

# No:'olchwin-ding, No:'olchwin-te To Grow Old In A Good Way

## The Hupa Flower Dance and Revitalization of Women's Coming- of-Age Ceremonies in Native California

By **CUTCHA RISLING BALDY**  
*Two Rivers Tribune*

This article is the first of a two-part series exploring my research on the revitalization of the Hupa women's coming-of-age ceremony. This article focuses on the history and importance of this dance to Hupa culture both in the past and the present. The second article will share portions of my interviews with

the Kinahldung (flower dance) girls.

It is easy for me to describe Hoopa as a powerful, balanced place; this has resulted, on occasion, of accusations that I idealize my tribe and culture. When I return to the Hoopa Valley, I am centered and grounded. In Hoopa, I am recognized at the store and I often get random hugs from cousins who just happen to be there. Summers in Hoopa are spent floating down the river, and with the popularity of Facebook, posting pictures of the many times one of my little cousins will get up enough guts to jump off the tallest rocks. Winters can be cold, but sitting outside of my parent's house with a warm cup of tea and looking out over the Trinity River is calming. Every August brings Sovereigns Day and includes a parade and fireworks show. And my daughter calls Hoopa "our home."

Hoopa is not immune to the issues of poverty and social inequality that plague Native peoples around the world. In the United States, Native peoples make up 1.7 percent of the total population, and yet they have one of the highest rates of poverty in the country. In a 2008 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study, 39 percent of Native women said they were victims of intimate-partner violence in their lifetime, which was the highest rate of any ethnic group surveyed. Data from the U.S. Department of Justice indicate that Native American and Alaskan Native women are 2.5 times more likely to be raped or sexually assaulted than women in other ethnic groups.

Hoopa's statistics are just as overwhelming. In 2013, the Hoopa Valley Tribal Police reported 136 incidents of violent crime. This was the second highest number in the Humboldt County region. Hoopa also has a high incidence of drug



Cutcha Risling Baldy's project explores how the empowerment of young women and by extension the community, builds a foundation for how Hupa people enact their sovereignty and self-determination by clearly including gender balance and gender equality as part of the very foundation of their culture and society./Photo by Juan Avila.

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use. This was highlighted in Allie Hostler's 2012 article, "Hoopa Rez: Ground Zero for an Expanding Meth Economy."

"Meth data specific to the Hoopa Valley doesn't exist. The scope of the problem can only be pieced together anecdotally, and only understood truly by those who live here. If you ask, they'd tell you that meth use in the valley today is rampant," Hostler said.

Drugs, violence, and alcohol have been a consistent presence on the Hoopa Valley Indian Reservation throughout my lifetime. Alcoholism and drug addiction have affected many generations of my family. The last time I went to the store to pick up a few things, I ran into a cousin who was obviously on drugs. They couldn't hold eye contact with me or complete a full sentence, but they did say, "I'm so happy to see you," before heading out the door. Outside the store it is not uncommon to run into other distant family members or acquaintances who are in desperate need of money to buy diapers and formula for their children.

As Hostler wrote in her article, "History matters...Multiple generations are grieving the loss of a cherished way of life, a way of life that lasted for thousands of years prior to settlers finding their way to Hoopa."

The history of California was

violent and extermination was legalized and supported by the California state government. Women were especially targeted for violence because of the role they played in the continuation and strength of their peoples and communities. Women's ceremonies and women's roles were systematically attacked during the historical periods of colonization in California.

The post-invasion assimilation efforts of the government were particularly directed toward regulating Native women and their bodies. Boarding schools tried to control Indian women and to normalize the practices of violence against and surveillance of their bodies. This is precisely why the Flower Dance represented such an important point of resistance for Hupa people, and one reason why it was targeted for eradication.

For the Hupa, the introduction of this gender violence would ultimately influence the continued practice of their world renewal ceremonies, and while they would be able to maintain the Jump Dance and the Deerskin Dance, the Flower Dance, among other ceremonies, would become a suppressed and rarely practiced ceremony.

While the dance was only infrequently practiced for a number of years following invasion, the Flower Dance persisted as an active part of the Hupa cultural imagination.

Though there had been consistent pressures and dangers associated with the continuing practice of this ceremony, Hupa elders pushed for revitalization and refused to forget that this ceremony was a central part of Hupa culture. There were some individual dances performed in 1975 and 1980, but these were not public ceremonies as had occurred in the past.

Hupa elders Ray Baldy, Rudolph Socktish, SuWorhrom David Risling, Sr., and many others continued to document, record, and tell stories about the Flower Dance well into the start of the new millennium, until finally a young girl by the name of Kayla Rae Carpenter agreed to have the ceremony performed for her. The first revitalized dance happened in the Hupa community in May 2001 and represented an important turning point for the Hupa people, as they worked to bring back a community celebration of young women that demonstrated how important women are to our culture and society.

The people who helped revitalize this ceremony believed it was the loss of the Flower Dance that contributed to the struggles that are facing our tribe. Of particular importance to the women who helped revitalize this dance was their hope to find a tangible way to address continued issues of historical trauma and colonization. Hupa medicine woman Melodie George-Moore believes that

the Flower Dance, in this modern context, contributes to a community healing and resists contemporary agents of negativity. "There are a lot of negative things in this world, especially in the modern world. In the modern Hupa world there are a lot of negative things that are cause for concern and I think we're holding space against that with this dance," said George-Moore.

From the Native perspective, the colonial policies of genocide and assimilation were designed to regulate their intimate lives, relationships, and bodies. Women's coming-of-age ceremonies were physical displays of tribal sovereignty and self-determination, a public and community performance of indigenous culture that is in direct contrast to western ideals of womanhood. For the Hupa, the Flower Dance built a foundation for each young woman of the tribe. This empowerment of young women and, by extension, the community, built a foundation for how Hupa people enact their sovereignty and self-determination by clearly including gender balance and gender equality as part of the very foundation of their culture and society.

As I set out to do research on the revitalization of the women's coming-of-age ceremony for my tribe, I was keenly aware that I wanted my research and study to focus on the impacts of this ceremony. I wanted to help tell a powerful story about

women, Hupa women, and how Hupa people can continue to build their futures with the cultural and spiritual knowledge of our First People. ■

## Writer's Note:

I began this research more than five years ago for my dissertation, which I plan to publish in the near future. I owe a great deal to the Hoopa tribal members who worked with me on my dissertation: Kayla Carpenter, Alanna Nulph, Natalie Carpenter, Deja George, Melitta Jackson, Naishian Richards, Lois Risling, and Melodie George-Moore. I am also continuing research and interviews over the next few months and look forward to learning from others about their experience with this ceremonial revitalization.

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