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**Nonbinary Significance:
Roles and Perceptions Throughout History**

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History 105: World Civilizations

Mr. Gavitte

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In our cisnormative society, the idea of someone outside of the gender binary is a new idea to many, and the legitimacy of their identity is often questioned.¹ But the concept of an individual who is nonbinary is not new at all. It is true that there is not very much scholarly research about nonbinary people, and that when world historians do choose to focus on gender, they tend to look instead at how women have appeared in history.² But lacking the large numbers of articles that other topics have does not correlate with a lack of nonbinary people in the past. Although they have been decimated by colonial influence, nonbinary people have been everywhere, from the *hijras* in India and the *bissu* of Indonesia to the two-spirit people of North America and the cross-cultural genderqueer movement today, and they held important and often spiritual roles in many of those cultures.

Even Mesopotamia, all the way back in the second millennium BCE, had a third gender. This third gender category was for anyone who did not fit into the male/female ones, much like the nonbinary label today. East of Mesopotamia, the Indian subcontinent has records of a third gender from the Vedic Period of 1500 - 500 BCE.³ They had three categories in which people belonged according to their nature, with the third, *tritiya-prakrti*, being the one that hijras were in. Although hijras are assigned male at birth, they present in a feminine way. Some of them chose to be castrated or had it enforced upon them. It is likely that the hijras include a wide variety of identities, but they all join together under the one name.⁴ Hijras have been widespread throughout India for a very long time, even having an origin story within the Ramayana: Lord Rama

¹ Kevin L Nadal et al., "Microaggressions Toward Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Genderqueer People: A Review of the Literature," *The Journal of Sex Research* 53, no. 4-5 (2016): 498-501.

Note: Cisnormativity is the assumption that everyone is cisgender (that their gender identity matches their assigned sex at birth).

² Wiesner-Hanks, Merry, "World History and the History of Women, Gender, and Sexuality," *Journal of World History* 18, no. 1 (2007): 3-4.

Note: Although I am using nonbinary as a general term meaning "not fully or only a man or woman" for all of these people, they may not necessarily identify with that specific term, as that term is Western and not culturally specific. Additionally, the culturally specific terms that I am using are, to the best of my knowledge, correct, commonly used, and inoffensive, but I am not of any of those cultures so I can't be sure. Finally, I am going to use they/them pronouns for these groups, in an attempt to not misgender anyone, but some individuals themselves might use other pronouns.

³ Note: The Vedic Period gets the name from the Vedas, which are religious texts. During this period, people spread to the East in the Indian subcontinent, social classes emerged, and society developed into a more settled agricultural state.

⁴ Himanshi Singh, and Pradeep Kumar, "Hijra: An Understanding," *Journal of Psychosocial Research* 15, no. 1 (2020): 77.

told all men and women to leave him, but the hijras stayed as they were not included in those categories. When Lord Rama saw this, he was impressed by their dedication, and so gifted them the power to bless other people.⁵ These blessings are for luck, fertility, and other such items.

Hijras continued to live on long after the Vedic Period, often holding high positions in Islamic institutions and being treated very well. They were administrators, political advisors, courtesans, and warriors; some of them could even influence state decisions.⁶ However, British colonization changed everything. Masculinity was vital to the British ideology and so the obvious subversion of that in public spaces by the hijra disgusted them and was considered a challenge to colonial rule.⁷ The Criminal Tribes Act made it easy to criminalize and deny rights to the hijra. With public performance and public cross-dressing being acts that one could be imprisoned for up to two years for, the money making capabilities of the hijra were greatly reduced. Police were the enemy and often very abusive to hijra, a legacy that would continue to modern times. Aside from being viciously targeted by the government, hijras also suffered when many Western values started spreading through the area. These new values undermined the belief in their powers of spirituality, lowering their position in society and forcing them to find other work.⁸

Today, hijras are still majorly stigmatized, exploited, and abused within the Indian subcontinent. From a young age, children who are assigned male but interested in feminine acts and items may be rejected by their families. Often, they may be abused in an attempt to 'fix' them, or at least make them hide it better as a secret life. School is another dangerous place, full of bullying, blackmailing, and abuse. Many young hijra can't survive in this kind of environment and so they drop out of school and run away from home.⁹ For example, one participant in a study said, "I could not continue my education because the boys at school ridiculed me and called me names since my body language, movement and gestures were somehow different and students were able to

⁵ Singh and Kumar, "Hijra: An Understanding," 78.

⁶ Singh and Kumar, "Hijra: An Understanding," 79.

