



## **Personal Reflections on Tlingit Matriculture: Transcript**

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*[lightly edited; please cite using time signatures]*

Gunalchéesh! *[speaks in Tlingit]* My name is Daxootsu; my English name is Judy Ramos. *[speaks in Tlingit]* I'm Raven moiety. *[speaks in Tlingit]* I'm from the Ku.éex' clan, which means the pink salmon people. *[speaks in Tlingit]* I'm daughter of the L'uknax.adi clan; that's the Coho Clan. *[speaks in Tlingit]* I'm grandchild of the Teikweidi or Brown Bear Clan from Áak'w River. I'm from Yakutat or Yakutat, Alaska, and I'm currently residing in Áak'w in Juneau, Alaska.

I am the daughter of Elaine Chew Shaa Abraham and George Milton Ramos. So that fully embeds me in the community of Yakutat or Yakutat. My grandparents are Olaf Abraham and Susie Bimner.

01:18

So growing up early, I have some memories of living in Yakutat when I was really young. My mother was a nurse, and my father was like a hunter-fisherman, and they had met when really young. My mother was promised to be married to someone else, and she was



engaged to someone else, but my father was kind of really charismatic and a very charming and good dancer, and so she fell in love with my father.

They're both Raven Moiety, which was not supposed to be that kind of marriage, so my grandfather had a potlatch to have people not talk about this marriage. But my grandmother still loved him because he was a great hunter, always providing for the family.

02:25

When I was like in kindergarten, our parents relocated to Cleveland, Ohio, so my father could go to a school where he could learn to be a good bookkeeper, and that was kind of a culture shock, going to Cleveland, Ohio. It was a really tremendous time.

There was a lot of riots going on, and I have vague memories of us looking at our skin color because we were trying to see if skin colour is going to be a factor, but then, lucky, we moved back, and we moved back to Sitka, Alaska, where there was a hospital there, and my mom could work at the hospital. And my father was a trained cook coming out of the military as a cook. He went to cooking school, and he cooked at Monash High School, and my mom talked him into working for Alaska Airlines, where we could get really cool benefits for flying, working for Alaska Airlines.

03:36

So I remember Sitka. But every summer, I remember going back home to Yakutat and living with my grandmother, and my grandmother was very sweet, and she was telling us a lot of stories about our clan history and migration and all that information. So I grew up, you know, berry-picking with her and picking seaweed up from the beaches, doing badly at learning how to cut fish, running a smokehouse, starting a fire in the wood stove. Then I would go back to Sitka because the schools were better there, and so we'd kind of migrate back and forth between Sitka and Yakutat. So I had an older brother and sister and then a younger brother, and so we kind of migrated back and forth between those communities, but we'd come back home to Yakutat when there was a potlatch or some event happening, we would come back to our village in Yakutat.

But Sitka itself was not really a Tlingit town either, but it was still quite a few Tlingit people living in Sitka. So we were pretty busy all the time. They had an Indian Ed program that was run in the Alaska Native Brotherhood Hall, so I would run down there and we'd learn different skills about our culture. But our main culture was through being around our grandparents and learning from our grandparents, so that's kind of some of the early memories of growing up between Sitka and Yakutat, Alaska. Very rich and happy time, and Yakutat's quite well known for its beautiful beaches, so just having the opportunity to kind of run, not wild, but we were not monitored as they do in today's communities. We had a lot of freedom to run around.

06:13

Even in Sitka, there was no fear of me walking to school for like half a mile; my school was half a mile away, walking to school and then running around downtown and just making sure we were home by dinnertime and start dinner before my parents came home. So we had a lot of freedom even in Sitka, Alaska, growing up.

In Northwest Coast cultures, the potlatch, or in our language, *a kui* we call it, is held for different ceremonies. It's part celebration, it's part ritual, it's part kind of affirmation of your clan. So if a clan built a house or raised a totem pole, we call them *kutia* or other things, we would have a potlatch and we would gather our clan to host it; we invite the opposite moiety as a guest or witnesses to a potlatch. So it would be part ceremony and part religious in a ways, but in these celebrations, there would be a lot of oratory and a lot of feasting and dancing and also there will be gift giving to the opposite moiety.

