

CHAPTER 7

Global Gender Diversity throughout the Ages: We Have Always Been with You

Key Questions

1. Much of the historic record we have about some ancient cultures comes from Western European explorers who wrote extensive diaries as they sailed around the world. In some cases, the explorers wrote precise accounts of the places and people they encountered, but some of their content was censored “back home.” What problems might we encounter in trying to understand these ancient cultures through the lens of the explorers? Who gets to record history, and what gets recorded?
2. We often understand history in terms of specific people and their life stories—the “great individuals.” Individual people are certainly important to history, but individual and community histories are often lost in ancient cultures that have suffered the violence of colonialism. Now, as previously silenced histories are brought to light, what can we learn about gender diversity in ancient cultures? What are the dangers of romanticizing some of these histories? What is at stake for the communities concerned as their histories are given voice again?
3. Is there any way “back to the past” that frees us from the colonial history? How difficult is it to discover a history that has been hidden for hundreds or thousands of years?
4. Have you ever heard of a third gender identity or of multiple gender identities in any ancient culture? If so, which culture, and where did you learn about it?

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, you will read about India, Africa, the Pacific Rim, and continental North America from ancient times to the present day. Traditionally, cultures in these areas included gender identities beyond the man-woman binary. Their languages reflected these multiple gender categories: *Māhū*, *Nádleeḥ*, *Hijra*, *Fa'afafine*, and *Winkte*, to name just a few.¹ In many cases, the gender-fluid figures were revered and given a special place in society. They served as healers, bearers of good luck, and spiritual guides in the precolonial era. In some cases, these gender variations existed for thousands of years before **first contact**, the term used to denote the point when Indigenous communities first encountered various explorers (mostly European). You may have heard these encounters described as explorers “discovering” the peoples around the globe. For example, it is common to hear that Columbus “discovered” the Americas. The Indigenous people on the North and South American continents did not need anyone to “find” them or to “discover” them; they knew exactly where they were.

As you read this chapter, it is important to remember that it is almost impossible to understand the cultures discussed in any “pure” sense removed from the ramifications of imperialism and colonialism. **Imperialism** is “the extension and maintenance of a country’s power or influence through trade, diplomacy, military, or cultural dominance.”² **Colonialism**, which goes hand in hand with imperialism, is “the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically.”³ As the chapter unfolds, you will see how the new imperial rulers misunderstood and criminalized the community members who embraced and honored gender diversity. A rigid gender binary was instituted as part of the violence of colonialism; this binary was an attempt to eradicate the more open gender possibilities. The near decimation of Indigenous histories means that millions of voices from the past have been lost to us.

Colonialism is not a thing of the past; it is ongoing. Even in governments and nations that have thrown off the imperial power that once dominated them, the colonial laws are often still in place, particularly laws regarding gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. The stereotypes and cultural misreadings found in the explorers’ accounts often informed the historic perception. Many of these accounts helped fuel the momentum of imperial and colonial laws that criminalized Indigenous traditions.

The last part of this chapter examines the ways that many cultures have begun to reclaim their ancient identities, religions, and laws. Given the silenced

histories, the imposition of non-Indigenous languages, and the colonial attempts to obliterate tradition, these efforts at recovery and empowerment can be very difficult.

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