

# Two-Spirit Identity and Traditional Knowledge

Gender diversity and equality are important components to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis cultures, yet are understood in different ways across cultures and communities. Further, 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.

The term Two-Spirit was first proposed during the 1990 Third Annual Inter-Tribal Native American, First Nations, Gay and Lesbian American Conference in Winnipeg by Elder Myra Laramee. Elder Myra was bestowed by Creator the term Anishinaabemowin term niizh manidoowag meaning two spirits. Two-Spirit or 2S folks have always existed in Indigenous Communities. Two-Spirit is an umbrella term used to describe those who are given masculine and feminine spirit by Creator, including people who might be described in western culture as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, genderqueer or who have multiple gender identities.

Historically, Two-Spirit people were seen, loved and respected as unique individuals in most Indigenous communities. They were gifted with keen insight and the ability to see things through both feminine and masculine eyes (double vision). Many help important roles within their tribes, such as chiefs, medicine people, marriage counsellors, caregivers, protectors, and knowledge keepers.

## Two-Spirit in First Nations Communities

It is important to think about how Two-Spirit identity will look differently for every community and person. Different communities will have different names with over 155 different words used across communities and languages to describe people with multiple genders.

Being Two-Spirit embodies much more than identity and includes important traditional and sacred roles within Indigenous Communities. Two-Spirit folks were known for their “wisdom, healing, and visions.” In the Mohave creation story it says

“ever since the world began, there have been Two Spirit people, and from the beginning of the world, it was meant that there should be Two-Spirit people.” Traditional teachings about Two-Spirit folks can be found in Midewiwin creation story of the Anishinaabe.

In some communities, when a Two-Spirit person reaches puberty, the community would hold a ceremony, placing the Two-Spirit child in a lodge and asking they pick a basket or a bow. Depending on their decision, this meant which path the child was going to be guided by the masculine or feminine. In other communities, vision quests guided Two-Spirit folks to their roles. Male-embodying Two-Spirit folks had a wide range of duties including healers, undertakers, and creative work including beading, quillwork, and making regalia for dancing. Many engaged in masculine-centered activities such as sweat lodges but also engaged in domestic responsibilities such as cooking. Female-embodying Two-Spirit folks engaged in duties including chiefs, hunter, fisher, medicine people, and peace keepers.

## Two-Spirit in Inuit Communities

Oral and anthropological research and Inuit testimony suggest that gender in Inuit culture is fluid and does not conform to a traditional binary framework. Historically, Inuit folks have not identified as Two-Spirit as other Indigenous Communities have done. Instead, Inuit folks have a heritage of “third genders” in. A choupan, is a man (or assigned male at birth person) who expresses feminine gender by wearing women’s clothing. A choupan often becomes a shaman and is responsible for training young, selected individuals to become seers and traditional healers (often young girls). In Inuit culture, gender norms have always been interchangeable and roles responsibilities are given regardless of gender or sexuality.

In some Inuit communities, infants are given names of loved ones who have passed on and may be given and exercise varying gender roles of each. For instance, children assigned female at birth may be named after a passed-on uncle or grandfather (specifically identified as men) but still display gender norms as women, and/or both; this simultaneously is reversed for those assigned male at birth named after female ancestors or relatives. It is believed the infant may display the qualities, knowledge, and spirit of the person they have been named after, regardless of gender.

Not all Inuit practice this tradition: many children are raised to learn both female and male traditional skills, knowledge, and social roles throughout the initial years of life to give them a broader skill set and range of abilities. In recent years, many Inuit 2SLGBTQ+ and gender-diverse women and girls have adopted the word 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, gender equality and diversity have been lost due to colonization and Christianization, Inuit women and girls are reclaiming various aspects of sexuality and gender equality through revitalization of language, drum dancing, tattooing, and throat singing. Inuit women and girls are reclaiming their sexuality and identity in evolving and increasingly open ways, illustrating the continuing cultural importance of gender diversity and equality.

## Two-Spirit in Métis Communities

The traditional Métis language, Michif, is a unique and complex blend of French and Cree languages. Two-Spirit identities, teachings, roles, and responsibilities in Métis culture are similarly interrelated. For instance, a shared value in Métis and Cree teachings is respecting others and their way of expressing their Two-Spirit identity. Historically, Métis Two-Spirit folks have specific duties and responsibilities including counselling, healing, and serving as visionaries (seers) in accordance with the belief to “respect all life.” 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. Métis culture was historically egalitarian: Métis women were the key pillars of their communities and were the providers for their immediate and extended families.

Two-Spirit and gender-diverse people also held important community roles and positions. As with other Indigenous cultures, colonization deprived Métis Women, Two-Spirit, and Gender-Diverse People from these valued social roles, leading to widespread discrimination and invisibility of diverse genders and sexualities. However, Métis Two-Spirit folks like Gregory Scofield (a Métis poet, artist, and writer) and Cortney Dakin (a Two-Spirit Didikai Métis community organizer) are revitalizing Métis understandings of gender and sexual diversity. In 2019, the Manitoba Métis Federation created a new organization—Two-Spirit Michif—to represent its two spirit and LGBTQ+ citizens. Check out Métis [Kitchen Table Teachings](#) where Two-Spirit Métis folks talk about their experiences and this [Two-Spirit Métis Awareness Resource](#).

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