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# The Institution of Berdache Among the North American Plains Indians

DONALD G. FORGEY

## Abstract

The institution of berdache in aboriginal North America is a relatively well-known phenomena among social scientists, yet a thorough, comprehensive investigation of the institution is lacking. In general, it involved a socially recognized means by which an individual might assume the dress, role, and status of the opposite sex. In this paper, the institution of berdache among the Plains Indians is examined. In Part I, the concept of berdache is more clearly defined; in Part II, the Plains berdache is examined in more detail (including specific ethnographic examples of the institution from several Plains tribes, and a brief discussion of reservation berdaches); Part III consists of an analysis of the institution in terms of Culture and Personality theory. The author suggests that the role of berdache served both personal and social functions in Plains Indian society.

## Introduction

“Unlike our own society, many primitive societies recognize in a social sense, and include in their culture pattern, a place for those individuals whose psychic or physiological peculiarities set them apart from the normal” (Hill, 1935: 273). Such was the case for an institution which occurred widely among the early North American Indians, known today by the French term “berdache.” Basically the institution of berdache involved the extreme introverts, transvestites, and homosexuals in Indian society and was a means by which these individuals could achieve societal recognition and acceptance.

Although the institution was a widespread phenomenon, the actual number of “berdaches” in any tribe at any given time was relatively few—from none to perhaps five or six. Secondly, no berdache arrangement existed for Plains Indian women. Although there are recorded instances of women accompanying war parties and playing an active role in engaging the enemy (e.g., Grinnell, 1923 and Lewis, 1941), such individuals still remained classed as “women”; no institutionalized means existed on the plains by which a woman might change her role and status from “female” to “male.” The Plains

berdache was, hence, in marked contrast to some other American Indian tribes, in which both male and female berdaches existed, e.g., the Navajo (Hill, 1935), Mojave (Devereux, 1937), and Nevada Shoshone (Steward, 1941: 253).

### *The Concept of "Berdache"*

When examining the professional literature on the berdache, one is at once struck by the vagueness and ambiguity which has, in the past, surrounded the use of the term. Throughout the literature on the subject, one finds "berdache" equated with such concepts as hermaphroditism, effeminism, transvestism, or homosexuality. These concepts are, of course, unequatable (cf. Brown, 1960: 222-3); an adequate definition of berdache is, therefore, the first task of this paper.

The derivation of the English word "berdache or 'berdash' is uncertain. Webster suggests that it derived from the French word 'bardash', which derived from the Italian term 'berdascia', which derived from the Arabic 'bardaj', which derived from the Persian 'barah'." Throughout the centuries, the meaning behind these terms has remained the same, namely a "male prostitute", a "kept boy", a "catamite".

In view of the information I have been able to find, I have chosen to utilize the definition of berdache as proposed by Angelino and Shedd. There "berdache" is characterized as "an individual of a definite physiological sex (male or female) who assumes the role and status of the opposite sex, and who is viewed by the community as being of one sex physiologically but as having assumed the role and status of the opposite sex." While adoption of the role structure of the opposite sex implies cross-dressing, "transvestism" is not to be considered synonymous with berdache; the essence of berdache lies not in the change of wardrobe, but rather in the publicly recognized, institutionalized change in *role* and *status*.

While Angelino and Shedd (pg. 125) claim that hermaphroditism should not be considered synonymous with berdache, it is not clear from the American Indian literature whether all tribes did indeed make a distinction between the hermaphrodite and the individual who had institutionally switched his sex. However, it will be noted, hermaphroditism can be explained solely in physiological-anatomical

terms, while this is not the case with the individual who, born of a definite physiological sex, institutionally changes his sex. The two are different orders of phenomena and, hence, for analytical, cross-cultural comparative purposes must be distinguished, even though some tribes may have categorized them both under the same heading.

