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EXPERIENCING

30
years

OF

**CULTURAL
RENEWAL**

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WATER IS
LIFE

The Flower Dance Ceremony

The honored young woman wears a bark skirt while she is running and it often gets into the water. Here, the bottom of the bark skirt is wet from the young woman's ritual bathing in the river. All photos by Cutcha Risling Baldy.



By Cutcha Risling Baldy

"WE ARE WHAT, 70 percent water if we're hydrated? 80 percent? That's what we're doing. We are rearranging the water in your body to be able to hold joy...that's how I would characterize it. We're changing the water to be able to hold beauty.... That's what singing does for her on a personal level." —Melodie George-Moore (Hupa/Karuk)

It was August 2014 and I was driving up I-5 on my way to the Lewiston Dam near Redding. I was going to meet up with many other Hupa, Yurok, and Karuk people and various supporters in the hopes that the Bureau of Reclamation could be swayed to release additional water flows into our rivers. Earlier that summer, the bureau had announced that there were no plans to augment river flows even though reports from biologists and community organizations had

found the presence of a parasite that could endanger fish and wildlife. This parasite was the same one that had infected thousands upon thousands of fish in the Klamath River in 2002, a result of low water flows and high temperatures.

Over the past few years, the Trinity River has suffered from the constant seizure of water by Central Valley farmers and the State of California and the continued maintenance of the dam that keeps the river unseasonably low, but in good years the river is clear, cool, and a place of great social, spiritual, and cultural importance. The World Renewal ceremonies are held along the river, including a key part, the Boat Dance, which requires that the Hupa navigate down the river in canoes while dancing and singing. For a number of years, because of the continued seizure of water by outside interests, the Hupa have been forced to ask for water to

be released so that they can perform this ceremony and help maintain the balance of the world. Over the past few years, our rivers have also had periods where they have become toxic to human beings and animals. In some of the hotter summer months, we have been faced with warnings not to swim in or drink the water from our river. We have also contended with continued threats to our fish and other wildlife.

In the Hoopa Valley we are, without a doubt, salmon people. We are also acorn people. We are also river people. Our river, now known as the Trinity, is called Hun' in our language. But the Trinity River, as a power and place of prayer, is called *ta'na:n-na:niwe:sile'n* or "water-you who have come to flow down through here." Our river runs through the center of our valley, and throughout my life I have heard it referred to as the artery of our land and what keeps us living and thriving. We are, without a doubt, intimately tied to our river, our creeks, our springs, our water. Because water is life. And as so many other Indigenous peoples have known since the beginning of time, we are the water, and the water is us.

That summer when the Bureau of Reclamation announced that it had no plans to augment river flows, the Hoopa Valley Tribe organized a protest at the Lewiston Dam. At the dam I was greeted by a group of young women, many of whom had been *kinahldung* or Flower Dance girls. We were going to be a part of a large group of people participating in a Flower Dance demonstration where we would sing for our water, not only in the hope that we would call attention to the possibility of another massive fish kill but also to offer prayers to the water, the land, and the people. This strong group of women and men, many of whom are regular participants in our women's coming-of-age ceremony, were an embodiment of our continuing cultures, as well as our determination and strength in the face of overwhelming odds. For a number of years our women's ceremony was not commonly practiced, with some anthropologists and ethnographers going so far as to call it extinct. This does not mean that our coming-of-age ceremony did not remain part of our cultural imagination. Many elders in our tribe would constantly educate and tell stories about our women's ceremony. They saw it as a foundational part of who we are as Hupa people. They continued to sing songs, demonstrate the movements, and talk about the importance of celebrating and honoring young women. After many years of hard work by various women in our tribe, we held our first revitalized Flower Dance ceremony in May of 2001 for Kayla Rae Carpenter (now Begay).

Kayla's mother, Melodie George-Moore, would be the medicine woman for many of these revitalized women's coming-of-age ceremonies. She would help to build up a

new generation of young women as they faced a new world, one where they could be strong Hupa leaders, and one that would continue to challenge them with daily acts of colonialism. At the Lewiston Dam, as we gathered to sing and pray for the water, Melodie would lead the way once again. She spoke to the crowd of people and introduced the dance as being an important demonstration not only of the power of women, but also the power of community. And, in a way that had become very poignant and important to Melodie, this dance is also very clearly about water, because water is life.

