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Transgender History: Trans Expression in Ancient Times

Filed By [Mercedes Allen](#) | [February 12, 2008 8:38 AM](#) | [1 comments](#)

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[EDITOR'S NOTE:] *Frequent guest blogger Mercedes Allen has*

written a six part history of transgender people for the Project that will run weekly on Tuesdays. A listing of the other sections is at the bottom of the post.

History is written by the victors. Unfortunately, this tends to mean that a lot of truth gets lost over the eons, peaceful tribes can become demonized, portrayals of nature reverence can be twisted into "witchcraft" and a lot of the accurate documentation becomes lost over the years in intellectual pogroms, such as the burning of the library at Alexandria in Egypt by the Romans.



History was never meant to be that sort of boring "is there gonna be a test on this" sort of dry reading, but it often becomes so, because it becomes an onslaught of dates and peoples and events that we don't recognize. It doesn't help that with histories written by victors, many of the lives we might recognize ourselves in become obliterated from memory. Such is the case with most things transgender or homosexual, which at one time were seen to be rooted in similar human need. It was once said that there were three facets to our existence: survival, reproduction, and everything else -- and to the person who made the case, "everything else" -- which tended to encompass those things creative, imaginative and ingenious -- could be classified as "art." If ancient cultures bore understanding of this, then one wonders if transgender and same-sex love were seen as an art of their own... a creative exploration of love and affection.



It may sound far-fetched, but history (even if written by victors) offers little glimpses of reality at times, and many of these glimpses tend to indicate that the gender transgression and gay / lesbian / bisexual love that is often vilified today was once quite respected and at times even encouraged. As a transgender and bisexual woman, I'm not personally inclined to think of myself as better than anyone or to try to portray myself as such, but a careful look at history does provide a rewarding sense that I have something to offer, and am a being worthy of respect.

It is impossible to know the motives of the early civilizations' approach. We can only see history in modern light and with our own experiences. Without the economic and socio-political backgrounds to some of these notations, we don't know if transgender behaviour was any result of coercion, conspiracy or other motivations. I would like to think that much of the experience was genuine, although I'm not so naive to believe that accounts of castrated boys raised as wives of Roman or Turkish military leaders were consensual. History unfortunately sometimes can only touch the surface, not revealing the beauty and ugliness underneath.

Consequently, I can only construct a history that is dry and vague at times, and intriguing at others. I also have to rely heavily on a few selected texts at some points, as there is so little other information available on those periods of time. There may be the occasional inaccuracy -- I welcome verifiable corrections. However, I have found that the exercise has unearthed some fascinating gems.

Dually-Gifted, Dually Respected?

What we understand as transgender (in its many different forms) has been understood quite differently at various periods of time. In the earliest ages, people who were seen to bridge the genders were quite often thought to possess wisdom that traditionally-gendered people did not, and were venerated for this. As civilizations transformed from matrilineal and communal societies into male-driven (patriarchal) societies with rigid class divisions and emphasis on property ownership, those male-driven cultures reduced the status of women... and because they were threatened by a persistent belief that those who blurred gender lines possessed some greater insight, they set out to crush gender-transgressive people most of all. Into the modern age, transfolk resurfaced, but it is a long climb back just to restore any sense of equality.

In earliest civilizations, throughout Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Northern Africa, tribes of different types venerated what they often identified as "The Great Mother." In nearly all of these traditions, MTF priestesses (often castrated or with some form of eunuching, which included a number of different body modifications of the time) presided, and the cultures were primarily communal systems which held women

(venerated as a source of life) in high esteem. Matriarchal in nature, the cultures often espoused peace, but the realities of early civilization and tribal existence did not always allow for this.

Roman historian Plutarch depicts "The Great Mother" as an Intersex deity from whom the two sexes had not yet split. Trans-gendered depictions of The Great Mother and Her priestesses are found in ancient artifacts back to the earliest civilizations in Mesopotamia, Assyria, Babylonia and Akkad. Some historians portray MTF priestesses as being recognized as something sacred, while others portray them as undergoing castration in order to subvert matrilineal rule and wrest religious direction from the control of women. David F. Greenberg, however, concludes that records of trans priestesses do date back "to the late Paleolithic (if not earlier)," suggesting that the advent of transgender priestesses was not simply a later reaction to feminine leadership and veneration. In some regions, particularly the oldest European customs, it even appears that some form of gender transgression was almost considered one's religious duty, at times (i.e. certain revelries).

Surviving Records

Displaying the earliest records of trans existence chronologically is virtually impossible, so I will sort them primarily by location.