I had at first also considered using the variable of "homosexual behavior" as a determinant in the definition of berdache. This stress upon erotic object has been the general emphasis of psychoanalysts who have approached the topic of transvestism. Some psychoanalysts have seen transvestism as simply the exemplification of homosexual trends (e.g., Gutheil, 1930; noted in Angelino and Shedd, pg. 123). However, as Kroeber states (1940: 209) in relation to the berdache: "How far invert erotic practices accompanied the status is not always clear from the data and probably varied. . . . at any rate, the North American attitude toward the berdache stresses not his erotic life, but his social status; born a male he became accepted as a woman socially." Moreover, the berdache literature contains accounts of some berdaches who were not homosexuals, and some homosexuals who were not berdaches (e.g., Fletcher and La Flesche, 1905-6: 133; Catlin, 1926; 243-4). A definition of berdache which stresses erotic object, therefore, is not adequate.

### *The Plains Berdache*

The institution of berdache was widespread among the Plains tribes. It has been reported among such nomadic tribes as the Assiniboine (Lowie, 1910), Dakota (Dorsey, 1889-90), Plains Cree (Mandelbaum, 1940: 256-7), Cheyenne (Grinnell, 1923 and Hoebel, 1960), Arapaho (Kroeber, 1902), and Crow (Lowie, 1956), and among such village tribes as the Mandan (Maximilian, 1843), Hidatsa (Dorsey, 1889-90), Omaha (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1950-6), Caddo (Newcomb, 1961: 301), Kansa (James, 1823: 129), and Pawnee (Dorsey and Murie, 1940).

Public sentiments towards berdaches varied among the different tribes, ranging from a neutral attitude of quiet tolerance, as among the Sioux (Hassrick, 1964: 121) to a positive one of great esteem, as among the Cheyenne (Grinnell, 1923 and Hoebel, 1960). Although recognized as "not normal", i.e., not a common or everyday occurrence, the status of berdache was not considered morally disgusting;

rather, adoption of the role was often explained and justified as a "divine mandate"—and, hence, no stigma was attached to the individual (Mirsky, 1937: 417). Nowhere did the berdache exist as an organized fraternity of men. Rather, it was based upon the belief that some individuals, though born in male bodies, were innately women and, as such, constituted a socially recognized class of individuals.

Among the Cheyennes, the tribal berdaches were male homosexuals who often served as second wives in a married man's household. They were called by the Cheyenne "hemaneh", or Halfman-half-woman (Hoebel, 1960: 77); these individuals were held in great esteem and played an active role in Cheyenne social life. According to both Grinnell (1923: 39—40) and Hoebel (1960: 77), there were only five of these in the tribe during its peak in the middle 1800's, all members of the same kindred, the Bare Legs family:

They were all doctors and highly respected. War parties liked to have Halfmen-halfwomen along, not only for their medical skill, but because they were socially graceful and entertaining. Young people liked them because they possessed the most powerful of all love medicines. A suitor who was able to get their help was considered most fortunate, for it was believed that no girl could resist the power of their potions. They were especially sought out as intermediaries to lead the gift-laden horses to a girl's household when a marriage proposal was being made. (The berdaches) . . . through sexual sublimation—with their self-abstinence and denial of their natural born sex—seemed (to the Cheyennes) to achieve great power (Hoebel, 1960: 77).

This belief concerning sexual abstinence as a means of achieving power was a reflection of the Cheyenne philosophy about male sexuality—that it was something to be husbanded and kept in reserve for the great crises of war. Abstinence from sex was considered a great virtue among the Cheyenne. Hoebel states further that

Although we have no direct evidence for it, it appears probable that the presence . . . (of berdaches) . . . on war parties was desired mainly because of their high "psychological" potential of stored-up virility—which was just what the Cheyennes felt was necessary for successful fighting . . . The fact that on the return from battle all the scalps were placed in the custody of the Halfmen-halfwomen indicated that warriors felt their success due to the presence of these personages. The fact that the victory dance was a courting dance wholly directed by the Halfmen-halfwomen emphasized . . . (in the Cheyenne mind) . . . the relation of war to virility. (Page 77).

