

(The Gender Centre advise that this article may not be current and as such certain content, including but not limited to persons, contact details and dates may not apply. Where legal authority or medical related matters are cited, responsibility lies with the reader to obtain the most current relevant legal authority and/or medical publication.)

American Indian Gender-Crossers

They joined the warriors on the warpath, behaved like women in attending to the food and had magical powers of healing

by Roberta Perkins

Article appeared in Polare magazine: December 1993 Last Update: October 2013 Last Reviewed: September 2015



The Sioux regarded the *winkte* as *wakan* (holy) and no attempt was made to prevent them crossing gender from men to women.

Long before the Europeans came to North America, Indian gender crossing occurred across the continent. It was widely reported by white men in their first encounters with Indian tribes. As early as 1564 a French traveller, Jacobus Le Moyne, in Florida remarked: "When (the Indians) go to war the 'hermaphrodites' carry the food" and "those who are stricken with any infectious diseases are borne by the 'hermaphrodites' to certain places and nursed until they may be restored to full health."

Like the Cheyenne, the Navajo treated their gender-crossers as a third sex with special powers not available to the conventional sexes.

These 'hermaphrodites' were not biologically ambiguous individuals, but simply Indian males who chose to live as women. Le Moyne and other Europeans of his time could only understand gender crossing by describing it as hermaphroditism. His description, however, alerts us to certain phenomenon

associated with gender-crossers among Indian tribes: they joined the warriors on the war path; they behaved like women in attending to the food; and, they had magical powers of healing. A century after Le Moyne, a Jesuit, Jacques Marquette, in 1671 made this observation of Sioux Indians: "There is some mystery in this; the *berdache* never marry and glory in demeaning themselves to do everything that women do. They go to war but can only use clubs and not bows and arrows, which are the proper weapons of men. They are present at the solemn dances ... at these they sing. They are summoned to the councils and nothing can be decided without their advice. Through their profession of leading an extraordinary life, they pass for *Manitou*, that is to say, spirits, or persons of consequence." '*Berdache*' was a term the French explorers used to describe Indian gender-crossers: it derived from an Arab word for 'male prostitute' or 'catamite' (kept boy), but Marquette was clearly referring to gender-crossers and not prostitutes. Once again we see that the Indian gender-crossers accompanied the warriors on the warpath and were treated with great respect for their wisdom and magical skills. In the 1830s the American travelling artist, George Catlin, visited the Sauk tribe and witnessed a ceremony in which warriors openly announced having had sexual relations with *berdaches*, or as the Sauk called them '*i-coo-coo-a*'. Catlin's Victorian upbringing caused him to express his disgust: "He (Catlin preferred to refer to the *i-coo-coo-a* in the masculine pronoun regardless of her demeanour and dress being obviously feminine) is driven to the most servile and degrading duties, from which he is not allowed to escape ... being the only one in the tribe submitting to this disgraceful degradation". This remark implies that the *i-coo-coo-a* was nothing more than a sex slave. But further on Catlin is forced to admit that the *i-coo-coo-a* is "a man dressed in women's clothes, as he is known to be all his life, and for extraordinary privileges which he is known to possess ... (he) is looked upon as medicine and sacred and a feast is given to him annually.

In many other tribes the gender-crossers had high status in their community. Anthropologist Royal Hassrick, in reporting on the Sioux *winkte* (man-woman), found them to be "good shamans (medicine men) who go about calling one another 'sister'. Each one has his own tipi (skin tent), for after men have sexual relations with them their parents put up a tipi for them. The Sioux regarded the *winkte* as *wakan* (holy) and no attempt was made to prevent them crossing gender from men to women. Hassrick claims that the *winkte* were held in awesome respect on one hand and in disdainful fear on the other." He felt this reflected the ambivalent attitude which the Sioux had for the *winkte*, but it sounds more like the typical response Indians had towards all shamans, whether they were gender-crossers or not. In the 1860s the *Cheyenne* Indians had six gender-crossers, or *he-man-eh* (half-men-half-women), as they called them, who all came from the same kin group, the 'Bare Legs' band. These were highly regarded personages who were granted the full status of women by the tribe. Yet, they were more than ordinary women. They were the most powerful beings in the tribe, with supernatural powers beyond even the shamans. Only the *he-man-eh* had the necessary power to handle fresh scalps brought back by the warriors after a successful battle, for the negative power of the enemy whose scalps had been lifted could only be

