

Gender and sexuality in the navajo culture

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Gender and sexuality have been the conversation of academics in the united states since the 1980's. The conversation developed with the queer movement, but also predated it. Today, some of the new areas of study that reflect this conversation are lesbian and gay studies, gender studies, and queer theory. Though the definition is constantly changing some have come to the consensus that, the term gender refers to the behaviors, ideologies, and cultural teachings placed on individuals within a wide range of sex and psychological characteristics. Gender is also depicted as a spectrum upon which individuals fall. The gender spectrum changes when examining different cultures and societies around the world. In addition, an individual's gender identity, the gender in which they link themselves with, is limited to the gender constructs within their given cultures and societies. The terms sex often goes hand in hand with gender but today there is a movement, within western pop culture, to make a distinction between the two. The difference between gender and sex is that sex is restricted to the biological phenotype of an individual. Another term often used in conjunction with gender and sex is sexuality. Sexuality is the interaction and behaviors of individuals in the gender spectrum. Sexuality can be expended to eroticism, self-identification, and desire where sexuality is also a spectrum that uses terms like homosexuality, heterosexuality, bisexuality, and trisexuality.

The variations between gender, sex, and sexuality inter-culturally are sometimes slight but can also be dramatic. In cultures around the world tolerance of some and or most gender and sexual identities can be found. There are also several cultures and societies that do not accept certain gender and sexual identity. Those cultures and societies that do not accept

or tolerate other genders and sexualities range between mere intolerance to violent persecution. The variation of perspective and ideals are also attributed to by location. Location encompasses country, community, culture, and vernacular. These all add to the diversity of gender and sexuality around the world. One example of this diversity is seen India with Hijra, transsexual and intersexual individuals, meaning gods people but this does not stop these individuals from being discriminated against. The presence of transsexual or homosexual individuals in a culture does not mean that they are(or were) accepted or tolerated.

In an article entitled, a time line of gay world history, the gay and lesbian vaishnava association describes how in many parts of the world homosexuality and gender nonconformity are and have been seen as crimes. However, the timeline also details how Native American communities , particularly the Navajo Nation prior to colonization, viewed homosexuality and gender nonconformity as a sacred concept. In other words, the timeline shows how individuals who identified as homosexual or gender nonconforming were held in high regard among navajo traditions. Throughout The course of colonization the views about gender and sexuality on the Navajo nation has shifted in most part due to assimilation. The assimilation of the Navajo people has been successful in regards to changing and perhaps even erasing aspects of Navajo identity, including homosexual and transgender individuals. The assimilation of the Navajo people brings about the question: To what extent has the influence of western culture affected views on gender and sexuality in navajo communities?

There were five genders that were recognized traditionally among the Navajo people:

- Woman: This is the gender that holds the most importance within the Navajo culture due to their ability to bare life. Asdzaan, meaning woman, is the first gender according to the Navajo creation stories.
- Man: Hastiin is the Male gender and was the second gender created.
- Nadleeh: the third gender recognized is nadleeh/hermaphrodite. Nadleeh is the Navajo term used for a hermaphroditism. The Western definitions of hermaphrodites have been used for Nadleeh. The Navajo define nadleeh as an individual who exemplifies characteristics of another gender. Individuals who identify as nadleeh are further categorized as female-bodied nadleeh or male-bodied nadleeh.
- Masculine female: the fourth gender is masculine female, or female-bodied nadleeh. Navajo culture views masculine females separate from other female-bodied people because their role in the culture is different from primary females. More recently, masculine females take up roles usually belonging to men. In the past, female-bodied nadleeh had certain roles in ceremonies.
- Feminine male: the fifth gender is the feminine male, or male-bodied nadleeh. Feminine males identify with gender variation, and they usually fulfill tasks also performed by women.

Within Navajo tradition, relationships are seen as issues of gender primarily and sexual issues secondly. A relationship between a female nadleeh and a female or a male nadleeh and a male are not seen as homosexual. On the other hand, relationships between two females, two male, two female nadleeh, or two male nadleeh are considered homosexual. Constructs with in

the Navajo society maintain how the relationship system functions between the genders.

