

Xoq'it-Ch'iswa:l

On Her They Beat Time, A Flower Dance Is Held For Her

The Revitalization of the Hupa Women's Coming-of-Age Ceremony, Part Two

By **CUTCHA RISLING BALDY**
Two Rivers Tribune

This article is the second of a two-part series exploring my research on the revitalization of the Hupa women's coming-of-age ceremony. I began this research five years ago for my dissertation, and I will be publishing it 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 as I prepare for publication. For

together to sing and dance over the girl. Both men and women are a part of this ceremony.

Kayla Carpenter sits down across from me in what has become a makeshift interview room, but is actually my parent's home office at their house on the Hoopa Valley Indian Reservation. She is drinking from a bottle of water and is wearing a long, summer dress with her hair pulled back tightly into a bun. Over the past few years I have gotten to know Kayla as I watched her grow up, graduate from high school, attend Stanford University, and then U.C. Berkeley for graduate school in linguistics, where she is working hard to finish her Ph.D. I admire her for the passion she displays when talking about the Hupa language. Throughout our interview she intersperses her responses with Hupa words, something that seems to come naturally to her now, and I notice on several occasions she seems to prefer the Hupa word to English.

It was Kayla's intense and ever-present maturity that I really noticed



Cutcha Risling Baldy 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.

interviews over the next few months as I prepare for publication. For more information, please visit my website, www.cutcharislingbaldy.com. The first part of this article focused on the history and importance of this dance to Hupa culture, both in the past and the present. This part explores the interviews I did with the kinahldung (flower dance girls) about the revitalization of the women's coming-of-age ceremony in Hoopa. The Hupa consider this ceremony a way for the kinahldung to reaffirm her new role as a woman instead of a child. The dance is 3-5-7 or 10 days. During this time the young woman will receive guidance and training that will help her as she moves into adulthood. Running is a significant part of the ceremony as the Hupa believe that how the girl runs is how she will live her life. Ritualistic bathing and prayer are also a part of this ceremony and are important for introducing what will become a routine and ritual bathing that is a part of menstruation in Hupa culture. This part of the puberty ceremony is also not usually seen by or attended by the public. The public aspect of this ceremony happens at night when the community comes

It was Kayla's intense and ever-present maturity that I really noticed as she was growing up. So when my mother told me on the phone, "we are finally going to have a Flower Dance" after so many years of not having public celebrations of young women at their first menstruation, it was fitting that it would be for Kayla, as it felt to me like this was something she could personally handle that would also be important to the foundation of her life.

Kayla would have her Flower Dance when she was fourteen, in May 2001. Kayla's willingness to participate as the kinahldung for this cultural revitalization would require the fortitude and thoughtfulness she had displayed throughout her life.

"My mom asked me if I wanted to do it and I thought that if I could do it, it could happen for a lot more girls that could use it and need it.. And I thought, if I could do it, if I could be strong and I could do it, then other people who need this dance could have it too and that was sort of an easy decision to me. And that's what happened," she explained.

Kayla described herself, at the tender age of fourteen, as being somewhat afraid of the dance "because I

hadn't seen one... I didn't know what it was. I didn't know what was going to happen and people had explained to me different parts of it, but I didn't know what each of those parts looked like." Although many parts of this ceremony are a sort of test for the young woman (running, fasting, prohibitions on itching/scratching), for her, they proved to be more like a "vacation."

"A lot of people were like, 'what are you doing this for? You're trying to make her tough and it's like torturing her.' No, for me it was a vacation because I was so used to taking care of my siblings and not thinking of myself and all this energy focused on me..." she said.

Melodie George-Moore, who is Kayla's mother, reflected that for her, this dance was first and foremost about Kayla and her ties to her culture and people. "In my mind historical trauma is the continuation of unhealthy patterns of behavior. Unknowingly, we give these to our children and I had wanted that to not happen... What I had hoped I was doing was...balancing her spirit...put-

ting on what I characterized as a suit of armor so that in going out into the world, because I knew she was going to go to college and go out into the world...to know who she is as a Hupa person, [so] that nobody would be able to disrupt anything. And that's held true, she's held her ground in a number of different places, in a number of different countries, in a number of different languages, that has held true. She knows who she is and can call on that strength at any given time; call on the strength that is Hupa, the land, the people, the language [and] the ancestors," George-Moore said.

Kayla is now the oldest of the Flower Dance girls who have participated in this revitalization and it is perhaps her distance from her ceremony that has allowed her to reflect on the role it has played in her life.

"I feel that every year since that time I've been able to look back at it in some way and it's a reference point in my life. And if I'm having some experience now, I can look back to that for some teaching or some experience I had that taught me that I was tough.

Or words people shared. Those things I'm able to bring to mind and bring to my life now," she said.