The contemporary Flower Dance ceremony is usually three, five, or ten days. Each day includes a number of activities where the young woman will learn more about her changing roles, but also about her deep and personal ties to her culture, land, and community. Daily activities include running, steaming, talking circles, ritual fasting, bathing, learning about herbs, and singing, among many others. This ceremony is particularly important to the Hupa as it is thought that each young woman's behavior during these days demonstrates how she is going to live her life. Running in particular demonstrates how she will live her life. If she falls, she must get back up; if she gets tired she must keep going. When she runs, young children chase behind her, sometimes teasing her, trying to get her to turn around—effectively "going back" toward her childhood.

Bathing is also a foundational part of this ceremony and is important for introducing what will become a routine and ritual bathing that is a part of self-care in Hupa culture. During each day of the ceremony the *kinahldung* runs and does a ritual bath at various bathing spots known as the *tim* (lucky spots). On the last day of the ceremony, she will do a ritual bath in all of the bathing spots. Bathing helps the young woman to become intimately tied to the river, and by extension the land and her community. The river that will nourish the young woman throughout her life provides her with an essential place of prayer during this ceremony. As young women begin preparations for the ceremony, Melodie will sometimes take them down to the river to make an offering, she says, to "begin a sense of place." In an interview that I did with her about the revitalization of this ceremony she told me:

"Some girls I've taken down to the water to give offering to the river, as well as to begin a sense of place, because there's a number of things that are helpful to people who are

holding space or holding ground against colonization. How do you keep well? And so there's a list of things, I've kind of narrowed it down from this dance...that sense of place, somewhere that you can tie yourself to; that's part of what is happening with this girl saying prayers at the river, with these bath spots—she's got a sense of place. That's where home is. That's where I'm tied to right there.”

The bathing, the running alongside the river, the intimate ties this young woman builds to her place, this is what will ground her as she moves forward in life. Many of our ceremonies give us an intimate connection to the river, they remind us that we are responsible for our river, our environment. These ceremonies teach us that our well-being is tied to our environment and our community. They teach us that we are intertwined with our world, not separate, not dominant.

When we came to the Lewiston Dam to pray for increased water flows, we were also demonstrating that our prayers, ceremonies, and culture teach us to be diligent, strong, and active. In this modern world we are constantly confronted with attempts to belittle, ignore, or silence our presence on this land, yet we remain ever diligent in our protection of our land, animals, and water, not just for ourselves but for everyone. That day, as our tribal members wore shirts that read “Free Our River,” I stood with a group of Hupa people who, despite the more-than-hundred-degree weather, sang as loud as they could, over the sound of rushing water, calling out into the mountains. We sang Flower Dance songs for our water. We sang songs that several years before had been silenced and were now, once again, thriving. “I think about these girls,” Melodie told me. “I think about how they bathe in our river and how it blesses them. I think about how much that means to them, and how much it means to us. Our water is in us.”

Over the past year many of our social media, and in some cases mainstream media, feeds have been filled with the growing Indigenous fight to protect water. Most recently, the Dakota Access Pipeline finally became headline news after thousands of Native people and allies went to the Standing Rock Reservation to stop construction of a pipeline underneath the Missouri River. “*Mni Wiconi*” or “Water is Life” became an oft-cited mantra. As they gathered at the various camps, Indigenous peoples from around the world shared their own water songs, dances, and prayers. And I was struck once again by the sheer number of Indigenous voices that could testify to the intimate and ancient ties we have to the water that nourishes this land.

It is through our culture, our languages, our stories, and our ceremonies that we are taught our interconnectedness with the land, environment, animals, and water. And now, over a decade after the revitalization of our women's coming-of-age ceremony in Hoopa, we continue to stand as a community of people, alongside our kinahldung, with songs, prayers, and laughter at demonstrations like the one at the Lewiston Dam in 2014. I realized in that moment the level of wellness that we bring to our dances and to ourselves we also bring to our water. We heal ourselves, we heal the water. We heal the water, we heal ourselves.

*Author's Note: Parts of this interview were taken from my forthcoming book *No:olchwin-ding, no:olchwin-te* (To Grow Old In A Good Way): The Revitalization of Women's Coming-of-Age Ceremonies as Decolonizing Praxis, which is currently under contract with the University of Washington Press. The book explores the cultural revitalization of women's coming-of-age ceremonies to demonstrate how this revitalization articulates and supports an Indigenous decolonizing praxis.*