⁷ Jessica Hinchy, "Obscenity, Moral Contagion and Masculinity: Hijras in Public Space in Colonial North India," *Asian Studies Review* 38, no. 2 (2014): 275.

⁸ Serena Nanda, "The Hijras of India," *Journal of Homosexuality* 11, no. 3-4 (1985): 49.

⁹ Aurangzaib Alizai et al., "Impact of Gender Binarism on Hijras' Life Course and Their Access to Fundamental Human Rights in Pakistan," *Journal of Homosexuality* 64, no. 9 (2017): 1222.

recognize the difference.”¹⁰ The only place left to go is a home that is specifically made for hijras to live in, run by a mentor called a *guru*. These places let hijras be free to be themselves; they can wear makeup and feminine clothes freely. However, they also are required to make money, and although they perform at events such as weddings and births, that is primarily done through sex work with a bit of begging as well. Sex work leaves them at high risk for both abuse and HIV/AIDS, but other jobs are mostly unavailable due to stigma, lack of education, and abuse from coworkers.¹¹ With most hijras being forced into sex work, the stigmatization becomes worse, making it even harder to get other jobs in a vicious cycle. Additionally, police often ignore reports of abuse and may even be abusive themselves. Once a hijra is old enough to be considered too unattractive for sex work, they are often thrown out of their homes by their gurus as they are not bringing in money any longer.¹² Thus, the group homes are places where they are provided with shelter and care, alongside some manipulation and enforced sex work. This lifetime of abuse means that many hijras have some sort of psychiatric disorder, but they can't get help from healthcare.¹³

Despite all these struggles, there are still some hijras who were accepted by their families, managed to get a good education, and rose to high positions.¹⁴ Slowly, they are gaining more acceptance; for example, in 2014, India's Supreme Court recognized and allowed hijras to claim a third gender status. Many hijras have reported better healthcare, more job opportunities, and less violent crimes since 2014.¹⁵ Additionally, young hijras may be able to see themselves in a more positive light. However, having an official status often comes with problems as well. In Bangladesh, recognizing hijras meant that they had to define what exactly it meant to call someone a hijra. They were then defined by officials as people with “genital defects,” leaving out much of the hijra population who were assigned male and chose not to be castrated.¹⁶

¹⁰ Alizai et al., “Impact of Gender Binarism,” 1222-1223.

¹¹ Alizai et al., “Impact of Gender Binarism,” 1225-1226.

¹² Alizai et al., “Impact of Gender Binarism,” 1228-1229.

¹³ Singh and Kumar, “Hijra: An Understanding,” 83.

¹⁴ Singh and Kumar, “Hijra: An Understanding,” 84-85.

¹⁵ Suzy Woltmann, “Third Gender Politics: Hijra Identity Construction in India and Beyond,” *South Asian Review* 41, no. 1 (2020): 14.

¹⁶ Hossain, Adnan. “The Paradox of Recognition: Hijra, Third Gender and Sexual Rights in Bangladesh.” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 19, no. 12 (2017): 1424.

Elsewhere around the world, in Indonesia, the Bugis recognize five gender categories: man, woman, masculine woman (*calalai*), feminine man (*calabai*), and bissu, who combine masculine and feminine elements.¹⁷ The bissu have been around for somewhere close to 600 years, and were the priests of the pre-Islamic Bugis religion. This religion emphasized dualistic ideas, and so the bissu needed to combine both sides of the binary in order to be able to be priests.¹⁸ They are mentioned in the *I La Galigo*, a 6,000 page document written between the 13th and 15th centuries, and held many important roles. For example, they were royal court priests of the Bone Kingdom, guardians of sacred objects, performers of formal rituals, healers, and they held a great deal of cultural knowledge.¹⁹ Many of these roles parallel those of the hijra: they both held high positions, could bless people, and knew many important cultural things. Additionally, they were both considered more spiritual than the average person due to their nonbinary nature. The gender of the bissu forms from many intersecting elements, such as behavior, sex, work, performance, and sexuality, as it is often assumed to be in our current world.²⁰ Further, there is a cultural element behind it and it can't quite be equated to nonbinary genders of the current Western world.

The bissu, much like the hijras, underwent the negative effects of colonization, although, for them, it was both Islamic and Dutch influence that impacted them. The very existence of the bissu completely contrasted Islamic teachings.²¹ The separate religion was a form of idol worshipping besides Allah, which was considered a sin. As a result, they were killed or forced to act as men in an extreme attempt to get rid of them. The new religion meant a decline in rituals and so a lack of work for bissu, leading to them struggling. Society was indoctrinated to believe that bissu were unlucky, which led

¹⁷ Petsy Jessy Ismoyo, "DECOLONIZING GENDER IDENTITIES IN INDONESIA: A STUDY OF BISSU 'THE TRANS-RELIGIOUS LEADER' IN BUGIS PEOPLE," *Paradigma: Jurnal Kajian Budaya* 10, no. 3 (2020): 277.