nullified by the half-men-half-women. And, what's more, after performing this extraordinary feat, the *he-man-eh* passed on their amazing powers to courting couples to ensure they had long and happy lives together.

The most positive response to gender-crossers by any people anywhere in the world came from the Navajos, who referred to those who permanently crossed gender or did so only from time to time as *nadles* ('being transformed'). These were god-like beings whom a Navajo informant told anthropologist W.W. Hill "are leaders like President Roosevelt (and) around the *hogan* (earth dwelling) they will bring good luck and riches. It does a great deal for the country if you have a *nadle* around ... you must respect (them) for they are somehow sacred and holy." The *nadles* were the source of knowledge, wellbeing and protective power for the tribe, for as the informant said: "They know everything. They can do both the work of a man and a woman. I think when all the *nadles* are gone it will be the end of the Navajos." The mythology of the Navajos is full of wondrous deeds performed by the *nadles*, from intervening in a quarrel between First Man and First Woman to their preference for women's roles over men's. The *nadles* were the outstanding artisans and sheep breeders, and usually prominent shamans, choosing one or another of the holy professions, such as a chanter, a curing doctor, a curer of incest, a midwife or a sorcerer. Like the *Cheyenne*, the Navajos treated their gender-crossers as a third sex with special powers not available to the conventional sexes. But, unlike any other Indians, the *nadles* were gods on earth who held the fate and destiny of their people in their hands.

Many attempts have been made by white men to explain the phenomenon of gender-crossing in North American Indian societies, from Le Moyne's hermaphroditism and Catlin's "disgraceful" homosexuality to modern psychoanalytical theories. One anthropologist, Donald Forgey, suggests that Indian boys unable to survive in the competitive world of warriors sought alternative lifestyles as women before they reached manhood. But this was achieved "with a supernatural explanation and justification of their condition." The Omaha Indian gender-crosser, or *min-qu-ga*, claimed to have dreamt their destiny when the moon spirit came to them in a vision and offered them a woman's pack-strap in one hand and warrior's bow in the other. When the boy reached out for the bow the spirit switched hands so that he grasped the pack-strap instead. But, as the old Sioux shaman, Lame Deer, once remarked: "if nature puts a burden on a man by making him different, it also gives him a power." Thus, did the Indians themselves explain why crossing gender and shamanism went hand in hand.

Not all tribes treated their gender-crossers with the deference of the Navajo, Cheyenne, Sioux, Sauk, Omaha and most other plains and eastern woodlands peoples. The Pimas cast their gender-crossers out of the tribe, and the Apaches went so far as to kill them. Among the Mohave the *alyhas* (like a woman) were treated as a joke. But their partners were ridiculed to the effect that they are unable to get a 'real' woman. The poor *alyhas* went to extraordinary lengths to demonstrate their feminine nature, even to the point of deliberately causing constipation, so that they could claim their swollen bellies were due to pregnancy. When they eventually defecated they said that the resultant dung was a stillborn baby, and went through an elaborate burial rite and period of mourning. The people often taunted them by pointing to dog droppings in the village and loudly proclaiming it as one of their children. Others would try to lift up the *alyhas'* grass skirts in an attempt to expose their penises, and when an unfortunate *alyhas'* penis became involuntarily erect and poked through the grassy covering this was an occasion for great communal mirth. The *la' mana* (man-woman) of the Pueblo Indians were better treated. Though crossing gender was generally discouraged by the Pueblos, if a boy was determined to live as a woman no further obstacles were put in his way. The nineteenth century anthropologist Matilda Stevenson reported extensively on a famous *la' mana*, *We-wha*, of *Zuni Pueblo*, who became a leader in the community, and found her to be mentally and physically the strongest person in the tribe. It is likely that this acceptance of the *la' mana* is due to *Zuni* gods being asexual. Similarly, the Cocopah and Yuma also accepted their gender-crossers because they reflected the hermaphroditism of their gods.