The gender system is laid out in the Navajo creation stories, Where The Navajo culture finds most of its identity. These stories are told orally meaning they are not concrete, and many variations between Navajo individuals. Within the creation stories among some of the navajo people there are events in which naadlehí play vital roles in the survival of the Navajo people. The concept of men that do not fit traditional gender roles is very prominent in creation stories, especially in the separation of the genders, in which males and females separated due to domestic disputes. In this event it was the men that were better off because they had a male Nádleehé who preformed the duty's of the women. The females rejected the nádleehí during the separation and sent him with the men. There are many occurrences of naadlehí among the deities (Diyiní Dinééh) of the Navajo people. It is said that Turquoise Boy and white shell girl were naadlehí. Both of these deities play very important cultural and ceremonial roles with in the Navajo culture. Navajo nádleehí persons were thought to be linked with wealth and their family was believed to be fortunate.

Homosexuality and gender nonconformity are concepts also seen among other indigenous cultures in the Americas. “ Two spirit” is a term used to generalize the concept of homosexuality or any individual who does not conform to “ gender roles” among the indigenous peoples of North America. The presence of multiple genders was a prominent social construct prior to the 1890's. In this time the Navajo people were exposed to the pressure of western culture and the presence of Christianity to give up there tolerance

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for multiple genders. The individuals who identified as anything other than the prescribed two genders were forced to conceal their identities for their safeties. The acculturation and assimilation from the 19th century onward, has consequently had lasting shifts in acceptance for individuals of other genders. In example, there is documentation of individuals seeing a change in 1930, when they saw Navajo boys who were attending boarding schools being scoffed at for identifying as nádleehí. After the nádleehí individual heard the disapproval of his peers, he switched from female attire into male attire.

Contrary to Navajo and other Native American cultures, western culture has had a clear and mostly violent view on homosexuality and gender nonconformity. This is for the most part due to the religious beliefs that homosexuality is a sin, and that the condemnation of homosexual individuals is a delineation given by god. The history of homosexual behavior in Western culture is murky, though well documented. In Europe the expansion of Catholicism and Christianity caused the spread of homophobic and transphobic ideals. Consequently when Europeans began to colonize, they too imposed homophobic and transphobic ideals.

The Americans were no exemption to the expansion of European empires and their ideologies, but as the Americans started to develop into sovereign countries they developed governments that would set themselves apart from Europe. However, following the American revolution, the United States retained European views and ideals, including the persecution of individuals who were homosexual or gender nonconforming. After the American

revolution, crimes of “ sodomy” and “ buggery” were seen to be offenses of the capital in many states. The act of cross-dressing was an offense that resulted in imprisonment and other forms of capital punishment.

As the United States grew, it sought to expand west thus sparking the manifest destiny. Similar to Europeans, during manifest destiny the United States began to assimilate Native American people. In an article published in 1990 “ Navajos” by D. L. Birch-field, Acculturation is defined as the process of social, psychological, and cultural change that starts with the blending between cultures. Assimilation; the process of becoming similar to something. The concepts of acculturation and assimilation have been used to describe the situation the Navajo people are and have been in for the past century. The government of the United States wanted to “ Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.”

The federal movement of assimilation, directed boarding schools to make Native American children stop using their own languages and names, or practicing their religion and culture. These children were given American Anglo names, attire , and hairstyles. These children were also told they must give up their lifestyles and livelihoods. A devastating mark on the Navajo people still remains because of the brutality in Boarding school. Though the United States government tried relentlessly, they were unsuccessful in ridding Native Americans of their cultures’ like they had hoped. Years later, a speech delivered by captain Richard Henry Pratt, exemplified the inhuman and cruel intentions of the boarding school system.

Historically the influence of western culture on the Navajo people has negatively impacted traditional ways of life. In many ways the Navajo people still retain their cultural identity but it is not the same as it was prior to the influence of western society. The Navajo people still feel the lasting effects of assimilation: culturally, economically, and socially.