08:02

So it's a reciprocal gift between the two moieties. We would be invited to their potlatches and they would pay us and then we'd invite them. So it was a time of honouring each other because in our traditional society, your father would be your opposite moiety and your brother's children are opposite moiety and your grandmother's husband would be your opposite moiety. So we would sort of balance each other out between the two moieties.

The one that's still really practiced today is our memorial potlatches and we have a forty-day potlatch after a person dies and it's mostly just feasting and feeding the spirit before it departs. And then at a payoff party, we would host a big potlatch and there would be an exchange of mourning songs and so we'd come out and do the mourning and the clans would do it. We would do our mourning songs, the opposite clan does their mourning songs, until the mourning is done and then there would be your feasting and your dancing and your payoff.

09:36

So we pay off the opposite moiety for any services they rendered to your clan during the funeral. And also this part would be when you would bring out your children to be given their names and anybody that you wanted to adopt into your clan would also be brought out at a potlatch. So it had many different functions for a potlatch. So that's the ones that are most really practiced today are these kind of ceremonies.

I learned that in my mother's generation, they would have a piercing ceremony where when they got their ears pierced, there would be a dinner small ceremony and whoever pierced your ears would be paid off. They would also maybe get a tattoo.

10:33

And so we have this ceremony for young women when she comes of age; it's called behind the blanket ceremony. So when a girl first would go through her menstruation, she would be put behind the blanket and they would have her fast during the day. Then in the evening, she could have some little bit of water or foods like that, but it was a very sacred time. They believe that this is kind of setting up her life for the rest of her life where she would be taught things. It was her clan aunties and mother that would bring her food. But she would be taught a lot about, you know, getting up early or not talking much. So one of the things they did was they used to go out really low tide and they would select a rock to put in the mouth.

That refers to a raven myth, but it was to not talk bad about other people is kind of my understanding of that. But if you were wanting to be a good artist, then you would practice that and kind of wish for becoming a good artist for beading or weaving or whatever during that time period. So it was kind of like a time of developing your, ah, what kind of person or, you know, artist you wanted to be during your life.

12:25

So when that period was done, depending on, you know, how long she was behind the blanket, then she would be brought out at a potlatch and all her childhood things would be put away. And so they would drop the blanket and they would announce that she's a woman now and then there would be a feast. So like my daughter went through this ceremony and she was going through with her cousin Alison Bremner. What they really wanted was waffles, and so we served them waffles at their ceremony. They gave away some of their childhood toys and they also gave away, you know, candy and other things at the behind-the-blanket ceremony.

So this is a women's ceremony; we're trying to bring that back and trying to bring that back to our culture, a very important part of our ceremonies. We're building wellness camps and culture camps, and things like that where we're trying to host a part of the, that is, what we call a women's circle. And to share that kind of information with young women about how we used to have these traditional practices. It was not explicitly taught to us, but I did do kind of a small ceremony with my mother. We were living in Fairbanks and she kept me home from school and she did a small ceremony with me. They didn't really explain what exactly all of it meant; I just know I went through something like that.

14:22

So it was not explicitly explained to me when I was growing up about these ceremonies, but it was only something when my daughter went through it that they really talked about what it was all about.

Through the clan, the transmission of wealth is passed through the clan. And so in Tlingit society, you have a chiefly class. You had a commoner class and you used to have a slave

class. So a lot of the wealth is kind of held within the chiefly class in the name of the clan. So they're stewards of the wealth. The accumulation of all this wealth was part of the potlatch system, when you would bring out a lot of this wealth and redistribute it through the potlatch or *ku'i*. So this is a redistribution of your wealth and the teaching is the more you can give away, the more wealthy you were. So this idea of, ah, you're very wealthy if you could give away a lot of things.