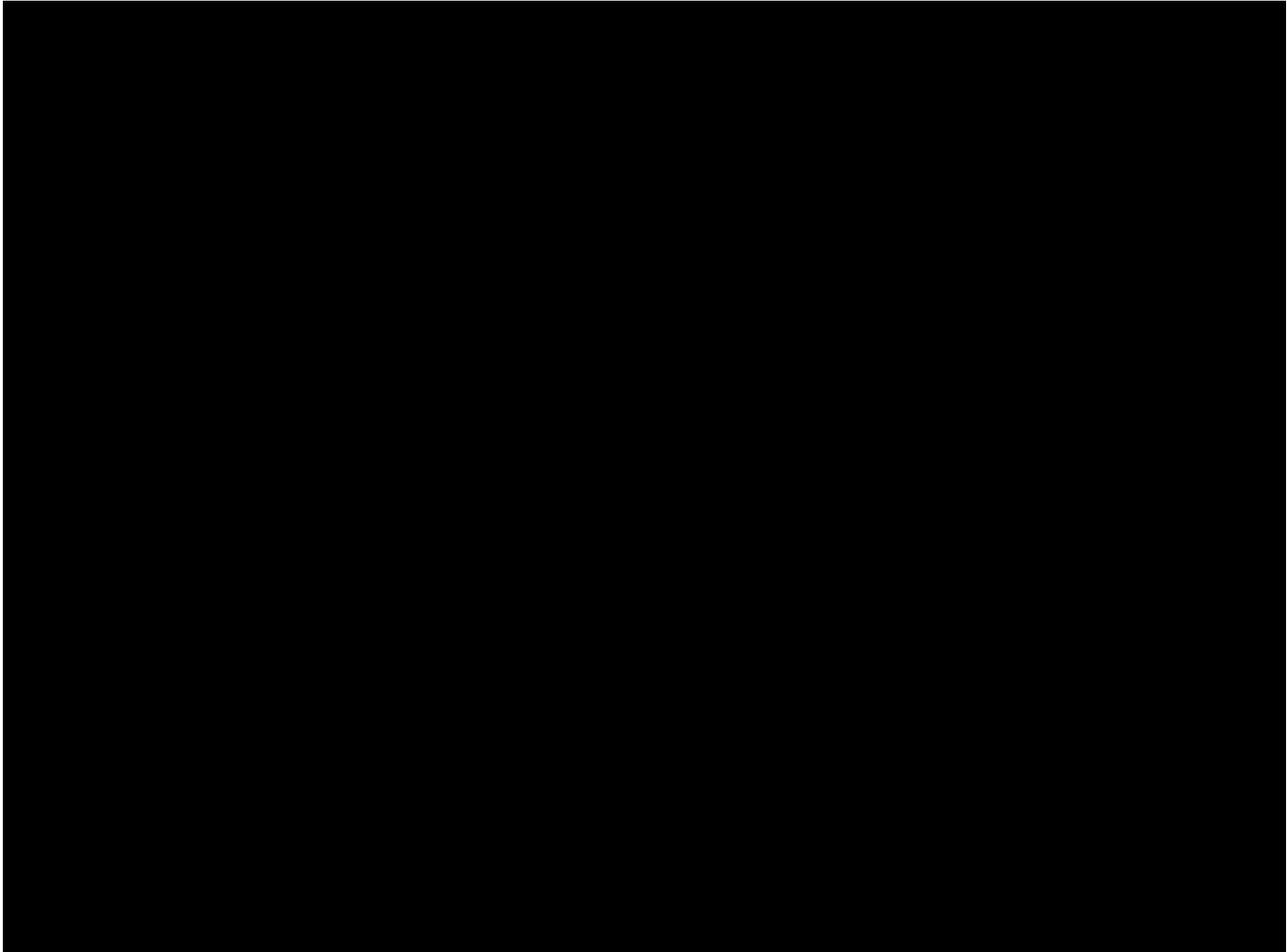
There is very little evidence of females crossing over to masculine roles in North American Indian societies. This might seem surprising given the generally higher status of Indian men, but then the lifestyle of the warrior was much more demanding than that of the woman and fraught with enough danger to dissuade females from taking the route. It has been suggested by some white observers that Indian mothers sometimes deliberately feminized their sons to avoid them dying on the battlefield, but neither parents would contemplate emasculating daughters for the strong possibility of being killed in war. On the other hand, in some warlike tribes like the Iroquois, where women had political power and the usual warrior's death was by prolonged torture (causing a high rate of suicide among men) there is no evidence of either women nor men crossing gender, while gender-crossing occurred amongst the peaceful Pueblos where the sex roles were similar. The fact is though that women's roles in many Indian societies were not as confining as men's. For instance, Black feet women were known to have acquired great wealth in horse herds usually achieved only by chiefs and prominent warriors, and, during the Indian wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth century white soldiers frequently commented on Indian women fighting



