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A primer on 2S identities and gender diversity in Indigenous contexts

“Two-spirit” (also written Two-Spirit) is a translation of the Anishinaabemowin term *niizh manidoowag*.¹ The term was first proposed during the 1990 Third Annual Inter-Tribal Native American, First Nations, Gay and Lesbian American Conference in Winnipeg by elder Myra Larabee. This term refers to a person who identifies as having both a feminine and a masculine spirit and is used by some Indigenous people to describe their sexual, gender and/or spiritual identity. Two-spirit is an umbrella term that may encompass same-sex attraction and a wide variety of gender variance, including people who might be described in Western culture as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, genderqueer or who have multiple gender identities. Two-spirit people may also reclaim traditions related to third or fourth genders within their Indigenous communities and thus the term holds multiple meanings.² The range of people under the two-spirit umbrella makes it inappropriate to understand the term as a single identity, nor should it be defined against traditional Indigenous gender or sexual roles (i.e., it is not “the Other”). Two-spirit identity is sometimes used to indicate gender difference, and sometimes to indicate sexual difference.³ For some, the term is connected to distinct teachings, while for others it serves as a placeholder until they can find words in their Indigenous languages to describe their identity.⁴ The Swampy Cree dialect, for instance, has no word for homosexual nor any gender specific pronouns. Instead, the dialect distinguishes between animate and inanimate: living, animate creatures and actions have a spiritual purpose. Alex Wilson, from Opaskwayak Cree Nation, describes

¹ <https://lgbtqhealth.ca/community/two-spirit.php>

² Sylliboy, J. R. (2019). Using L’nuwey Worldview to Conceptualize Two-spirit. *Antistasis*, 9(1), 96 - 116. Retrieved from <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/antistasis/article/view/29323>

³ Robinson, M. (2017). Two-spirit and bisexual people: Different umbrella, same rain. *Journal of Bisexuality*, Vol 17(1), 7-29.

⁴ Laing, M. (2017). Two-Spirit: Conversations with Young Two-Spirit and Queer Indigenous People in Toronto, 4. [magazine].

Two-Spirit as a term “...acknowledging that we are spiritually meaningful people. Two-Spirit identity may encompass all aspects of who we are, including our culture, sexuality, gender, spirituality, community, and relationship to the land”.⁵ It is important to note that not all Indigenous LGBTQQIA+ people identify as Two-Spirit or apply this term to identify themselves.

Gender diversity and equality were embedded in the ways of life for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis cultures. This is in large part because binary understandings of gender identity in which everyone had to neatly fit into the identities, roles, and responsibilities associated with “men” and “women” were not a structure in place in most communities. Historically, Two Spirit people were seen, loved, and respected as unique individuals in most Indigenous communities. This aligns with the maxim in many Indigenous communities that “everybody has a purpose, everybody has a destiny, everybody has a role”.⁶ They were gifted with keen insight and the ability to see things through both feminine and masculine eyes (double vision).⁷ Many held important roles within their tribes, such as Chiefs, medicine people, marriage counsellors, caregivers, protectors, and Knowledge Keepers. and gender-variant people, who exist between the physical and spiritual worlds, maintained the health of our communities through medicine, through counseling, visioning, and dream interpretation. Two Spirits also played a critical role in pow-wow, historically an event that would bring together tribes from far and wide for feasting, trade, dancing, and socializing. Since the event brought together people of different dialects and languages, Two Spirit folks would be interpreters because they had their own way of communicating.⁸

However, the specific traditional roles of gender diverse and two-spirit people in Indigenous cultures have been impacted by colonization and other social, political, and cultural processes. Forced assimilation and colonial acts introduced gender inequality. More specifically, racism, patriarchy, and heterosexism developed in relation to colonizers and missionaries viewing Indigenous peoples as nefarious, subordinate, and against God.⁹ The establishment of colonial rule was done so by what is termed as “gendercide”: the intentional elimination of Indigenous people who were perceived to be neither fully male nor fully female, or expressed a unique third or other gender, and was done by way of punishment, systematic targeting, and death in order to enforce colonial gender roles and heterosexuality, as well as enact domination over Indigenous peoples.¹⁰ In the century of residential schools, Two-Spirited children suffered from the intersection of colonial oppression, heterosexism, and patriarchy; they endured

⁵ Wilson, A. (n.d.). N'tacimowin inna nah': Our Coming In Stories. *Canadian Women Studies*, 26(3), 193.

⁶ Olson, L. (2008). *Second stories- Deb-we-win Ge-ken-am-aan, Our place in the circle*. [short film]. https://www.nfb.ca/film/second_stories_our_place_in_the_circle/

⁷ https://www.outsaskatoon.ca/two_spirit1

⁸ Gabe Castilloux, Two Spirit Identities webinar, Oct 21, 2020.

⁹ Cannon, M. (1998). The regulation of First Nations sexuality. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 8(1), 1-18. York University: Ontario Canada.