Today, post-boarding school and post-assimilation, Navajo people have taken to other cultures, causing cultural losses. One of the losses the Navajo culture has experienced is that of the gender system. Many Navajo people today who identify as trans, gay, or lesbian do not link themselves with traditional concepts like nadleeh. In numerous ways it can be said that the arrival of conservative views on the Navajo reservation came after European churches intruded and coerced natives to a different set of beliefs. These views were also imposed when the U. S. forced Native Americans to relocate and attend U. S. schools. There is a definite shift in views among the Navajo people especially about gender and sexuality.

There is now a government on the Navajo reservation that is very closely tied to that of the United States. When there is a law in the United States it is usually found on the reservation, despite the Navajo nation's sovereignty. In the case of gay marriage the Navajo nation also followed the U. S. government, for many years there was a gay marriage ban on the reservation. This is a very good reflection on how the views of the traditional gender system have shifted; where gay marriage was a limitedly accepted concept and it is now completely outlawed. A traditional navajo marriages between a hastiin or adzaan and a naadlehí individual was socially

acceptable, but this concept was lost in the Anglo-governmental system the Navajo nation now has. Recently, the Navajo nation has lifted the ban, but the systematically incorporated homophobia and transphobia still remains. On the reservation today there is still a constant battle for marriage equality on the basis that it was traditionally acceptable. People like Alray Nelson are still campaigning for marriage equality rights on the reservation. One of his many goals is to educate council members and citizens of the Navajo Nation, But the Navajo nation still resists fully accepting trans and homosexual tribal members.

The Navajo nation has government employees who are protected by anti-discrimination laws. Despite laws it is still common for trans and homosexual individuals to be physically assaulted, raped, and harassed. In a quote by Nelson “ It’s very clear that if you identify as trans, especially if you’re a Navajo trans woman living here on the reservation, it’s more likely you’re going to see violence within your lifetime because it’s become so normalized and it’s an issue that no one is really talking about,” This is in almost complete contrast to traditional gender system and sexuality acceptance. Ultimately, the Navajo LGBTQIA+ members have to fight for equality, when in reality the Navajo people have had a long history of acknowledging and accepting their existence.

The influence of the United States government has largely changed the ways Navajo people think and navigate their own culture. Through the ideologies and perspectives of Catholicism, Mormonism, and Christianity the Navajo people have almost completely changed their understanding of gender and

sexuality(a western concept). The lasting effects of assimilation and acculturation, leave many navajo people oblivious or unwilling to acknowledge the traditional gender system, even to go as far as discriminate against individuals once “ revered” in the Navajo society. In these ways it can be said that Western culture has dramatically influenced the Navajo nations views on gender and sexuality.

There is also the difference in environment and location which affects identity. In the politics of location written by Thomas Wesley. Navajo people usually find themselves on a spectrum of traditional to assimilated. In Many ways where a Navajo individual falls on this spectrum effects how they identify. As stated by Thomas a Navajo person who grew up with non-natives may not be able to identify with traditional navajo constructs of gender and sexuality, rather they many identify themselves with gay, lesbian, or transgender. The individual may change their identity based on situation(situational identity), in which one will change their identity to better accommodate their environments understanding.

The Navajo people have found themselves on the spectrum mentioned above as more assimilated, and for this reason many may take on western identities and deny Navajo ideologies, or incorporate western perspectives with traditional Navajo constructs. Focusing specifically on how western culture has effected the the Navajo peoples views on gender and sexuality, the extent of this effect is dependent on the individual and where they lay on the three spectrums mentioned(gender, sexuality, and traditional to assimilated). A Navajo individual who lives in an urban setting will have

different perspectives and ideologies, than a Navajo individual who lives on the reservation and follows traditional navajo values.

On the reservation there is heavy mixing of western and navajo culture; this makes it difficult to find the difference between the two cultures. Today among Contemporary Navajo people, There is no way of completely separate the two cultures on and off the reservation. When it comes to gender and sexuality, Navajo constructs provide a Different perspective on western construction and vice versa, with diversification of perspective; Western and Navajo constructs May be mutually beneficial. The shifting of perspective, contemporarily, could be advantageous to the Navajo people. In recognizing the presence of naadlehí, the navajo people could possibly promote equality with a traditional perspective.