



Introduction

(english)

JUDITH DAXOOTSU RAMOS, MAT

I would like to introduce myself. My name is Judith Daxootsu Ramos, I am Raven moiety, from the Kwaáshki'kwaan clan, Tisk'w Hit (Owl House). I am the daughter of the L'uknaᵿ.ádi (Coho) Clan from Dry Bay, Alaska, and granddaughter of the Eagle Teikweidí (Brown Bear) clan from Ahrnklin River. I currently live and work on the land of Áak'w Kᵿwáan on Lingít Aani (Tlingit people) in Juneau, Alaska.



*Elaine Chewshaa Abraham, Judith Daxootsu Ramos, Maka Keixé Yaxtí Monture-Paki,
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This issue focuses on the Indigenous cultures of the Pacific Northwest coast of North America. While the transmission of traditional knowledge has been disrupted because of pandemics, colonization, residential schools, and Christian missionaries, today's Indigenous young people are revitalizing their culture, dancing, art, ceremonies, and languages. This issue features Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors presenting aspects of our cultures pertaining to women's lives, ceremonies, and art. Through the contributions we present here, a theme – sometimes underlying, sometimes explicit – weaves its way through the pages: that of cultural continuity. This theme unfolds in very concrete ways which highlight the work of women in establishing the necessary links for the transmission of values, language, and knowledge upon which Indigenous identities are established.

Northwest Coast peoples occupy the area from Yakutat Bay, Alaska, down the coast of British Columbia and south into the contiguous USA through the Oregon-California border. They speak many languages belonging to at least ten distinct linguistic families and are divided into more than forty nations.

The southern groups, including the Nuu'Chah'Nuth on Vancouver Island, are culturally very diverse and the matricultural core of these societies varies from one group to the next. The northern groups, speaking Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian and Athapaskan languages, share several unifying features and, most relevant to this journal, the fact that their social systems, though differing from one group to the next, are all matrilineal. Furthermore, as coastal people, their diet is focused on the harvest of marine mammals and fish, especially salmon. They enjoy abundant, albeit seasonal, food resources. All have developed elaborate stratified societies, with lineages and clans as well as large winter villages, and intricate art forms displaying inherited crests images and paraphernalia, or serving in rituals which celebrate the relationship between the humans, animals, and other nonhuman beings that populate our world. While their worldviews differ, they remain compatible.

This issue contains contributions from two members of the Tlingit community of the Pacific Northwest Coast: Diane L'xeis' Benson and Meda DeWitt. These contributions relate, on the one hand, the community context and, on the other, the ritual context for the process of establishing a woman's Tlingit identity.

In 'We Are A Net', Diane L'xeis' Benson introduces the Tlingit ways of building strong personal relationships between women, which in turn strengthen and deepen the local Tlingit community. The author, who is a politician, an inspirational speaker, a video production consultant, a published writer and a dramaturge, shares the story and resilience of five Indigenous women that live in a small, mostly Norwegian city in Southeast Alaska. Most of the women are 'elder' women; each has experienced a different journey, but through sharing of food, 'knowledge, stories and laughter,' they have woven a bond of trust with each other.

In sharing the short book she co-wrote with Jennifer Andrulli, *Women's Rites of Passage*, originally published by the Anchorage Museum in Alaska, Meda DeWitt introduces the content of teachings and rites of passage shaping the life and identity of Indigenous women, according to their respective

cultures. Using historical stories and accounts and providing an Indigenous perspective, this booklet discusses seven different Indigenous cultures of Alaska. The publication was part of a series of virtual discussions on the importance of Tlingit women's coming-of-age ceremonies (puberty rites), menstruation huts, and women's rituals hosted by the Anchorage Museum, and we are very pleased to be able to include a video recording entitled *Traditional Healing & Coming of Age: A Conversation with Meda DeWitt*, originally broadcast by the Anchorage Museum on 4 September 2020.

Sharing the theme of these community contributions, in 'A Retrospective on the Voices of Nuu'Chan'Nuth Women,' scholar Jacky Moore revisits with us the strength and wisdom she discovered through stories shared with her by Nuu'Chah'Nuth women from the west coast of Vancouver Island. Through their voices, she shows how they are advocates for their culture, traditions, and for the women themselves, as well as demonstrating that not only are they involved in all preparations for ceremonies, they also hold key roles in many of these very ceremonies. In 1939, anthropologist Edward Sapir described the ceremonies and lives of Nuu'Chah'Nuth women, along with the importance of their role and status in Nuu'Chah'Nuth society, in *Nootka Tales: Tales and Ethnological Narratives*. Canada's ban on potlatches and other ritual gatherings, however, not only suppressed the puberty potlatches held traditionally to honour young women, it also imposed restrictions on other traditional women's gatherings and cultural events in general. Women retained the songs and dances despite this oppressive legislation; they taught them to the next generation and they also created and owned new songs. For example, one woman shared with Moore the ceremonies, rituals, and teachings around the birth of children and the role of midwives, discussing how, during this time, other women supported and cared for the new mother. Traditional birthing practices and the reliance on midwives are some of the traditions being revived and re-taught today. Other important ceremonies are the celebration of the first year of a child's life, and the puberty and coming-of-age rituals and ceremonies. According to Jacky Moore, the resilience, tenacity and resistance of these women have enabled them to ensure that their knowledge and values, which go beyond the female circle to enrich the whole community, can be transmitted to future generations.

