cultures where sex role differentiation is well defined, less is the occurrence of sexual inversion (90). Munroe found that transsexuality appeared more often in groups with weakly defined sex roles. Gender confusion was therefore common, and the berdache institution could easily accommodate individuals with identity problems.

Munroe utilized the standard cross-cultural method of Murdock and White (1969), sampling 44 worldwide cultures. The following variants were chosen: 1) residence, 2) kin group affiliation, 3) vuncular terminology, 4) cousin terminology, 5) authority succession, 6) eating arrangement, and 7) the couvade (Munroe:92). Cultures were assessed one point for each characteristic with sexual distinctions - zero for those without. Thus, seven would be the theoretical score for groups with the highest sexual distinctions.

The problem with this methodology is, of course, the choice of variables. I tested this methodology using other social variables which might have functional correspondence with the concept of sexuality. First, I tested the presence of the berdache against post-marital residence. Twenty-seven Plains Indian cultures were chosen from Murdock's world ethnographic sample (1957). I found a correlation between the presence of the berdache and the absence of post-marital matrilocality.

Secondly, the sample was increased to 44 cultures throughout the world and sexual inversion was tested against division of labor and conceptualized sex role distinctions. In the following results, 'equal participation of labor' is defined as the degree of sharing of all duties listed by Murdock (1957) relating to the maintenance of society:

Sexual Inversion Present

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|-----|---------------------|
| 1. High role distinctions . . . | 50% | equal participation |
| 2. Low role distinctions . . . | 73% | equal participation |

Sexual Inversion Absent

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|-----|---------------------|
| 1. High role distinctions . . . | 66% | equal participation |
| 2. Low role distinctions . . . | 57% | equal participation |

It appears that sexual inversion tends to prevail in cultures where sexual distinctions are low and there is a greater equal labor participation by men and women in all activities. This seems to support Munroe's findings.

Similar correlations were made between sexual inversion and the dominance of either male or female based subsistence technology. The results seem to indicate that in those cultures in which women play a more dominant part in daily subsistence, and the differentiation of sex roles is high, the frequency of sexual inversion is also high.

Of course, one could continue to test any variable that would appear to be related to sexual distinctions and the presence or absence of inversion. Despite some recent attempts to assign quantifiable values to variable selection (Rohner, et al 1982), the basic problem remains: a high correlation of variables cannot imply a functional relationship of those variables. There has been an attempt by some anthropologists to explain the berdache through cross-cultural comparison, predicated by causality models from western psychology and sociology. Implied in their selection of variables is the assumption that the dominance of women in any particular group promotes an identification by young males towards female identities. This problem has been hotly debated in our own society. It loses even more credibility when extrapolated through cross-cultural comparison.

It seems illogical to assume that the institutionalized berdache-shaman complex developed as a convenient accommodation

for individuals with sexual identity problems - these problems occur in cultures that do not have defined roles for sexual inversion. Identity problems might be a result of a certain lack of culturally defined sex role distinctions, but they do not explain the ritually sanctioned operation of sexual inversion as it is found in many cultures.

The Berdache as Shaman

It is important to investigate probable functional relationships rather than causal ones in regard to the berdache. It seems clear from ethnographic description that the berdache is frequently associated with shamanistic power. An analysis of shamanism can be useful for explaining the function and status of the berdache.

In the search for common themes in the worldwide expression of shamanism, Eliade's monumental work (1964) stands out. Eliade attempted a comprehensive study of the phenomenon. But we need an analysis of the dynamic relationship of spirit possession, role reversal, and sexual inversion.

The system of shamanism tends to embrace outcasts in society - individuals who don't seem to fit into normative roles. Shamans become highly privileged persons with many liberties not usually ascribed to the common folk. The role of shaman is burdened with the attributes of norm reversal - a phenomenon found so frequently in religious activity (Norbeck 1974). Shamanistic traits are often found in cultures undergoing the pressures of alien contact. Ecstatic cults, such as found in the Prophet Dance in North America, are a reaction to events perceived as not being within the group's control. One who can control these unseen forces through shamanistic trances achieves an elevation of status. During periods of social chaos and 'liminality,' performers behave in a manner often opposite the normative roles of society (Turner 1974; Klieger 1983). Role inversion becomes a method whereby the power generated by symbolic mastery of sexual distinctions is utilized for dealing with the unknown. The "contraries" of the Plains Indians seem to follow the same pattern but use a broader range of reversal.

An equilibrium is brought about in society through the practice of shamanism - an individual role conflict resolution that has sacred parameters for the group. The peculiarity conferred by the atypical role of shaman is of the same genre as the conceptualization of the sacred and the profane.

Knoll-Greiling (1952) differentiates four main periods in the life of a shaman: 1) predisposition, 2) call to the profession, 3) preparation for the office, and 4) experience recorded in the course of shamanistic vocation. These steps are essentially similar for the Indian berdache. Recognized by Eliade as being characteristic of shamanism throughout the world are the characteristics of 1) initiatory visions and 2) subsequent communication with the spirit world (13). The practitioner's control over these sacred forces is usually appreciated by the general society. A certain respect and status enhancement follows.

In an interesting paper by Devereux (1951), the shaman may start his life as a functional psychotic manifesting extreme identity conflict. The individual simply does not fit into normative society. The important point is that he learns to adjust to his affliction. A shaman, becoming the 'master of chaos' finds culturally acceptable ways of controlling his individual eccentricities.

Of course not all Plains Indian shamans were berdaches, but ethnohistoric and ethnographic descriptions seem to support the converse: the role of the berdache and its status indicates that these individuals, for the most part, were shamans. Some groups, such as the Cheyenne, sanctioned and even recruited individuals into the berdache role. Other groups negatively sanctioned the berdache, yet these individuals existed - feared and respected rather than derided. It seems to be a matter of the scale of adjustment from the individual level to the cultural.

The role of the berdache was certainly not identical to normative male or female roles. The outward manifestations of sexual inversion, cross-dressing, was not always practiced. The inversion was more significantly symbolized as a combination of external and internal qualities perceived in the opposite sex. It was the act of transcending the normative world which resulted in the acquisition of special status and power. In this regard, it is akin to shamanism.

Summary

The widespread occurrence of the berdache in Plains and adjacent Indian groups has been widely documented in ethnohistory and ethnography. Interpretation of the role played by these individuals exhibiting sexual inversion has often been misleading. Early explanations of the berdaches' morally

'deviant' behavior was followed by the use of western psychological and sociological models in an attempt to show causality. Both attempts are ethnocentric. The recent work of Blakeslee has shown what the berdaches weren't. Cross-cultural attempts have sought correspondence between sexual inversion and other social variables - variables which may or may not be functionally related.

It appears evident in the descriptive accounts that the role of the berdache is usually associated with shamanism. The structure and function of the Plains Indian berdache follows the general pattern of shamanism, with its rites of initiation, role reversal, the curative/prophetic powers. It is important to look at the berdache as a special, sacred role which individuals achieve through a symbolic transformation of normative male and female roles. A special status is achieved by the berdache through the initiatory ordeal which ultimately transcends the mundane world. Whether that status was encouraged or despised by the various cultures, it was nevertheless feared and respected. It implied a control over forces that were unseen, yet powerful. The control over basic sexual identity was perceived as a manifestation of this power.

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