Note: The Bugis are an ethnic group in South Sulawesi, which is a province in Indonesia.

Note: I said masculine woman and feminine man because that is what the words translate as, but they are not men and women, but another category instead.

¹⁸ Michael Peletz, "Gender Pluralism: Muslim Southeast Asia since Early Modern Times," *Social Research* 78, no. 2 (2011): 666.

¹⁹ Matthew Kennedy, "Clothing, Gender, and Ritual Transvestism: The Bissu of Sulawesi," *The Journal of Men's Studies* 2, no. 1 (1993): 4.

²⁰ Sharyn Graham, "It's Like One of Those Puzzles: Conceptualising Gender Among Bugis," *Journal of Gender Studies* 13, no. 2 (2004): 114-115.

²¹ Batari Oja Andini, "The Islamization in Bugis Society during the Darul Islam Era under Kahar Muzakar in 1960s," *Dinika* 2, no. 1 (2017): 26.

to rejection. Even those who may have supported the bissu were forced to act otherwise to protect themselves. The area's culture slowly changed from one of gender pluralism to one of a gender binary system. These trends of erasure continued under Dutch rule and past independence in 1949. In 1966, the government struck again in an act called Operation Toba. Many people were killed, others had to go into hiding, and important ceremonial equipment was burned and then sunk. Additionally, when the last leader of the bissu died, the government seized their land.²² This governmental erasure mirrors almost exactly what happened to the hijras of India, with both being persecuted heavily using the law by their colonizers.

Despite these numerous efforts to eliminate them, the bissu actively resisted attempts to cut them down, and they often succeeded. Today, many of the nonbinary people of Indonesia who are Muslim are content in their identity, and even use Islam to justify themselves. For example, one stated, "It's part of God's plan, [...]. It's my *kodrat*."²³ However, some Islamic leaders believe that it is just a hobby and that they can change.²⁴ The bissu are persisting still, working in salons and doing ritual activities, bridal makeup, and custom events much like hijras do, but their continued place in Indonesian culture is uncertain. They will have to fight to remain despite religious objections.

In North America, many Native American tribes had some form of nonbinary people, who are now labeled two-spirit. The term lumps together many different groups, but has been taken on to highlight the cultural aspects of their identities. Some examples of different identities are the *wintke* of the Lakota, the *nadleehi* of the Navajo nation, and the *Ihamana* of the Zuni. Two-spirit people held different roles in different regions, including fortune telling, shamanism, medicine, mediation, matchmaking, and culture keeping, as well as being skilled artisans.²⁵ Additionally, although some of these roles align with those of the hijra and the bissu, two-spirit people were also considered caretakers, helping to name and guide children throughout their lives, which isn't

²² Ismoyo, "DECOLONIZING GENDER IDENTITIES," 286.

²³ Graham, "Conceptualising Gender Among Bugis," 111.
Note: Kodrat means fate or nature.

²⁴ Graham, "Conceptualising Gender Among Bugis," 111.

²⁵ Sabine Lang, "Native American Men-women, Lesbians, Two-spirits: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 20, no. 3/4 (2016): 307.

something that has been noted quite as much in those previously mentioned. However, some other cultures saw nonbinary people to be caretakers as well, such as the *mahu* of Hawaii, the *muxes* of Mexico, and the *fa'afafine* of Samoa. Often, two-spirit people who were assigned male at birth would marry men or have sex with men. Although these interactions were same-sex ones, the men involved were not considered gay as the two-spirit person was not considered masculine, but often took on a more feminine role. This idea is also seen in some other societies with nonbinary people, for example, among the muxes of Mexico.

Two-spirit people were widely accepted among Native American societies for a number of reasons. Sometimes children would be raised as the opposite sex because a family had only had boys and needed a girl to do women's work; sometimes it was believed that a relative who had passed away had reincarnated in the child, and so they would be raised as the same gender as that person.²⁶ This is a bit different to hijras and the bissu. Those are more self recognized, although some poor parents might choose to hand over their child to become a hijra. Additionally, sometimes calalai and calabai in Indonesia were raised as such by their parents, so there are parallels around the world. Sometimes, rather than be raised that way, the kids themselves would refuse to do work that their sex dictated, or they would receive a vision.²⁷ Some tribes only had people assigned male who presented differently, similarly to the hijra. Some also had people assigned female at birth who presented differently, which is not seen as commonly around the world, but somewhat mirrors the calalai of Indonesia.