The social status of berdaches among the Teton Dakota (Western Sioux) appears to have been less honorific than that of the Cheyenne berdache. Known among the Teton as "winkte" (Dorsey, 1889-90: 467), the Dakota berdache, like the Cheyenne hemaneh, was not subjected to scorn or ridicule; rather, he was recognized as "wakan", or sacred, his position having been "supernaturally dictated." ". . . his role was looked upon as inevitable—perhaps unfortunate—but certainly not of his own doing" (Spencer and Jennings, 1965: 373). In practice, however, it appears that winktes may have been slightly ostracized from the mainstream of Dakota society, as they usually lived in their own tipis on the edge of the camp circle—the area occupied by old widows and orphans (Hassrick, 1964: 121). Nevertheless, many of them achieved considerable reknown for their skill in female arts such as cooking, bead and quill work, the tanning of hides, etc.; and, in fact, they were generally believed to excel the Dakota women in these tasks. The contemporary Dakota medicine man John Fire Lame Deer (1972) provides the following explanation of the Dakota winkte:

We think that if a woman has two little ones growing inside her, if she is going to have twins, sometimes instead of giving birth to two babies, they have formed up in her womb into just one, into a half man-half woman kind of being. . . . He could be a hermaphrodite with male and female parts. . . . To us a man is what nature, or his dreams, make him. We accept him for what he wants to be. That's up to him. Still, fathers did not like to see their boys hanging around a winkte's place and told them to stay away.

Lame Deer notes further that "if nature puts a burden on a man by making him different, it also gives him a power". Dakota berdaches, accordingly, were reputed to have the gift of prophesy. They were also sought out to give a newborn child a secret name. Such a name, given by a berdache, was supposed to bring its bearer good luck and long life. Some winktes were also known for their curing abilities.

The adoption of the berdache role by a Dakota male was apparently not always a matter of personal preference. Rather, the role, at times, may have been compulsory. Lame Deer notes that individuals become berdaches "by their own choice, or in obedience to a dream". Lame Deer's statement would seem to agree with Wissler's (1912: 92) report that, though Dakota berdaches did not have ceremonies, they had dreams in common. According to Wissler's

informants, berdaches were made so by dreaming of a "wakan woman", or through repeated dreams of buffalo. Dorsey (1889-90: 467) notes that it is probable that the Sioux regarded the moon as influencing these people.

The institution of berdache among the Omaha (a farming Plains-edge tribe linguistically related to the Dakotas) appears to have been in many ways similar to the Dakota berdache. The suggestion that the institution was, at times, compulsory, in obedience to a dream, and the "influence of the moon" are both found among the Omaha. According to Dorsey (1889-90: 378), the Omaha believed that the unfortunate individuals known as "Min-qu-ga" were mysterious or sacred as a result of having been affected by the Moon Being. Young men reportedly became berdaches as a consequence of the first vision during puberty. When a young man reached puberty, he fasted and awaited a vision; the Moon, it was believed, would come to him, in one hand holding the bow and arrows of a warrior, in the other a woman's pack strap. If the young visionary reached out to take the bow and arrows, the Moon might quickly cross its hands, and the visionary take the female symbol instead. If this occurred, the young man's fate was sealed, and he then had no choice but to don women's clothes and become a berdache.

While the berdache vision no doubt provided supernatural justification for the young man who desired the "Min-qu-ga" role, it might also have dramatic consequences for the youth who abhorred it. Fletcher (1884: 281) has documented at least one account of a young man who had the berdache vision, and, consequently, committed suicide.