In her research report, "Mythological Narratives and Women's Expression in the Northern Northwest Coast", Kierra Beament presents the preliminary results of a research project on weaving, basketry and other art forms often associated with women among the Indigenous communities of the northern Northwest Pacific Coast, that is, the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian peoples. Due to current circumstances, including the Covid 19 pandemic, Beament had to delay her in-person engagement with the artists with whom she wants to work and, instead, explored archives and texts. These texts include a group of documents rarely consulted when we work on material culture: mythology and stories. By exploring the literature about Indigenous oral culture of the Pacific coast, she discovered that the myths contain relatively numerous mentions of objects made by women. The gendered context, that is to say, the attribution of the production of these objects and their decoration to one gender or another, turned out to be less rigid than expected, and it seems that women have had access to the domain of crests for a long time. Art collectors realized that baskets, hats, wild goat wool blankets, and other woven works, along with their decorative geometric patterns, had an aesthetic value equivalent to the sculpture and paintings - made mostly by men - to carry the crests. The myths,

however, unveil a more fundamental value, one that unfolds socially, culturally, and spiritually by affirming the sacred intervention of mythical powers in the creation and teaching of basketry and weaving techniques, among other skills used especially by women. From there a link can be made, one announced by the mythological texts which often give an active and leading role to the heroines, between the respect granted to the women in the oral literature and the intervention of the powers which govern the world beyond the human community, a world with which women have daily contact. The proximity of the myths and the teaching they propagate supports the current revival of traditional techniques, and the respect granted to them.

Frederica de Laguna's research paper 'Matrilineal Kin Groups in Northwestern North America' is reproduced here thanks to the generous permission of the University of Ottawa Press, who hold copyright over the text first presented at the 1971 Northern Athapaskan conference organized by the Museum of Man (today the Canadian Museum of History). It was originally published in 1975 with the proceedings of that conference, part of the Mercury Series, Canadian Ethnological Service Paper No. 27.

The research was decisive at the time and continues to be influential, because it resolved a long-standing question, contentious among both Indigenous communities and scholarly disciplines, about the origins of matrilineal kin groups in northwestern North America, including the people of the Pacific Northwest Coast (British Columbia and Alaska), inland Alaska, the Yukon Territory, and the Northwest Territories. The contention was based upon a resemblance between the names or crests identifying kin groups among the coastal societies and the names or crest of the Inland peoples, mostly Athapaskan speakers, and anthropologists had deduced that these names had originated on the coast and were subsequently 'borrowed' by the Inland peoples, along with with certain kinship features such as cross-cousin marriage. Up until half a century ago, some authors, such as George Peter Murdock, maintained that matrilineal kinship groups were unthinkable in the case of hunter-gatherer peoples such as the Northern Athapaskans because matrilineality was only possible for sedentary peoples who depended on the work of women and that the demonstrable system of matrilineal kinship among Athapaskan peoples must have been introduced from outside, fairly recently. Some of Murdock's colleagues relied on the fact that similar clan names were sometimes found among different nations, this resemblance between the names identifying the groups (and the crests) of the kinship groups being easy to note, for example, between certain coastal groups such as the Tsimshian and the Tlingit and their Athapaskan neighbors inland. They deduced from this that the system of the Athapaskan clans was simply 'borrowed' from the coastal clans at the same time as the rules of marriage favouring unions between cross cousins (rules frequent among matrilineal peoples). But other ethnologists, such as Catherine McClellan, a collaborator of Frederica de Laguna, insisted on the general and ancient character of the structures of clans and matrilineal moieties based on the fact that practically all the Athapaskan groups of Alaska and Yukon are matrilineal, even those who are simultaneously hunter-gatherers, semi-nomadic, and located far from the coasts.

As for the coastal peoples, the Tsimshian, Haida and Tlingit, their matrilineal kinship systems were attributed sometimes to the abundance of resources allowing an almost sedentary life, sometimes to

the work of the women who were responsible for drying and preserving the salmon. Neighbouring peoples to the north and south, though, while living in similar environments, did not and do not share the matrilineal option.