Once again though, colonization, this time in the form of Europeans, changed all of the perceptions of two-spirit people. People who presented themselves differently to their assigned sex were not understood by Western colonizers, considered deviant, and so were targeted by missionaries, boarding school teachers, and other non-Native American people.²⁸ The federal government made direct attempts to regulate and destroy Native American culture, similarly to when the hijras and the bissu were persecuted. For a long time, almost 100 years, it was illegal to practice their religion.

²⁶ Lang, "Native American Men-women," 306.

²⁷ Walter L Williams, "Persistence and Change in the Berdache Tradition Among Contemporary Lakota Indians," *Journal of Homosexuality* 11, no. 3-4 (1986): 194.

²⁸ Lang, "Native American Men-women," 300.

Boarding schools in particular were where Native American culture was decimated. Children were taken away and forced into these schools, forbidden from speaking their own languages, and made to assimilate into the European culture.²⁹ Indigenous people acknowledge this assimilation as the reason for change; for example, one man said, “the attitude of respect changed [...] because of social pressures, as Indians who had been educated in white schools lost respect for the traditions.”³⁰ Thus, in a genocidal manner, much of the culture, and subsequently, the gender systems within the culture, was lost. Homophobia and transphobia entered their worlds.

Today, Native Americans may identify as two-spirit in an attempt to connect to their culture, and some had grandparents who recognized their special nature and raised them as such.³¹ They are somewhat accepted within their own communities, still being seen as spiritual teachers and role models. One medicine man stated of a two-spirit person, “we accept him for what he wants to be.”³² Even so, due to the colonization, some Native Americans have lost respect for two-spirit people. Although gender roles are being crossed by more and more people today, two-spirit people also have a spiritual component to their identity that some younger people have forgotten about. Much like hijras and the bissu, this is what truly sets them apart from men and women of these cultures.

These nonbinary genders all have cultural components that they wouldn't be complete without. The modern genderqueer movement is different from that as it has people of many different cultures, and so having culturally specific terms would be very hard. If a culture has a term for a nonbinary gender, then there is a historical precedent behind it, and it is for people of that culture. These terms that link a culture and an identity together are still used by some, but most modern Western terms stay away from that. For example, anyone from any culture could call themselves agender without appropriating someone else's culture. In this way, they create a space for people who do not have their own cultural terms or do not want to use them.

²⁹ Margaret Robinson, "Two-Spirit Identity in a Time of Gender Fluidity," *Journal of Homosexuality* 67, no. 12 (2020): 1676-1677.

³⁰ Williams, "Persistence and Change," 193.

³¹ Lang, "Native American Men-women," 311.

³² Williams, "Persistence and Change," 192.

Another difference is that most cultures mentioned at the very least tie together gender identity and gender expression, if not much more, such as sexual orientation. Modern culture's ideas vary a lot by where one is. Many areas are heteronormative, cisnormative, and ascribe to gender roles. Thus, they may assume that someone who is assigned male at birth will have a masculine identity, be attracted to women, and behave in a way that is expected of men. Behaving in ways outside of the norm might not be accepted freely. In a few places, those ideas might be considered unrelated. In other areas, those assumptions may be made, but other behavior is accepted. In Oregon, for example, many students learn in school about the "genderbread person", which points out the differences between sex, gender expression, gender identity, and sexual orientation using a gingerbread person and makes it clear that they are separate ideas, but most people will still assume that someone is cisgender.³³ There are many different Western identities under the nonbinary umbrella, such as agender, bigender, or genderfluid. Most are considered to be defined only by gender identity, although some labels, such as transmasculine or transfeminine, may also include their gender expression in their identity.

There is now more education about queer identities in general, and nonbinary people are accepted in many parts of the world. There is a nonbinary elected official, Mauree Turner, who is a legislator in Oklahoma; there is nonbinary representation in StarTrek; there are some famous nonbinary celebrities such as Miley Cyrus and Ruby Rose. Having well known people who are nonbinary helps to build awareness about their existence, as well as to provide people who are just coming into their identities with role models. Many more people may feel emboldened to come out after seeing other people living their lives as their true self. Additionally, they are provided with words or descriptions that may match what they feel, which may inspire some to come out instead of silently suffering alone because there don't appear to be any other options. These people now, famous or not, don't have any special roles in society that others can't do like hijra, bissu, or two-spirit people do. Perhaps, this is because the gender of

³³ Note: The "genderbread person" is a teaching tool that breaks gender down into smaller pieces to make it easier to understand. It takes a picture of a gingerbread person and labels the head, heart, crotch, and whole body with identity, attraction, sex, and expression respectively.

those people was greatly linked to the role that they played in their community, whereas all that is necessary today for someone to be nonbinary is to identify as such.