The institution of berdache met with governmental suppression when the various tribes were placed on reservations (Simms, 1903: 581). Interestingly enough, however, the institution, in some instances, survived this suppression, for it still exists today among several American Indian tribes. An informed source told me of a contemporary berdache well-known among the Sioux around Fort Thompson on the Lower Brule Reservation in South Dakota. This individual is referred to as "Auntie Pete". As far as my informant knows, he is not a homosexual. "Auntie Pete" wears the clothes of a woman, is reportedly well-adjusted to his role, and is a fully recognized and accepted member of the adult community. He is only rarely subjected to ridicule, and then (according to my informant),

only by the younger, more acculturated Dakotas. Likewise, Lame Deer (1972: 149–50) notes the existence of a Dakota berdache near his home town in South Dakota.

### *Analysis*

Generally, the institution of berdache has been explained in the following manner: The position of berdache in Plains Indian society provided a socially approved outlet for the individual with a strong aversion to the ultramasculine male role, i.e., the role of berdache is a culturally constituted defense. My analysis is, therefore, largely an attempt to examine in more detail and to substantiate the above explanation for the Plains berdache.

*Competition and the Expected Role of the Adult Male:* Plains Indian culture was basically democratic; a relative lack of hereditary wealth on the Plains meant that positions of prestige in society were generally achieved, rather than ascribed. A male might raise his status through the vision quest, by successfully performing the Sun Dance, by giving away horses, food, and other property, by being an accomplished hunter, and—above all else—through successful warfare (Driver, 1972: 441). Since positions of prestige in Plains Indian society were obtained principally by brave deeds in battle, competition between men for war honors was generally intense. However, it was also impressed upon the male that his individual performance was for the good of the entire tribe: game was to be shared and fighting was to protect the women, children, and the elderly.

Driver notes that rivalry and hostility within the family, band, and tribe were given institutionalized outlets by Plains culture, with warfare playing an integral part in this. Physical aggression against the enemy—publicly emphasized and rewarded—served to redirect hostilities arising within the family, band, and tribe.

The pursuit of glory and personal prestige, and a general emphasis upon individual achievement, was characteristic of the role of the adult Plains male. From the day he was born, a Plains Indian boy had it impressed upon him that it was better to die young fighting bravely in battle than to suffer through the sickness and discomfort of old age. Young men were introduced to warfare between the age of 12-17 years, and it was generally only after having taken part in a

war party that a youth could marry or be considered an adult (Driver 1972: 320). What was expected of men in battle is exemplified in the following quote; it is the advice given by an elderly Cheyenne man to his grandson, as the boy was about to embark upon his first war party:

Now, when the party is about to make a charge on the enemy, do not be afraid. Do as the others do. When you fight, try to kill. When you meet the enemy, if you are brave and kill and count a coup, it will make a man of you, and the people will look on you as a man. Do not fear anything. It is not a disgrace to be killed in a fight (Grinnel 1923 I: 119).

The boy was about 13 years old at the time.

*Child-Training and Socialization:* The infancy period for Plains children usually extended from birth to about 5 or 6 years of age. Infants generally received lots of attention and were rarely struck or given any sort of corporal punishment. Correct behavior, rather, was usually induced through advice and admonitions, and the use of threatening stories of the "If you don't behave, the 'bogey man' will get you . . ." type. A child was allowed to nurse anytime it was hungry, and weaning usually did not take place until the fourth or fifth year.

The childhood period extended from about five or six years of age to puberty. Childhood was generally carefree. A young boy in particular was well treated, because (as Grinnell 1923 I: 117 notes), "it was remembered that he might not be long with his people, that in his first fight he might be killed; and, therefore, while he was with them they wished to treat him well—to make him comfortable and happy."

Peer groups began to play an important role in this childhood period. Sandoz 1961: 39 notes for the Sioux: A boy "learned much, perhaps most, from the scorn and laughter of these peers, and from another boy's fist in his face." In this way, a youngster learned early of the power and bite of public opinion. Plains life was, by its very nature, public life, each individual being constantly under the watchful eyes of his fellows. Praise in public opinion, then, was a goal desired by a boy early in life, while public condemnation became the punishment he dreaded. In terms of symbolic interaction theory and Goffman's "dramaturgical" methodology (Goffman, 1959: xi), it

may be said that a Plains male was continually "on stage", and that maintaining "face" in one's performance was a constant and major concern.