It was Kayla's dance that set the tone for many of the conversations and experiences that would follow. Each of the kinahldung girls I interviewed reflected on how watching Kayla run made them excited about running, how watching her sing made them excited about singing, how seeing her smile after she finished her dance made them want to know what that feeling was like. They commented on the positive aura of this dance, one that would follow Kayla as she emerged from underneath her blanket and stood beside her family.

This ceremony is particularly important to the Hupa people, as it is thought that the girl's behavior during these days will demonstrate how she is going to live her life. Many aspects of the dance demonstrate this value. For example, running is a significant part of the daily ritual activities; it is believed that how the girl runs demonstrates how she will live



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her life. If she falls, she must get back up; if she gets tired, she must keep going. Young children will chase behind her, sometimes teasing her, trying to get her to turn around – effectively “going back” toward her childhood.

When asked about the running, many of the young women had fond memories of how difficult they expected the run to be, and how surprised they were that they made it through each and every run.

“You kind of get this connection with earth and with your body, and with how beautiful you really are and how beautiful earth is that is surrounding you...During your ceremony you are to be put away, to be isolated from all the nowadays stuff, tv and newspapers and stuff like that, and when you are in your own mental thoughts...I feel like it is just a very powerful feeling... it felt refreshing,” said Hoopa tribal member and former Flower Dance girl Deja George.

At night the community comes together to sing and dance over the girl. Men and women are a part of this ceremony. This is where the name for the dance comes from, “they will beat time with sticks over her.” The people who attend sing songs throughout the night as part of the ceremony. The importance of these songs, and the act of community members coming to sing over the girl, were reflected in many of the kinahldung’s interviews where they spoke about being personally affected by the singing part of this ceremony.

“I still dream about some of the flower dance songs that were sung to me, and maybe I’ll wake up thinking, ‘oh maybe that was a sign of, you know, things are going to be okay. You know I’m here for you. Everything is going to turn out,’ said Deja George. “It gives you a connection with the spiritual world like no other. I don’t think I’ve ever felt so much connection then I did with my flower dance.”

Humor is also a tremendously important part of the dance, something that was consistently reflected in the interviews. Humor is fundamental to the teachings of this dance, but also to the healing of our community as a whole. Hoopa tribal member Lois Risling explained that

humor is not only about shaping the experience of the young girl, but also about serving a bigger purpose of bringing the community together.

“It brings together those people who are dancing over her, men and women, but also the people who are sitting and not singing and dancing, but are sitting in the audience watching, because it brings, makes it cohesive, all of the people in the group. And it also, in the middle of the night, it kind of lightens up the area and what you are doing. It keeps people awake,” Risling said.

The Hupa consider this ceremony an exercise and challenge for the kinahldung to reaffirm her new role as a woman instead of a child. While participants are allowed to laugh or joke with each other during the light songs, the girl must remain in seclusion under her blanket and she must not laugh. The Hupa believe that if a girl laughs during the ceremony she would get wrinkles when she was older. Natalie Carpenter explained that for her, humor helped to build a solid foundation for the kinahldung, to help show her the strength and autonomy that she has over her decisions in life.

“Life tries to throw you off of your path, tries to throw you off what you’re doing, and so when you’re able to kind of hold your composure without laughing and things like that, it teaches you to do that in everyday life. So whatever comes at you, you’re able to kind of still do what you got to do, still get done when you came there to do,” she said.

Melodie George-Moore echoed this sentiment. “We’re teaching our girls to be happy. There’s a place for joy in these dances, laughter, and that’s part of the prayer I say also... because life is a series of trials and errors, and you carry with you joy. Joy is not a destination but it is what you carry with you, how you experience the world and so that makes a huge difference,” she said.

Now that this dance has been practiced again for more than a decade in the Hoopa Valley, it has once again become part of the living, vibrant cultural practices of the Hupa people. Since the revitalization of the Flower Dance there have been at least one or two dances each year. Girls are now requesting and planning for their flower dances from a very

young age.

Alanna Nulph, a former substitute teacher for the Hoopa Valley Elementary School, told me about the many young girls who are now excited about their Flower Dance. “And I know from just being around the kids from teaching that those girls are really get excited for their Flower Dance. They really want to do that. They want to have it and have their friends see. You know, their friend did it and their sister did it and their cousin over there did it and they want to do it now...I think it’s a good thing,” she said.

But I will end here, once again with Kayla Rae Carpenter, whose Flower Dance in 2001 marked the start of this revitalization. We are friends on Facebook and when her posts come across my feed, I am in awe at the assuredness of her voice. She posts often about the importance of water during this extended California drought, and she started an online language group for Hupa people to learn more about the Hupa language.

We ended her interview, just over a year ago, with this question: “And for all the young girls that are dreaming of their Flower Dance, what do you tell them? What is your advice for them?”

Kayla answered exactly as I expected, in a thoughtful and straightforward way. “That’s awesome,” she responded, “because I didn’t. That’s a very cool experience and I’m happy for them.” ■

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