However, despite this slowly growing amount of representation and acceptance, in other parts of the country (and world), people lose jobs for coming out, they are kicked out of their homes, and they are disrespected. The lack of acceptance and accessibility makes life very difficult for those who are nonbinary. Within schools, one survey found that 75% of trans youth felt that they were unsafe because of their gender.³⁴ Within work, being out as nonbinary negatively affects someone's chances of a promotion.³⁵ It is hard to change names, to change markers on government documents, to come out, and to have gender neutral bathrooms. When filling out forms, there is often not an option to select a nonbinary gender, and someone is forced into choosing either male or female, which can cause a lot of discomfort. Even when researching or supporting transgender people, many will focus only on binary trans people and disregard nonbinary people. When meeting new people, most will try to assign a gender to everyone in their mind, and often the only genders they use are male and female. Being misgendered everyday takes a toll on someone, and living in a world like this that is clearly not structured for nonbinary people makes it difficult to stay positive and keep on going. It creates a mindset where someone has to be constantly considering if it's safe to be out and if it's even worth it to be seen as their true self. As a result, many nonbinary people have mental health issues. According to the Trevor Project, over 60% of trans and nonbinary youth engaged in self-harm in the previous year, over 50% said that they had seriously considered suicide, and over 21% had attempted suicide.³⁶ Clearly, it is not a smooth path.

Additionally, intersectional identities can be difficult to come to terms with. For example, many of those who are religious struggle with being nonbinary and religious. Furthermore, queer people of color often struggle twice over, facing racism in the queer community as well as transphobia from others. For example, one two-spirit person

³⁴ Brittany J Allen et al., "At the Margins: Comparing School Experiences of Nonbinary and Binary-Identified Transgender Youth," *The Journal of School Health* 90, no. 5 (2020): 359.

³⁵ Skylar Davidson, "Gender Inequality: Nonbinary Transgender People in the Workplace," *Cogent Social Sciences* 2, no. 1 (2016): 10.

³⁶ The Trevor Project, "2020 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health," The Trevor Project, 2-3. Note: The Trevor Project is a group that works on suicide prevention and provides crisis intervention for queer youth. They do many research studies to bring new knowledge to the area of suicidology.

stated, “I could not find a positive place for myself in the predominantly white, gay scene.”³⁷ Racism also impacts their chances at school and work, making it very difficult to move up due to the oppression. Thus, it is evident that the results of colonialism are still here and alive within modern transphobic attitudes. That which the hijra, bissu, two-spirit people, and others went through resulted in the world that there is today, where new and old identities alike are persecuted.

Overall, it is clear that nonbinary people have existed in many different cultures, and continue to be here.³⁸ They hold many similarities, such as being considered spiritual and having special roles, but also had differences across the cultures. Colonialism almost managed to wipe out various cultural identities, but they held on, and are surviving today. The identities present today can’t quite be the same as the ones from before colonization. They have been, in some way, changed completely due to being persecuted. For example, many bissu are Muslim, and do not practice the religion that bissu from before did, or they may practice them together in some form. Some people simply use their cultural terms in an attempt to connect to that culture, and do not carry out the ritual practices or typical roles that they would have done in the past. They may not fully understand the cultural or spiritual aspect of the identity that they have chosen to take on. For example, some Native American people have mentioned that modern two-spirit people are not the same, saying, “some younger people today are called winkte, but I don’t think they are really winkte because they don’t have spirituality.”³⁹ Other people are nonbinary without a historical precedent behind their culture, feeling that the term is the correct one despite it not being connected to their culture at all. All of these genders, in addition to many not mentioned, show that the gender binary was not a constant around the world, and that nonbinary people were actually quite important to societies in the past, and survive to this day.

³⁷ Alex Wilson, “How We Find Ourselves: Identity Development and Two-Spirit People,” *Harvard Educational Review* 66, no. 2 (1996): 312.

³⁸ Note: Many studies have been done through a biased lens, which may lead to researchers either ignoring the presence of nonbinary people, or possibly missing it due to incorrect cultural cues. On the other hand, queer theorists may get overexcited in their researching and end up inventing an example of a nonbinary gender that wasn’t actually there. However, most studies are either extensive enough to appear legitimate or they contain information that is from a primary source.

³⁹ Williams, “Persistence and Change,” 193.

Note: Winkte is a Lakota identity that falls under the wider two-spirit umbrella.

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