The onset of puberty marked important changes—both biological and sociological—for Plains Indian children. Boys and girls were separated. Girls began observing the decorum of adult women, and were available for marriage. For young men, puberty marked the beginning of a series of important events: the first bison hunt, war party, and personal vision quest. As mentioned previously, a young man was not considered eligible for marriage until he had first proven himself, especially in warfare. It was only after marriage (which set up a new series of obligations for a couple) that a young man or woman was recognized as a full adult.

Throughout the periods prior to adulthood, games were modeled after the behavior of adults. Girl's activities emphasized "playing house" while boys' games mimicked the hunt and warfare. Boys' games in particular were often extremely rough, designed to condition them for the rigors of battle. An example of one such game—known as the "Swing-kicking game"—is described here; this version is from the Sioux, although the game was known to other Plains tribes as well.

The Swing-Kicking Game took first place as a rugged conditioner, and there was no pretense at horseplay. Here two rows of boys faced each other, each holding a robe over his left arm. The game was begun only after the formality of the stock question, "Shall we grab them by the hair and knee them in the face until they bleed?" Then using their robes as a shield, they all kicked at their opponents, endeavoring to upset them. There seem to have been no rules, for the boys attacked whoever was closest, often two boys jumping one. Kicking from behind the knees was a good way of throwing an opponent, and once down he was grabbed at the temples with both hands and kneed in the face.

Once released, the blood victims would fight on, kicking and kneeling and bleeding until they could fight no longer. The game was over when one side retreated or someone yelled "Let us stop". As Iron Shell explained, "Some boys got badly hurt, but afterwards we would talk and laugh about it. Very seldom did any fellow get angry (Hassrick 1964: 129-30).

Other games emphasized horsemanship, skill with weapons, etc. Such activities no doubt served to "separate the men from the boys".

Spiro (1961) notes that a social role must satisfy both personal and social needs. The role of berdache in Plains Indian society accomplished both these ends. The relationship between the motives for

the performance of the berdache role and its various personal and social functions is diagrammed in Figure 1.

To begin with, the institution of berdache provided an outlet for the individual with a strong aversion to the ultramasculine male role. In this sense, the role served a manifest personal (integrative) function.

Besides providing an outlet for the introvert with a strong aversion to the male role, the custom of berdache also provided an outlet for aggressive homosexuality. The fact that, as mentioned previously, there might be as many as half a dozen berdaches in a tribe at once provided an escape mechanism for individuals who would otherwise have become anti-social. Also, it should be noted that sodomy by no means occurred only between berdaches. Among some tribes, it has been reported (Catlin, 1926 2: 243-4 and Erikson, 1945: 329-30) that Indian warriors themselves might turn to the tribal berdache for homosexual relations. Thus, in some instances at least, the berdache appears to have served as an outlet for aggressive homosexual tendencies even for men who were not themselves berdaches.

Further, the berdache role contained within it the potential for the "deviant" male to achieve some social prestige. It will be remembered that boys were inculcated early in life with the desire to achieve social recognition and esteem; the primary channel through which this was obtained was, of course, warfare. However, throughout the literature on the Plains berdache, one finds it reported that many berdaches achieved considerable reknown for their skill in women's arts and, in fact, excelled the women in these tasks. It would appear, therefore, that many men who adopted the berdache role—thereby abandoning male pursuits—did not simultaneously abandon the male goal involving the intense desire for social prestige. Rather, the means by which prestige might be attained were simply re-channeled to the pursuits of women. Although the Indians themselves explained the berdache's expertise in the female arts as due to "supernatural assistance", it is suggested here that their skill was due to an intense motivation to gain prestige in competition. The berdache role, therefore, fulfilled the intended and recognized personal (integrative) function of providing the individual with the chance to obtain prestige.

