



Two-Spirit Truths: Returning to the Circle

Two-Spirit

- The term Two-Spirit originated in the 1990 North American Native Gay & Lesbian Gathering in Manitoba. As it was introduced, a red-tailed hawk hovered above, symbolizing a positive spiritual message¹.
- The term recognizes pre-contact Indigenous gender diversity and its interconnection with spirituality and tradition.
- It describes gender identity (male, female, third gender), sexual identity (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer) and spiritual identity (having both a male and female spirit).
- The term Two-Spirit may refer to the cultural role of one who balances a feminine and masculine spirit².

Across Indigenous cultures, approximately 200 terms refer to gender fluidity and multiple genders. Examples:

- Cree: **Iskwêw ka napêwayat** (a man dressed/living as a woman)³
- Cree: **înahpîkasoht** (a woman dressed/living as a man)³
- Cree: **Aayahkwew** (half and half)⁴
- Zuni: **Katsotse** (girl-boy)
- Dakota: **Winkte** (halfman-halfwoman)⁴
- Ojibwe: **Agookwe** (hidden woman)⁵

Traditional Roles of Two-Spirit People

Many, but not necessarily all, Indigenous Nations respected gender fluidity and esteemed their Two-Spirit relatives for their gifts in politics, decision-making on council, healing, knowledge keeping, teaching and child minding. Two-Spirit people were spiritual leaders, interpreters, mediators and artists with dual skills in traditional male and female roles^{7, 8}. A dream/vision quest often guided individuals to a Two-Spirit role.

- Two-Spirit people are part of the Midewiwin creation story of the Anishinaabe, where they are known as those “in the center who keep others from wandering”⁶.
- The Assiniboine saw vision quests as a spiritual calling to be Two-Spirit⁷.
- Winnebago men received spiritual guidance from the female Moon spirit. In some cultures, a child was raised as a Two-Spirit individual from a young age⁷.
- Crow history describes a female child who hunted, participated in warfare, sat with chief and council, and led her nation as a chief⁷. Two-Spirit Crow individuals were important relatives in the circle, spiritually connected to all life forms and honored for charitable acts^{7,9}

Contact: Shunned on Their Homeland

- Status of Two-Spirit people changed as Turtle Island was colonized.
- Europeans with Christian doctrines viewed non-binary genders as sinful. Many Indigenous communities internalized these doctrines.
- Residential schools enforced differences between male and female through dress, hairstyles, and roles⁸.
- Two-Spirit people were banished, shunned, and subject to violence¹¹. Two-Spirit people lost their respected place in the circle and were turned away from ceremonies.
- Two-Spirit traditions were silenced.

Historical Two-Spirit People



- **Osh-Tisch (Finds Them and Kills Them)** (left). A Crow, revered for his bravery after saving the life of a Crow at the Battle of Rosebud, 1876. Osh-Tisch was called “sister” and seen as a leader¹⁰.
- **Ozaw-wen-dib** (Yellowhead), Salteaux Ojibwe from the territory known as Manitoba, demonstrated battle prowess when he single-handedly protected his people from a Lakota Sioux war party in 1801. His community called him Ogokwe, wise woman^{9, 10}. Photo un available for Ozaw-wen-dib.



- **We'Wha** was a Zuni ambassador in Washington, DC heralded for her intelligence¹⁰. We'wha stands in Zuni ceremonial clothing holding a pottery bowl with corn meal.

Resurgence: Resilience and Advocacy

Two-Spirit people are reclaiming their roles and Indigenous understandings of gender, sexuality, and spirituality^{8, 12}.

- 1960's to 1970's Two-Spirit individuals become part of the gay and lesbian movement.
- 1986 The Nichiwaken Native Gay Society was organized in Winnipeg in response to the suicides of two First Nations youth¹.
- 2000 Assembly of First Nations stated: “Recognize the role of Two-Spirit First Nations' Peoples, the solution [to discrimination, fear, and stigma] is to educate people of the traditionally respected role that Two-Spirit First Nations' peoples played in most communities”.

Contemporary Two-Spirit People

The resurgence and decolonizing of Two-Spirit identity signifies returning to a place of belonging; reclaiming Two-Spirit roots, communities, and selves¹³. Examples:

- **Jeremy Dutcher:** Wolastoqiyik from Tobique First Nation. 2019 Juno Award winner, classically trained tenor, political activist, educator in the community initiative Two-Spirits, One Voice¹⁴.
- **Massey Whiteknife:** Cree from Fort McKay First Nation. Producer, CEO of ICEIS Group of Companies, anti-bullying activist, and performs as ICEIS Rain.
- **Geraldine McManus:** Dakota from Winnipeg, Manitoba. Environmentalist, peaceful protest activist, Spirit of the Buffalo Prayer Camp leader.

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