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### **An Anthropologic Perspective On Gender**

Anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and many other scientific schools have conducted numerous studies to try to understand gender roles in our culture now, in the past, as well as other cultures today. However, trying to test people's thoughts, behaviors, and actions are not easy, and perhaps cannot really be done. In fact, some people would suggest that it is an absurd notion to even attempt to do so. Gender roles became more intriguing to researchers in the 1960's when it was more socially acceptable to understand the dynamics involved within these social implications. With the civil rights movements and women's liberation, came a paradigm in the thinking of many people. We became more aware of injustices, more educated about ourselves, our bodies, and gained higher consciousness with opening our eyes.

Through these changes in history and culture came about new language to describe what we were observing and how to make sense of it all, and maybe test it to further our understanding. People began to take a much closer look at gender and sexuality.

Cultural anthropology is a great way to form an analogy to help to understand gender within our own culture by examining other societies and the way they understand gender. The expectations or research question that I am alluding are to understand how have other cultures perceived gender and sexuality and how has the western dichotomous

thinking became an influence in their culture today? If other cultures have different ways of expressing their gender/sexuality, maybe it could be a good influence on us, considering ours is so confining and linear in thought. Also, through looking at primitive or aboriginal societies, it can give you a clearer picture of what may be more naturally oriented without the distraction of industrialization that our society seems to like so much.

When examining the Native American culture that presided before the Europeans entered into the area and their ideas on gender and sexuality, a term called 'berdache' surfaced. The English term *berdache* has its roots in the Arabic *bardag* and the Persian word, *bardaj* (*bardaj*). This is a borrowed Arabic term that means "a passive partner in male-male sexual intercourse." The term is used by Anthropologists to refer to pre-conquest. (Fulton) When the conquistadores arrived in the new world they saw many men dressed in women's clothing and practicing sodomy. They did not understand how it could be happening because of their extremely influential Catholic background. The roles of men and women within the aboriginal context are not clearly defined in archaeology or historical documents. So, sometimes there are inferences made that may not be an accurate representation of what was really being portrayed or practiced. That is why the more approaches used investigating this matter makes for more well-rounded, more accurate results.

In academic discussion the subject of 'man-woman' started to appear more frequently in research, which Fausto-Sterling mentioned in her book *Sexing the Body*, that it was considered a pathologic subject. Weston La Barre claimed that the "'man-woman' was a classic paranoid who, in the phallic phase of his childhood, had been able to give up "neither his own fantasized omnipotence nor the fantasized omnipotence of his

father.”( La Barre 1970) Donald Forgey, claimed that the “‘man-woman’”—in contrast to the highly competitive male—served a non-aggressive function within the tribe with ‘aided in promoting social solidarity’ (Forgey 1975) In some societies the ‘man-woman’ could go to war, but could not use men’s weapons. If he/she did not go to battle, then they would be responsible for the dance upon return. They would also be responsible for carrying supplies or treating the wounded. Some societies gave that individual status, some not so much. Only members of certain groups could become *berdaches* and they usually did not mate with others like themselves. They would oftentimes be married or just practice casual promiscuity. Some southwestern tribes distinguished gender with symbols which were often sent from a supernatural, ritual, or vision quests. Their world-view was more circular in perspective, and so was their outlook on gender, whereas westerners see gender as being a dichotomy of either male or female. However, some of us do not buy into the western hegemonic discourse.

If someone were to have sexual relations with someone of the same sex, they would not always be considered a ‘man-woman’. These powers that these individuals held were directly from the supernatural and because it was neither masculine nor feminine they claimed it as ‘middle’. They also were said to ensure tribal survival because of all the difficulties tribes faced with survival like warfare, subsistence, hunting, infant mortality, among other things, the ‘middle’ individuals sort of cheered up the sometimes dismal atmosphere.

Most of the time, nowadays, there is a stigmatization attached to identifying as gay/lesbian/bisexual, among many young people. It is oftentimes hard to approach this subject with younger children because there are predefined societal influences that shape the way children think from a very young age.