One possible reason for the adoption of the berdache role by a young man involves parental overprotection (Hassrick, 1964). Since

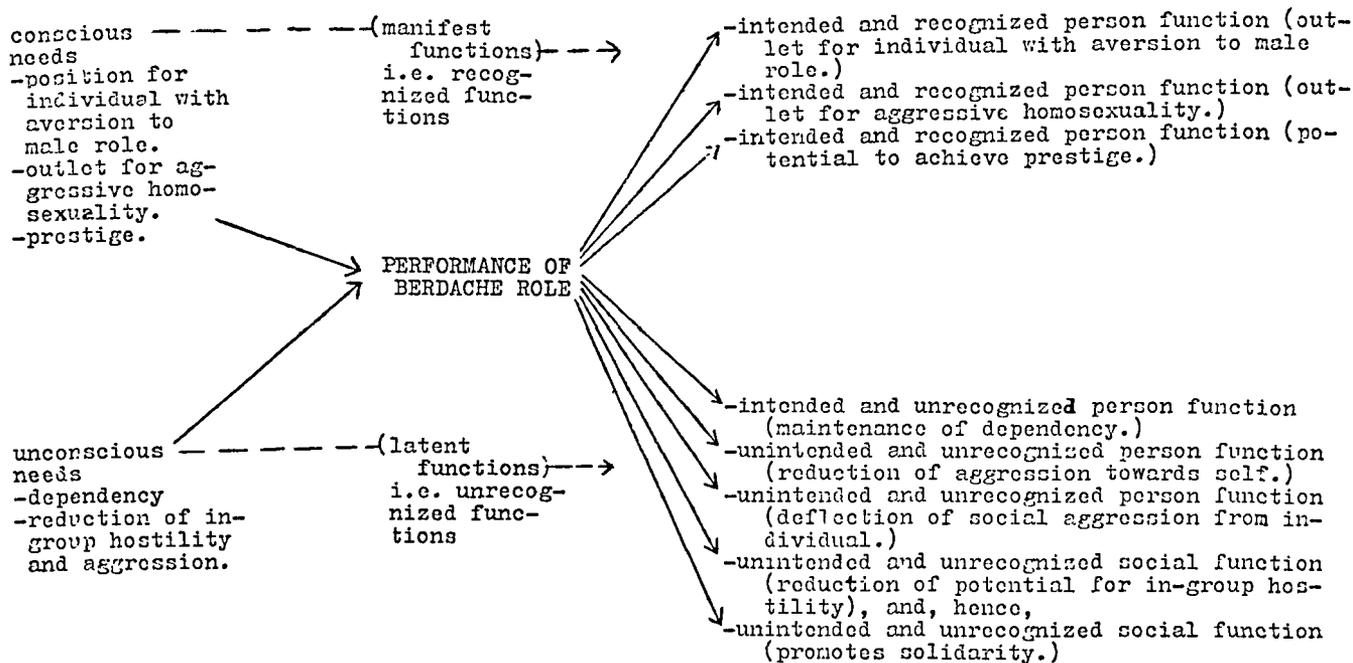


FIGURE 1: Relationship Between the Motives for the Performance of the Plains Berdache Role and Its Various Personal and Social Functions. (Adapted from Spiro's chart on Sioux warfare. Spiro 1961: 110.)