The Middle East

In the Middle East (Cradle of Civilization), MTF (male-to-female) priestesses were known to have served Astarte, Dea Syria, Atargatis and Ashtoreth / Ishtar. Additional MTF "gallae" served Cybele, the Phrygians' embodiment of The Great Mother. Trans expression was also present in the early genesis of the Kumbh Mela festival in Allahbad (India).

For centuries, Muslim tradition differentiated between MTF transsexuals who live as prostitutes or criminals, and those in whom femininity was innate and who lived blamelessly. The latter were called "mukhannathun," and accepted within the boundaries of Islam. Mukhannathun could have relationships with either men or women, but only those who had been castrated or were exclusively attracted to men were allowed into womens' spaces. Later, it was ordered that all mukhannathun undergo castration.

Africa

In Africa, intersexed deities and spritual beliefs in gender transformation are recorded in Akan, Ambo-Kwanyama, Bobo, Chokwe, Dahomean (Benin), Dogon, Bambara, Etik, Handa, Humbe, Hunde, Ibo, Jukun, Kimbundu, Konso, Kunama, Lamba, Lango, Luba, Lugbara (where MTFs are called okule and FTMs are called agule), Lulua, Musho, Nat, Nuba, Ovimbundu, Rundi, Sakpota, Shona-Karonga, Venda, Vili-Kongo, and Zulu tribes. Some of this tradition survives in West Africa, as well as Brazilian and Haitian ceremonies that derive from West African religions. In Abomey, the Heviosso maintain trans traditions, in an area renowned for Amazon-like warrior women.

In seventh Century BC, King Ashurbanipal (Sardanapalus) of Assyria spent a great deal of time in womens' clothing, something that was later used to justify overthrowing him. In Egypt, 1503 BC, Egyptian Queen Hatshepsut ascended to the throne, the second Egyptian queen to rule (the first was Queen Sobekneferu of the 12th Dynasty). Possibly learning from the disfavor shown to her predecessor, she donned male clothing and a false beard signifying kingship, and reigned until 1482 B.C. She had one daughter, Neferure, who she groomed as successor (male clothing, false beard and all), but Neferure did not live into adulthood. After her death, her second husband attempted to erase all record of her. And Nzinga ruled as King of Angola from 1624 - 1653, cross-dressed and led several successful military battles against the Portuguese.

Asia

In Asia, Hijras persist even today, although their reverence is often limited to the belief that their presence at weddings is a good portent for the couple. They do tend to suffer in the modern Indian caste system, something that "eunuchs" of all types are banding together to work to improve (i.e. only recently was a Hijra able to vote, and now there have been Hijran elected officials). Historically, they have often worshipped the mother-goddess Bahuchara Mata, although some also worshipped Shiva in his half-man, half-woman persona, Ardhanarisvara.

Many early Indonesian societies had transgender figures in religious functions, including the basaja, from the island of Sulawesi (The Celebes). In ancient China, the shih-niang wore mixed-gender ceremonial clothing. In Okinawa, some shamans underwent winagu nati, a process of "becoming female." In Korea, the mudang was a shaman or sorceress who was quite often MTF. In February 1995, archaeologist Timothy Taylor discovered evidence of transgender lives in the Iron Age graves found in southern Russia.

Fanchuan was a name given to stage crossdressing, such as male-to-female performances in Beijing opera, and female-to-male acting in Taiwanese Opera. Chui Chin, a cross-dressing Chinese revolutionary and feminist was beheaded in 1907 for organizing an uprising against the Manchu dynasty.

Europe

In Europe, MTF priestesses served Artemis, Hecate and Diana. Early traditions thrived longest in Greece, and the mythology of the day incorporated tales of cross-dressing by Achilles, Heracles, Athena and Dionysus, as well as literal and metaphorical gender changes. The blind prophet Tiresias is often mentioned as a figure who had lived many years of his life in each different gender, and was said to have possessed acute wisdom for it. The tale of an FTM character, Kaineus (Caeneus), who was viewed as a "scorner and rival of the gods" and was driven into the earth by the Centaurs, is an example of Greek mythology attempting to subvert earlier trans-oriented legends. And Cupid was a dual god/dess of love, originally portrayed as intersex. The child of Hermes and Aphrodite, one of Cupid's variant names provided the origin for the term, "hermaphrodite." Some time between 6th Century and 1st Century BC, in the Greek Hippocratic Corpus (collection of medical texts), physicians propose that both parents secrete male or female "bodies" and that if the father's secretion is female (rather than male) and the mother's is male, the result would either be a "man-woman" (effeminate male) or a "mannish" female.