¹⁰ Miranda, 2010, pp. 257-259.

particularly heinous abuse and targeting due to being Two Spirit in homophobic Catholic institutions.¹¹

Gender diversity in First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities and cultures

As noted above, the teachings, meanings, roles, responsibilities related to being Two-spirit are specific to individual communities. The diverse understandings of being two-spirit are also reflected in language: the Lakota's *wintike* or the Diné's *nàdleehé* both refer to men who fill social roles associated with women, while the Mi'kmaq phrase *Geenumu Gessalagee* refers only to sexuality, translating into "he loves men." Although Two Spirit is a relatively new term, there are over 130 terms derived from Indigenous languages to describe people who did not fit into the western gender binary, including:

- **Aayahkwew** (Cree term, which roughly translates to "neither man nor woman")
- **Okitcitakwe/Ogokwe** (Ojibwe terms for "warrior woman" and "warrior man," respectively)
- **Winkte** (Dakota/Lakota term, translates to "double woman". Among the Lakota and Dakota peoples, possessing a *winkte* name was said to provide spiritual protection for the child, and helped to insure good health and a long life.)
- **Sipiniq** (Inuit term, meaning "infant whose sex changes at birth").
- **Onón:wat** (Mohawk term, which translates into "I have the pattern of two spirits inside my body").

It has only been since the late 1980s that researchers are deconstructing the settler-interpretation of Inuit culture and the ways in which archeological records pathologized Inuit and culture through Euro-Christian values and colonization and imposed heteronormativity.¹² By contrast, non-binarism, gender fluidity, and gender diversity were integral to Inuit culture. Historically, Inuit have not identified as two-spirit as many First Nation cultures have done, but there is a legacy of "third genders" in Inuit culture.¹³ Gender norms within Inuit culture and identity have always been interchangeable and many gender roles, diversity, and equality comes in forms of roles and responsibilities rather than focusing on the notion of sexual or gender identification. Within Inuit culture many infants are given names of loved ones who have passed on and may be given and exercise varying gender roles of each. For instance, genetically born females may be named after a passed-on male relative but still display gender norms as a female, and or both; this simultaneously is reversed for males named after female ancestors or relatives. It is believed the infant will in some form display the qualities, knowledge, and spirit of the person they have been named after, regardless of their gender. However, not all Inuit practice this tradition: many children are raised to learn both female and

¹¹ Xtra Magazine. (2014, November 5). Residential schools' impact on Two-Spirit people. [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SzT2ed8xRIU>

¹² Walley, M. (2018). Exploring potential archaeological expressions of nonbinary gender in pre-contact Inuit contexts. *Etudes Inuit Studies*, 42(1), 269- 289.

¹³ Saladin d'Anglure, B. (1992). Rethinking Inuit Shamanism through the concept of 'third gender'. In *Northern Religions and Shamanism*, (Eds. Mihály Hoppál & Juha Pentikäinen): 146-150. Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest.

male traditional skills, knowledge, and social roles throughout the initial years of life to give them a broader skillset and range of abilities.

In recent years, many Inuit 2SLGBTQ+ and gender diverse women and girls have adopted two-spirit as a form of decolonization. Using this term also provides an opportunity to identify within the broader 2SLGBTQ+ community. Although some aspects of Inuit culture and gender equality and diversity has been lost due to colonization and Christianization,¹⁴ Inuit women and girls are reclaiming various aspects of sexuality and gender equality through revitalization of language, drum dancing, tattooing and throat singing.¹⁵

Two-spirit identities, teachings, roles, and responsibilities in Métis culture are unique but similar to Cree understandings. For instance, a shared value in Métis and Cree teachings is respecting others by not telling them how to be: this principle creates room for gender diversity. Métis Two-spirited people's specific duties and responsibilities have historically included counselling, healing, and serving as visionaries (seers) in accordance with the belief to "respect all life".¹⁶ In addition to respect, Métis core values and beliefs include strength, kindness, courage, tolerance, honesty, love, sharing, caring, balance, patience, and above all a connection with the Creator and Mother Earth. Emerging from these core values, Métis culture was historically egalitarian: Métis women were the key pillars of their communities and were the providers for their immediate and extended families, and gender-diverse and Two-Spirit people also held important community roles and positions.¹⁷ As with other Indigenous cultures, colonization deprived Métis women and gender diverse people from these valued social roles, leading to widespread discrimination and invisibility of diverse genders and sexualities.



¹⁴ Crass, Barbara A. (1998). Pre-Christian Inuit Mortuary Practices: A Compendium of Archaeological and Ethnographic Sources. Ph.D dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

¹⁵ Arnaquq-Baril, Alethea. (2012). Unikkaat Studios Presents Tunniit: Retracing the Lines of Inuit Tattoos. Retrieved March 15, 2016, from <http://www.unikkaat.com/projects/tunniitretracing-the-lines-of-inuit-tattoos/>

¹⁶ <https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/ubctheses/24/items/1.0228786>

¹⁷ Women of the Métis Nation Document; "Health Policy Paper", (2007), 5.