the prestige system among Plains Indians resulted in the death of many fathers in battle many women were left grieving over the loss of their husbands. As a result, a mother—concerned about a similar future for her infant son—might then be led to overprotect him. Overmothering produced a child neurotically anxious about his own masculinity—in a system which emphasized ultramasculinity. The rough-and-tumble games of young men, as discussed previously, further served to separate the brave boys from the “sissies”. As Hassrick (1964) notes for the Sioux: “There can be little question that the Sioux had their mama’s boys; the system was a natural for producing them.” The same, I think, might be said for all Plains tribes. Such a “mama’s boy”—when finally confronted with the period in which he is expected to adopt the ultramasculine, aggressively individualistic, and often dangerous role of the adult male—might instead identify with the principle source of his childhood dependency and protection—his mother—and adopt the female role, rejecting the male role altogether. This flight from masculinity probably reflects envy for the female’s protected role and the desire for that role as a means of escaping male responsibilities and duties (Kardiner 1954). The adoption of the berdache role may, therefore, be seen as an attempt on the part of the young man to extend the dependency of childhood into adulthood.

Further, in terms of unconscious needs, the berdache role served the unintended and unrecognized personal function of reduction of aggression towards self. A true-life incident perhaps best illustrates this point. My “informed source” told me of a contemporary Northern Plains Indian hermaphrodite whom she had known of in Montana. This young man was apparently well-educated; he had gone to school and become a medical technician. However, according to my informant, he was forever plagued by the thought of his physical condition; finally, psychologically and emotionally unable to reconcile himself to the sexual ambiguity of his identity, he committed suicide. Traditional Dakota society of 150 years ago such individuals were provided with a supernatural explanation and justification for their condition. The adjustment to the condition, therefore, was generally a smooth one, both for the individual and society. Although the incident cited involves a hermaphrodite (and hermaphroditism was excluded from “berdache” as defined in this paper), a clear analogy can be drawn, transvestites, and homosexuals in Plains

Indian society. Without such a role transfer, such individuals would have been complete misfits in ultramasculine Plains culture, and no doubt they would have realized this. The institution of berdache provided for this potential problem by granting the individual the ability to maintain a satisfactory self-image; inner conflict and tension for the "deviant" was, hence, kept to a minimum.

This aspect of the berdache can also be viewed in terms of symbolic interaction theory. "Interaction" involves the reciprocal influences of individuals on each other's actions (Goffman, 1959); the "actor" sees himself in the way in which he thinks other people see him. In Plains society, a man who did not "measure up" to the role expected of an adult male was made aware of the negative impression he made upon others through their reciprocal actions towards him. Failure to perform—i.e., to stage the expected character successfully in front of others—could lead the individual to lose his self-image, with self-destruction being a possible consequence. Such a consequence was prevented by the role of berdache.

In line with this reduction in hostility towards the self is the unintended and unrecognized personal function of deflection of social aggression away from the individual. As discussed previously, rivalries and hostilities arising within the tribe had an outlet in that they could be culturally channelled against the enemy. There is, however, no reason to believe that this mechanism for the redirection of intratribal aggression was successful in every case. Goldfrank (1943) cites instances of intratribal violence and even murder among the Dakota Indians and makes it quite clear that—until the threat of white invasion became overwhelming—instances of aggression and violence among tribal members were not infrequent.

Plains Indian social structure, however, provided for one aspect of this potentially disruptive force with the institution of berdache. Granted there were other intratribal mechanisms for the quelling of internal disruption (e.g., tribal councils, the "akicita" or police societies, ritualized joking relationships, a general emphasis upon altruism, etc., cf. Spindler 1957), but the berdache allowed an avenue of escape for men who would otherwise have been total misfits, and against whom aggressive tensions might therefore have been directed. Warriors who demonstrated fear in the face of the enemy were publicly humiliated and ridiculed (Llewellyn and Hoebel, 1941), and one can only imagine the internal hostility and aggression that might

otherwise have been directed against "sissies" living in a society that emphasized ultramasculinity. As Kroeber states (1940): "... the invert is free to work out his inner satisfactions as he can, without persecution from without; and society does not feel itself injured or endangered. A status of adjustment is achieved instead of one conflict and tension." The institution of berdache, therefore, in deflecting social aggression away from the individual, served to reduce the potential for in-group hostility, and, consequently, aided in promoting social solidarity.

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