In the later development of Europe, early alchemists borrowed from pre-Christian spirituality at times, and some of these mystics created the concept of the "chemical wedding," a merger of male and female spiritual attributes to achieve perfection. Some alchemists saw this as a chemical concept that would lead to the process of transmuting lead into gold, while others touted that this was more of a personal, spiritual transformation. While much of this was later absorbed into secret societies such as the Freemasons and Rosicrucians, the belief hints at transformative and bigender-conscious reverence. Even the Bible has such "gender-wedding" imagery at times, in allusions to the "Bride of Christ" found in the Book of Revelations and some comments by later epistle writers.

The Amazons, a group of warriors often in conflict with Greeks and later mythologized, seem to have been thought of as trans, and Pliny the Younger referred to them as the Androgynae "who combine the two sexes." They carried double-edged axes which may have been symbols of intersexuality, as were those carried by the South American tribe that inspired the naming of the Amazon River.

In the Klementi tribe of Albania, if a virgin swore before twelve witnesses that she would not marry, she was then recognized as male, carried weapons, and herded flocks.

Years later, Joan of Arc was said to have followed in the traditions of Gentiles and heathen. In France, "gens" referred to matrilineal farming communities, indicating some pre-Christian tradition that she evidently had stirred up, inspiring older values and explaining why she had become such a potent threat to

the church while alive (more later).

North America

In North America, as late as 1930 (with the Klamath in the Pacific Northwest), Two-Spirit Natives are noted among tribal communities. Originally called "berdache," a name of largely insulting intent given by Europeans, Native culture adopted the term "Two-Spirit" as a blanket term -- though in reality, nearly every tribe had at least one (often several) unique name for Two-Spirit peoples, with the names sometimes addressing different aspects of those populations. Two-Spirit actually covers the full range of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons, as well as intersex and other gender-variant people. It was often thought that Two-Spirits had two spirits inhabiting the same body, and that Two-Spirit people deserved a special kind of reverence. Jesuit priest Jacques Marquette notes that in the Illinois and Nadouessi tribes, nothing is decided without their advice.

The sensational nature of reports of Two-Spirit peoples and the hatred they contained were used to try to justify genocide, theft of land and the dismantling of Native culture and religion. In Panama, explorer Vasco Nunez de Balboa threw a King and forty others of a Native tribe to be eaten by his dogs, because they crossdressed or had same-sex partners. Spaniards committed similar genocides in the Antilles and Louisiana. In those areas where Two-Spirit traditions survived, they were later driven underground or supplanted completely by missionary teachings and residential schools, both of which were bent on destroying Native culture.

Inuit FTMs serve White Whale Woman, who was believed to have been transformed into a man or woman-man.

South America

In South America, MTF priestesses have been found among the Araucanians (southern Chile and Argentina) and Mapuche, although after oppressive Spanish contact, they were largely replaced by female priestesses. Some females in the Tupinamba tribe lived as men, hunted and went to war. In 1576, explorer Pedro de Magalhaes recorded this, and recalling the Greek legend of the Amazons, named the Amazon river for these Tupinamba. For the Yoruba (Brazil), the deity Shango is represented as all sexes.

Unclear, But Present

Although it's doubtful that all of these traditions had a common origin, and possible that some of these are trans only by coincidence, there do seem to be a number of similar themes tying them together. Sorting through them to find specific motives and beliefs is impossible, though, because so little of the original traditions was recorded or survived the various book purges over time. It is only possible to speculate.

Alas, history is written by the victors, and the victors were largely not transgender or homosexual / bisexual persons.

This post is Part 1 of a six part series on transgender history. The other parts to the series are:

- *The Rise of Hatred (Middle Ages)*
- *Into the Modern Age (1700s - 1932)*
- *From Germany to Stonewall (1933 - 1968)*

- *Stonewall and Its Fissures (1969 - 1995)*
- *Toward the Future (1996 - 2007)*



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Ian Miller · ★ Top Commenter · Fall River, Wisconsin

The term "Hermaphrodite" was coined after Hermes, not cupid. Hermes, Hermaphrodite. He was a very feminine man. Most Greek gods were portrayed with beards, yet he is the only god without a beard. Hence, less masculine.

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Cathryn | [February 12, 2008 10:00 AM](#)

If you wish to read a more extensive history of the transsexual priestesses of the ancient world, I have a series of essays at <http://gallae.com/cathy/thoughts.htm> I occasionally rewrite them with additional material from my own research.

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[Bil Browning](#) | [February 12, 2008 12:50 PM](#)

I'm really excited that you're doing this for us, Mercedes. I know I'll learn a lot. Thanks for the extensive effort this must have taken.

