



Personal Reflections on Tlingit Men and Matriculture: Transcript

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[lightly edited; please cite using time signatures]

[Speaking Tlingit] Káak'utxhéich is what my grandmother named me. [Speaking Tlingit] She also gave me the name Ikahaka. [Speaking Tlingit] We come from Tsisk'w Hít, the Owl House. [Speaking Tlingit] My clan is called Gineixkwaan, and we also are called Kwaashkikwaan and Ikahakwaan. [Speaking Tlingit] We come from Yaakwdáat, also known as the village of Yakutat in Alaska. [Speaking Tlingit] My mother's mother was called Chew Shaa, or Elaine Abraham. [Speaking Tlingit] I'm the grandchild of the L'uknax.adi clan, and my grandfather was named Uxt'akhu'ish, George Ramos. [Speaking Tlingit] My outer shell are the Teikweidi clan. *Gunalchéesh*. Thank you.

[01:37]

Some of the really important events in my life were when my family, my mother, my sister, and I moved back to Yakutat, our village and traditional homeland of our people on our Tlingit side. I was ten years old when we moved back to Yakutat, and it's when my reconnection to my Tlingit culture really began. We had stayed in touch with my grandparents while we were living in British Columbia when I was a child, but I only got some small bits and pieces of my Tlingit culture and language. But our home village of



Yakutat is a place where Tlingit culture and language are still really strong, and where my grandparents were well known as culture and language bearers.

[02:51]

I got to start learning directly from my grandparents and was raised, especially by my grandmother, in Tlingit *kusteeyí*, the Tlingit way of life, and was also able to learn in our traditional dance group, the Yakutat Mount Saint Elias Dancers. We perform traditional Tlingit song and dance from the five clans of the Yakutat area, and a lot of the songs we still perform today are over a thousand years old. My grandfather, George Ramos, was the leader of that dance group for over thirty years, I believe, and I was also lucky to learn from other elders, my other grandmothers in my clan, Nellie Lord and Lena Farkas, who ran an after-school Tlingit language program when I was a kid. So, I learned a lot from them as well, and also had lots of other grandmas and aunties that I learned a lot from growing up, and I still consider Yakutat to be my home, even though I'm now living in the city of Juneau, and I love to travel back there whenever possible to see family and friends and participate in our cultural events, our *ku.éex'*, or potlatches, and everything else that happens back home with my people.

[04:55]

My grandmother was the biggest teacher for me in connecting to our family history and our ancestry. She was very traditional, and genealogy was a big traditional value to know and understand, so from a very young age she started teaching me our family lineage through Tsisk'w Hít, the Owl House, and Gineixkwaan, our clan, and she could trace the lineage and family tree of our clan back at least eight generations, I believe, and that's an important aspect of our culture because we believe in reincarnation. So, the names we're born with are the names that belong to family members or ancestors that passed on before us. So, she gave me the name Káak'utxhéich, which came from her uncle, George Bremner, who was really close to her as a child and a really important person in her life. We still practice that tradition of passing on our clan names and holding them within our clan.

[06:34]

She also taught me our clan history. Our clan, the Gineixkwaan, were originally Ahtna Athabaskan people from Copper River, and over twelve hundred years ago, we split off from our original Athabaskan clan, and we began migrating south over a period of a few hundred years, and this all happened during the last ice age, so our clan was walking over the top of glaciers for much of this migration, and we became intermarried and intermixed

with the Eyak people for a long time, and then we moved even further south into the Yakutat area where we became intermixed with the Tlingit people and eventually adopted Tlingit language and culture. But we still carry and hold on to our history as Athabaskan people originally, and we still have songs, stories, and names that come from our Ahtna ancestors as well as our Eyak ancestors, and our culture even today is a very unique mix of Ahtna, Eyak, and Tlingit. And my grandmother really taught me how important it is to hold on to that history and to carry it on as we went through many, many hardships in our migration, and we still have songs, mourning songs that mourn for the people we lost along the way. I've been happy that two years ago I got to visit Copper River for the first time and to meet my Ahtna ancestors. And it was a really powerful reconnection for me because I had just had my grandma's stories up until that point, but to actually walk on the land there and meet my most ancient ancestors that still live there was a really powerful spiritual and emotional experience for me. And I'm really grateful that my grandma passed on all that history to me.