'Berdache' was a term the French explorers used to describe Indian gender-crossers: it derived from an Arab word for 'male prostitute' or 'catamite' (kept boy)

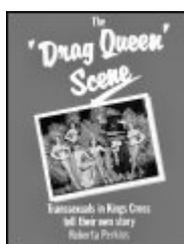
side by side with their men folk. The anthropologist George Devereux reported on female gender-crosser, Sahaykwisa, a Mohave *hwame* (like a man), who insisted on being treated as a warrior. But the people called Sahaykwisa 'split vagina' on account of the way he and his 'wife' laid with vaginas touching. Sahaykwisa bragged about his imaginary penis and strutted around the village in a manly fashion. Everyone humoured him with this behaviour, but when he tried to enter the war councils of warriors he was refused outright and he was not allowed to touch the men's weapons just as women weren't. Obviously, Sahaykwisa did not threaten the social order by 'pretending' to be a man, but when he wanted to enter the warriors' inner sanctum he posed a direct threat to a masculine prerogative. This rebuttal was too much for Sahaykwisa, who ended his torments by drowning himself in the raging Colorado River.

An overview of historical and contemporary Native American concepts of gender, sexuality and sexual orientation. This documentary explores the *berdache* tradition in Native American culture, in which individuals who embody feminine and masculine qualities act as a conduit between the physical and spiritual world, and because of this are placed in positions of power within the community.



Roberta Perkins

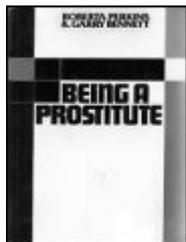
Roberta Perkins established the Gender Centre (then known as Tiresias House) in 1983. She is also a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at The University of New South Wales and has conducted many government-funded research projects into prostitution. A transsexual herself, she has the confidence of the people she interviews; a sociologist, she has counselled transsexuals for a number of years; an activist, she has worked with them in the struggle to overcome the problems they face every day of their lives. Roberta is also the author, and co-author of five books and scores of journal articles on sex work research in Australia and has also taught Native American Studies for many years in Sydney



The Drag Queen Scene: Transsexuals in Kings Cross
Author: Roberta Perkins Publisher: Allen & Unwin (1983)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0868610474