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[Rebecca Juro](#) | [February 12, 2008 2:36 PM](#)

This is really great stuff, Mercedes. I'd also recommend Leslie Feinberg's "[Transgender Warriors](#)" for more on transgender expression in history.

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[Serena Freewomyn](#) | [February 12, 2008 4:59 PM](#)

This is really interesting, especially the parts about the Great Mother. I'm gonna say ditto on Rebecca's comment. But this is a really good summary. Thanks. I'm looking forward to future posts.

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[Cathryn](#) | [February 12, 2008 5:21 PM](#)

Serena,

I did 15 years of extensive research on the subject and have written an entire series on transsexual priestesses and the Great Mother spanning from the neolithic to Rome.....again check it out. I lecture on this subject regularly.

<http://gallae.com/essays.html> or

<http://gallae.com/cathy/thoughts.htm>

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[Brynn Craffey](#) | [February 12, 2008 11:10 PM](#)

people who were seen to bridge the genders were quite often thought to possess wisdom that traditionally-gendered people did not,

I think this is true, though most people in current societies don't see it thusly.

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[Anya](#) | [February 13, 2008 2:50 PM](#)

This is an exciting series! I came here via the link from queerty and really I will be looking forward to the rest. I wonder what is significance of 1996 as the start year of the current period (I thought maybe it's the year Boys Don't Cry comes out, but on searching I see that is 1999).

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[David](#) | [February 14, 2008 4:25 PM](#)

Don't forget the Bible!

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[shakay](#) | [February 14, 2008 9:27 PM](#)

It's obvious that you did a lot of work and research on this important topic, Mercedes.

Thank you!

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[Stassa](#) | [February 20, 2008 3:25 PM](#)

Mercedes, Plutarch was Greek, not Roman.

As far as the Old World history and mythology is concerned, you confuse the symbolic mystique of the freak enjoyed by bi-gendered mythological figures like Hermaphroditos and Teiresias (who btw was granted his second sight by Zeus, for saying women enjoy nine tenths of pleasure in sex- that was the great wisdom he got from his time as a woman), with the real-world place of real intersex or gender-bending individuals. To give you a hint, there was a chasm in Sparta where they threw everyone they deemed unfit for their hegemonising swarm-kind of life, the Ceadas (keh-AH-das). In there, they tossed old people, cripples, traitors, rebelling slaves, adulterous women and so on and so forth- and also, en passant, children born “hermaphrodites”.

Greeks never embraced the real world bi-gendered individuals in the way you say they did, neither did they ever deign to grant them any elevated social status whatsoever. In fact, to them the self-castrations and cross-dressing of the Galli were shunned as barbaric (in great part also because they “came from Asia”). For the record, Cybele (kee-VEH-lee) was born intersex before the other gods “fixed” her by removing her penis- hint again? And nobody called the Galli “Gallae” or Attis a she, before Cathy Platine and her fifteen years of research ::scorn::

I also have to play that damn ethnic card again. You seem to assume, when you speak of ancient Mediterranean peoples cultures (and later their conversion to Christianity in your next article, which I read just before this one) that you are speaking of people long gone whose everyday lives we can know nothing about.

The fact is, Greeks are still around and most of us find it very offensive to be told that each and every single one of our bonds with our past is gone, our connection with the spirits of our ancestors only masks illegitimate claims to territory and that, as a result, snotty foreigners with horrible accents can tell us what being Greek and worshipping Greek gods and goddesses was all about.

I admit that I have not “researched” my history, certainly not “for fifteen years”, but I never thought I needed to- I grew up with it. I know my myths and legends, but still sometimes I’m surprised by the obscure alternative tales that are dug up to prop this or that flakey political position of today as the one the mainstream of Greek society held for the three millennia of its sprawl around the Mediterranean. I also don’t understand how “the Greeks did it” becomes “they knew better.” Ancient Greeks were intensely patriarchic and conservative and some of their everyday mores and traditions would have chilled the blood of the most hardcore conservative today. How modern liberals and gender activists go looking for examples in the tales of my ancient ancestors’ lives just baffles me no end.

I must tell you then, with no intention to attack your person, that your delving into the past of at least my ancient people in search for explanations for the experience of modern transgendered people (our common tribe) has resulted in a romanticised, hasty and uninformed narrative that is certainly not the one I grew up with. And I am just as proud of my five thousand years of history as any Greek.

Btw, the Amazons, trans? Achilles, a crossdresser? Please, rein yourself in, yes? You are over-overdoing it here.

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