15:46

So it's not accumulation like in the Western sense of goods, but giving away of goods and being able to hold a big potlatch and give away coppers and things like that. I was just reading a book on the Kwakiutl and one of the coppers were worth like five thousand blankets, which is amazing to me. So my dad always says like coppers like this size is worth like six slaves and this, you know, and then he always teased a little copper around his neck and that's worth a slave for a day.

But, you know, the accumulation of blankets that were given away at potlatch and the copper, the *chinos*, were a sign of wealth in our traditional culture. So we were wealthy as a clan because we had raw copper.

16:45

Stories that I heard is like women, if they saw the trader had beads, you know, she would say, I really want those beads and poke her husband and really make him get the beads and stuff like that. So women, you know, did kind of control the trading, but the men were the primary traders, but it was like the women sort of directed them to the trade. From the stories I've heard, they would tell them, kind of be in the background and direct the trade.

In Tlingit society, starting with the marriage system, there were arranged marriages. So my grandparents were arranged marriage because they were both in a kind of chiefly class. My grandfather being a chief and my grandmother being a daughter of a chief, and so they were arranged marriages. So, patrilocal: she went to live with her husband, so they would go live in their husband's clan house.

18:10

But when their son became of age, not of age, but as a young child, he would go live in his uncle's house because that was where he would be trained by his maternal uncle. And the women would be trained through their maternal aunties and uncles. So when a marriage was set up, they would try and select women that had, especially industrious as far as she was able to bring these artistic skills to the marriage, like being a good Chilkat blanket weaver or other things.

And so they would try to find women that were really good weavers and other things, and that would accumulate their wealth through her skills and things like that to the marriage.

So women, as far as to the food economy, besides her weaving and other skills she brought, she was one that really helped do the cooking and preparing of food. Men would go out and do the hunting and other things like that.

19:42

But there was also kind of a respectful balance between men and women as far as they would... Because they were opposite moieties, there would also be a respectful dialogue between the men and women in the marriage. So even though she was living in her husband's clan house, she still kind of controlled all the food and things like that. She would decide, you know, kind of control the whole household, it was kind of all under her control. And so like he would bring it home, and then from then on, he wouldn't have any say in that. They did have a really strong control over what was said, so they would tell the men what to say at the ceremonies, and then he would go out and be the spokesperson. But it was really the woman who made a lot of decisions in the background as far as...

The clan mother, they call them, and she was kind of the head of the, the female head of the clan, and they had a special term for her as the clan mother. So it was a very equal balance, I think, between the two, men and women in our society.

21:26

Yakutat is the furthest northern Northwest Coast culture village, so it's like the extent of the Tlingit settlement. And we were pushing sort of north into the Copper River area as Yakutat people, mixing with the Eyak, and we had Ahtna ancestors too, so kind of a mix of cultures. So we were, in our village, we were surrounded by glaciers and so our glaciers that were around us... we had to develop language and technology around hunting and glaciers, where they didn't really have that, maybe, except that the Huna had a little bit of ice hunting technology.

We also don't really have cedar up in Yakutat; we have spruce, so we weren't big totem carvers. So we were sort of a little bit different up there because we didn't have cedar. And so we sort of adopted to our climate there, which is a little bit north of the cedar zone, which is very prominent in the Northwest Coast cultures is the cedar. But we still had access to salmon, but it was the most northern extent of the Tlingit settlements in Yakutat.

23:19

So there's a term in the U.S. Constitution, they call us Native Americans 'merciless savages.' So this is kind of a play on, ah, as Native people being called merciless savages in the Constitution. So I'm a merciless matriarchal savage. And so that's just a play on the colonial terms that were given to us.

Just the next generation, I think are tremendous. I would bring out our wonderful next Generation artists, and they're really kind of reclaiming the culture and just proud of who

they are. Especially I'm thinking about my own daughter, who's a social environmental activist and also a very wonderful artist, and just really balancing and being proud of who they are with her other friends that are, you know, challenging any kind of, you know, destruction or injustice they see happening.

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