[09:27]

I was born in Ottawa, Ontario, in Canada on March 4th, 1990. My mother is Tlingit and Filipino from Yakutat, and my father is Kanienkehaka, the Mohawk tribe from the Six Nations Reservation in Canada. And I grew up around British Columbia, mostly in Haida Gwaii in the village of Masset up until I was eight years old, and we also lived in Kamloops for a while, too. One of the earliest memories I have actually is my mom pointing towards Alaska and telling me that's where my grandma and grandpa lived, and I remember trying to wave and say "Hi" to them, like thinking they would somehow hear me all the way from Haida Gwaii. We spoke mainly English, but my grandparents spent a lot of time teaching me the language. With my grandmother, I got to a conversational level of fluency. So, there would be times when we'd be speaking in Tlingit maybe about half the time, but not full time.

[11:07]

Speaking from my Tlingit culture, there is a big difference between your mother's family and your father's family because of our moiety system. Half our clans fall under Yéil, the Raven side, and the other half fall under Ch'áak, the Eagle side, and they're considered to be opposite but equal, and balance between the two moieties is a really important aspect to our culture. Our rule is that you have to marry someone from the opposite side of you because everyone on your own side is considered family. I come from the Yéil, the Raven side, so all the other people that come from Raven clans, even if we don't share any blood, I still consider them to be a brother or sister because we're from the same moiety, and even if they're from a clan that's hundreds of miles away from Yakutat, if they're a Raven

clan, then they are still a sibling to me. Because of that cultural aspect, your father is usually from the opposite moiety as you with his family, and when we introduce ourselves, we call ourselves the children of his clan. Or in my father's case, his tribe, so I would introduce myself as "*Kanienkehaka yatki hatsiti*; I am the child of the Kanienkehaka, the Mohawk tribe."

[13:24]

But you're raised in your own clan, and you're born into your clan through your mother's side, so we're a matrilineal culture, so everything, all my clan history and practices, the core of my identity comes from my mother's side, and from our house lineage, *Tsisk'w Hít*, the Owl House, or family relations. Our maternal aunties, we use the term *ax tlaak*, which means 'my little mother.' So, maternal aunts, we don't call them aunts, we call them 'other mothers,' basically, 'little mothers,' and, yeah, the children of your maternal aunts are just like brothers and sisters to you. We don't have a term for cousins. So, everyone in the same clan is considered family, the same, like, blood lineage. But we hold high reverence for our father's side, for who we're the children of, and anyone from your father's clan, you treat them culturally like as another parent to you. Even if it's someone younger than you, you still kind of give the same respect and acknowledgment of them being a father to you, and we give the same acknowledgment to our grandfather's clan, too, anyone. My grandfather came from the Chookaneidí clan, so anyone from that clan, even a little child, I would still address them as a grandparent. Your in-laws are also given that same kind of respect, say, *ax káani yán*, my brothers-in-law, so anyone from the clan that you're married to, or that one of your sisters is married to, you give a lot of respect to and address all of them as in-laws.

[16:30]

Traditionally, as a man, there was a big relationship between you and your maternal uncle. In the olden times, once you reach the age of six-and-a-half to seven years old, your maternal uncle would become your, the primary person to raise you. There's a few different reasons for that. One is that our ancestors believed that your parents could spoil you too much or not discipline you enough, and that's tied into your father being the opposite clan of you as well. Traditionally, your father can't discipline you or mistreat you because he's not the same clan as you, he's the opposite clan. And, *wooch yáx*, the respect between the opposite clans is like a number one rule for us. You have to treat your people from the opposite moiety with the utmost respect and love. So, traditionally, your father can't be too strict or harsh with you. They're just culturally obligated to give you love and support. It becomes your maternal uncle's duty to be the one to discipline you, to give you structure, and to raise you to be strong and resilient.

[18:44]

Your uncle was the one to raise you to become a warrior in the olden days. So, the training with your uncle would be really tough in the olden days. As soon as the sun rises, your uncle would wake you up and tell you to go run into the ocean, into the water. Cold water dips were a really essential part of our warrior training, becoming conditioned to the cold and becoming resilient against it. So, you would have to stay in the cold water as long as you could stand it, and then when you come out of the water, your uncle whips you with alder or willow branches on the chest. And part of the reason was to build up calluses and scars to toughen you up. But it also helped in bringing back your blood circulation. Boys that grew up to be the strongest warriors would lean their face forward so they could get whipped in the face. The cold-water dipping is something we still practice today, but we don't do the whipping part.