Now I am going to narrow the focus down to a particular society that was studied in 1980-1982 by Bruce M. Knauft, Professor of Anthropology. The Gebusi of Papua New Guinea were observed, and they were very isolated and were not influenced by economic, religious (Christianity), or other industrialized changes at the time. At the time they lived on the interior lowland rainforest of the Western Province and had only 450 in the community. The Gebusi were very into shamanism, sorcery, costuming, manipulation of penises, and orally consuming male semen. Young boys from ages to 16-20 years were inseminated by adult men as sort of a right of passage into adulthood. They loved to involve themselves in engagements that would last most of the night, and everybody would hear what they were doing, and joke about it. There were some men who did not participate in the festivities. Some of the reasons were for initiation into warrior manhood or a necessity for male-bonding within communities. Other societies within in Papua New Guinea had a numerous amount of various gender/sex orientation that was not necessarily age oriented, tied with ritual, or initiation-based.

These societies had sexual freedoms, sexual privacy, sexual equity, and the right to sexually associate freely. These things are obviously not able to be pursued completely in our country due to different stigmas tied to what it means to be male or female, and therefore certain roles that need to be played out in order to 'fit in' our society. There have been cases of severe depression, to suicide due to some of these people not being able to reveal who they really are due to society's rules and standards.

In 1998, Knauft returned to document the changes that occurred during that short period of time. It was phenomenal. The practice of ritualized homosexuality was non-existent for the most part. The community moved to a more centralized location, and most of the people were Christian or had much western influence. Their belief system

had completely been replaced with the ideas of heaven and hell, good and evil, and to read the Bible all the time. In just that short amount of time there were significant, huge changes. The Gebusi now consider themselves to be locally modern. Now the Gebusi have labels such as 'gay', 'lesbian', 'homosexual', and bisexual. These are termed 'third-gender' and 'third-sex. Just as they have *hijras* in India, *berdache* or 'two-spirit' in the Native American southwest, *hathoey* in Thailand, and *mahu* in Tahitian and other Polynesian societies.

The problem with these labels is that they come from a western world-view. In order to fully understand a culture, you have to be able to step outside of your own culture, and look at theirs as though you are seeing it for the first time. This problem arises quite frequently in cultural anthropology. As an observer, you are biased with your own cultural upbringing, your own perceptions, and hence have a difficult time with objectivity in the study. Sexual categories are not necessarily good for a healthy sexual disposition. Sexuality is usually constructed through the interaction between the individual and social structures. (Knaft 2001) Some people today believe that sexual rights are a universal inherent freedom. I agree. There should not be any constraints on ones sexual freedoms. If health is a human right, (which sometimes is not recognized in our society and others), then sexuality should be recognized, promoted, and respected as well.

People should be understood based on their personality and other characteristics, rather than gender/sexual orientation. Much has been written on what causes homosexuality and the answers range from genes to socialization. I do not believe that should be the focus now. The focus should be on understanding ourselves/gender and letting people express their own individual self. Sometimes, even within historical

documents, there are major biases. For example most of the women are not considered as much in an archaeological report, whereas the men are talked about mostly. Some suggest that we should go back and re-evaluate some of the research that has been done, and re-write the history in a more holistic way.

Even though our society needs to take a closer look at this issue, there are other societies that are much worse at recognizing this. There is still a lot of sexual inequality on larger scales in some Middle Eastern countries, and other societies where women are not valued like the men. The androcentric lens is prevalent in our country as well as in others, and seems as though it is a tough membrane to break. However, with education and understanding cross-culturally, somehow we can maybe break out of this unhealthy, androcentric, constraining, shell that is placed on our sexuality and our lives in general.

Essentially, in this paper I have looked at other societies and their way of believing associated with gender and sexuality, and revealed that our way of doing business may not be the healthiest practices we have ever endured.

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