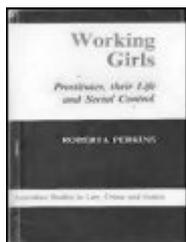
Through a unique series of frank interviews, *The Drag Queen Scene* deals with the experiences of male-to-female transsexuals who live and work in Sydney's Kings Cross area. It focuses on twelve people — showgirls, strippers, bar girls and prostitutes. Each of the twelve speaks for herself, providing first-hand insights into life and work in her world — a world a few people understand. Their stories uncover the raw reality behind the shallow popular view of the "Drag Queen". These revealing every-day accounts demonstrate how much accepted attitudes are based on ignorance, prejudice and callousness. By offering the reader a rare opportunity to view a closed subculture as its participants see it,

The Drag Queen Scene is an attempt to break down the resistance facing transsexuals, to influence changes in social attitudes and the law. In this book, twelve voices, hitherto silent, challenge the reader to question the stigmatising and ostracising transsexuals endure.



Being a Prostitute: Prostitute Women and Prostitute Men (with Garry Bennett)
Author: Roberta Perkins and Garry Bennett Publisher: Allen & Unwin (1986)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0868616780

Constant media coverage and popular concern about prostitution, recent changes to legal and administrative regulations governing prostitution in its various forms in its several States, and the emergence of organised groups to represent the views and interests of prostitutes in public discussions and to influence policy formation ensure that the subject retains a high level of visibility and social significance. At the same time there have been remarkably few empirical studies of prostitution in Australia and our knowledge is largely confined to sensationalised reports of criminal cases and media exposés. So a book giving detailed accounts of the perceptions and experiences of a variety of prostitutes, male and female, homosexual and heterosexual, of different ages and background, and covering the diversity of forms of occupational types and organisational settings of prostitution at the present time would seem to be timely.



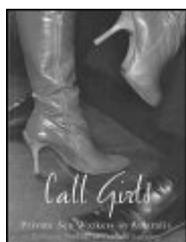
Working Girls: Prostitutes, Their Life and Social Control
Author: Roberta Perkins
Publisher: Australian Institute of Criminology (1991)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0642158765

From Abe Books: This book has three objectives: 1. To demonstrate empirically that prostitutes are basically ordinary women with only their occupation distinguishing them from others; 2. To bring to the general public a balanced, well-informed view of prostitution, shed of its tawdry reputation; 3. To convince legislators to adopt a more practical method of dealing with prostitution.



Sex Work and Sex Workers in Australia
Author: Roberta Perkins
Publisher: University of New South Wales Press (1994)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0868401744

From Google Books: *Sex Work and Sex Workers in Australia* is one of the most comprehensive books on the sex industry. This book's main focus is on prostitution and it is broken down on many levels: female, male, transsexual, health care, oral histories, and foreign workers (e.g.. Thai). It is very easy to read and one leaves this book with an excellent history lesson as well as viewpoints from both men and women which balances this book.



Call Girls: Private Sex Workers in Australia
Author: Roberta Perkins and Frances Lovejoy
Publisher: U.W.A. Publishing (2007)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 1920694913

From Booktopia: *Call Girls* casts a penetrating, red light gaze upon the upper echelons of the worlds oldest profession private sex workers who use the telephone as a means to solicit clients. Containing frank accounts from women working in the Australian sex industry. *Call Girls* puts a human face on this hitherto shadowy, clandestine world as it documents how many women became sex workers; run their businesses; maintain their health; and how the call girls work affects their relationships with husbands, lovers and families. Far-removed from the moralising, victim stereotypes and *Pretty Woman*-inspired fantasies which pervade popular culture, *Call Girls* places the world of the sex worker within social, political and legal contexts which will surprise and change the preconceived notions of many readers.

Polare Magazine is published quarterly in Australia by The Gender Centre Inc., which is funded by the Department of Family & Community Services under the S.A.A.P. program and supported by the N.S.W. Health Department through the AIDS and Infectious Diseases Branch. Polare provides a forum for discussion and debate on gender issues. Unsolicited contributions are welcome, the editor reserves the right to edit such contributions without notification. Any submission which appears in Polare may be published on our internet site. Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Editor, The Gender Centre Inc., the Department of Family & Community Services or the N.S.W. Department of Health.

The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.