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It has been a goal of mine over the last three years to bring back traditional Tlingit warrior training, because as far as I know, it hasn't been practiced for about five generations. My grandfather was the last person in Yakutat who was raised by his uncle in the traditional way. But he didn't go through the warrior training; he went mainly through subsistence and cultural training. It's something that's only exists right now for us through oral history mainly. Over the years, I've been trying to support our women with things like MMIWG (Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls), and how much gender-based violence our people go through. I really realized how unhealthy our boys and men have become from intergenerational trauma and from toxic masculinity that's been put upon us because of colonization. And I realized that we have very few role models for positive, healthy Tlingit masculinity because so many of our men are in these toxic cycles, and so many of them are in the prison system. There's just a lot of problems and things to heal and cycles to break right now.

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And I was inspired by all the stories and history my grandfather had taught me about traditional warrior training and most especially the Tlingit warrior code. It was something my grandfather liked to teach a lot to the youth and to our dance group. The warrior code was a set of five rules that the *xeigaa káa* lived by. *Xeigaa káa* was our title for a really high-level warrior, and it translates to 'true or authentic man or person.' *Xeigaa* means 'authentic.' The five rules they had to live by were, number one, never make yourself heavier than the person you're with. In the Tlingit culture, 'heavier' means more

important or more valuable. So yeah, never make yourself more valuable than the person you're with. Number two is always be humble with the person you're with. I personally translate that as, you have to have outer humility and inner humility in balance. Rule number three is reach out for the hand of the person next to you and lift them up. So be of service to the people that need it. Rule number four is always protect the person you're with. So, that's always being prepared and ready to defend your people. Rule number five is if you're wounded, and you know you're going to die, then fight to your last breath. That's what we called the *xeigaa káa yugatangi*, the 'words of the true person or the authentic man.' My dream, my vision, is to use that warrior code as a foundation for raising the next generation of my people to be supporters and caretakers and to participate in community service, to try and break the cycles of violence against our women and girls and to try and heal intergenerational trauma.

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So, for about two years now, I've been working with a group of my brothers and my sister and we have an advisory council of Tlingit matriarchs and grandmas and aunties that are guiding us in what are the most essential values and teachings we need to bring back for the next generation as part of warrior training. And we're hoping to be able to start these warrior training groups in all of our communities. Though we're mainly Tlingit culture-based, the group has already become inter-tribal. One of my brothers in the group is UnangaĀ, or Aleut, and that was a really important thing that happened that I wasn't expecting. But I'm really grateful that he joined us because traditionally, our tribes used to war against each other for, like, hundreds and hundreds of years, and we were really bitter enemies for a long time. But coming together like this, I think is a really beautiful healing thing for our cultures because we can train as warriors to protect each other instead of fighting each other. My brother-in-law, who is a Māori, is also a member of the group and he's been a really huge supporter and brought a lot of beautiful teachings from his people. I'm really grateful we have so many supporters and allies, especially from other tribes and cultures, giving us guidance and mentorship and just tons of love and support and trying to make this dream come real.

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I'm really, really grateful that I had the opportunity to be raised in traditional Tlingit matriarchy by my grandmother, my mother, and all my aunties. It really instilled in me my ancestors' value, values on how the women and girls in our clan are our most precious, precious members and how they carry our future by being mothers. My whole identity—my name, my membership in my clan and house—all comes from the women in my lineage and my ancestors, going back to time immemorial. All the most important parts of

my upbringing and training in my culture and language, all came from the women in my life. I'm really grateful for the privilege of that because I know not many men in our tribe get to experience the same thing right now because of colonization. I was really, really lucky to have two traditional grandparents to raise me with these traditional values, but because of colonization and intergenerational trauma that's come from it, many, many of our boys and men go without that. And it definitely manifests into toxic masculinity and acting in a patriarchal way over the traditional matriarchal way.

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And I hope that our warrior training group, Toowu Latseen, can be part of the solution, but I know it will take a lot more than that. There's lots of healing that my people have to go through, and some of this healing work is probably going to take a few generations to happen. And I know not everyone will choose to be healed or are ready to be healed, but I feel focusing on our youth is the best thing we can do. And giving them the tools and the knowledge they need to break these cycles is the best we can do. And I try and hold on to the fact that my ancestors used to make decisions thinking up to, like, seven generations into the future. It wasn't just about themselves or what would happen in their lifetimes, but what's going to happen generations from now when you're long gone. And I try and think about that a lot and try and call on my ancestors, all the powerful women that came before me, and the ones that I learned from, especially my grandmother Chew Shaa, for guidance. Yeah, I just hope and dream that every day we can restore the traditional Tlingit matriarchy. And the more that we restore it, the more our people will heal, and the more of our *toowú latseen*, our inner strength, will come back with that.

[34:16]