Frederica de Laguna studied and lived many years with the Tlingit people and their neighbours - from 1921 until her death in 2004 - and worked with many Athapaskan peoples, such as the Dena in the Yukon valley and the Ahtna all along the Copper River valley. Wherever she went, she learned about the cultures of these peoples and, in particular, with colleagues such as Catherine McClellan, was given detailed data on kinship systems, clan names, and moieties. She found that the matrilineal kinship groups, including clan systems grouped into two halves or three phratries, as well as a significant proportion of the names identifying the clans, were found throughout a vast region: through the Alaskan interior from the far northwest to the Yukon Territory in Canada and on into the western Canadian subarctic, and descending, on the one hand, along the Pacific coast and, on the other hand, towards the central plateaus of British Columbia between the Rocky Mountains and the Coastal Range, and pushing even farther south, among the Athapaskans of the American Southwest, such as the Navaho people. This study is the culmination of immense and meticulous comparative work which is based on ethnographic research as complete as it could be at the time, and whose conclusions remain unassailable: the matrilineal Athapaskan clans and their names are not the result of a diffusion inland from the Coast, they are part of a kinship system anciently rooted in the parent culture of the Athapaskans, or Dene, as they call themselves. Moreover, the kinship systems of the coastal peoples, while being relatively compatible, are sufficiently different from each other for us to recognize their antiquity on the one hand and, on the other, the influence they exerted and still exert on each other, for example with inter-tribal marriages, or with the arrival of a group of immigrants who introduce new names and new crests.

The interest of such a document, essential for anyone interested in North American matricultures, is not only theoretical. It is also a basic reference for tracing the old kinship systems, reaffirming the matrilineal character of these societies, and recovering knowledge that has now disappeared from the social context of many Indigenous communities converted to kinship systems of European origin, systems that do not easily tolerate overtly influential matricultural systems.

As a complement to de Laguna's study and for readers looking for more information about Dene / Athapaskan kinship systems, matriliney among southern Athapaskan peoples, or the social organization of the other Dene peoples, a monograph by Isidore Dyen and David Aberle, *Lexical Reconstruction: The Case of the Proto-Athapaskan Kinship System* (CUP, 1974), is invaluable. Dyen and Aberle offer precise and technical data on the terms of kinship and their evolution in all the northern and southern Athapaskan, while confirming the ascendancy of matrilineal systems on the social organization of these groups.

Dr. Frederica de Laguna was interested in all facets of the cultures she encountered. In the spirit of celebrating her life and work, we are republishing here a short article, untitled in the original version, about the gendered landscape around Yakutat, Alaska, the region of my origins. Although brief, this

text introduces an essential aspect of our culture: the relations between humans and other beings, animals, rivers, or mountains, and, for example, the extension of our social relations and our concepts of marriage and kinship to the mountains around us, to their 'children,' and to glaciers whose male or female gender demands the appropriate ritual approach.

Being personally acquainted with Kuxaankutaan, as Dr. De Laguna was named by Katy Dixon Isaac when we adopted her into the Gineix̄ Kwaan clan of the Raven Moiety, it is with great pleasure that I share some reminiscences recorded by my mother and myself about the song Kuxaankutaan composed for Sharon Goodwin's memorial potlatch in 1986. The article was first published in *Arctic Anthropology* in 2006, and we are grateful to be able to reprint it here.

To conclude this issue, we return to an Indigenous voice with Linnéa Rowlett's review of *Xwelíqwiya: The Life of a Stó:lō Matriarch*, dictated by Rena Point Bolton and transcribed and edited by Richard Daly (AU Press, 2013). The book is Bolton's autobiography and through a sensitive process of listening and conversational vignettes, Daly not only skilfully shares the story of the Xwélmexw artist and craftswoman, but introduces a voice which is familiar with lifeways, skills, craftwork, and teachings that were long hidden from colonial actors in Canada. Xwelíqwiya's contributions to the cultural continuity of her people have been crucial to the revival occurring today.

The various communities mentioned in this issue are facing a similar colonial past and similar losses; in spite of their linguistic and cultural differences, they are not isolated. They are united by the will to regain essential parts of their cultural heritage, and by their expressed determination not to return to the past but rather to build on it. The women of these communities have taken explicit responsibility for this task. They are not following the injunction brought by the colonizers - against their ancient cultural values - to limit themselves to domestic and local community work. Instead they speak and write and publish their ideas, they organize workshops and study groups, they travel to conferences within Canada and abroad, they challenge scholars, and they are involved in politics. They also prepare art shows and they organize feasts, where children join forces with grandparents to revive the ritual songs and dances of yesteryear.

We do not know to what extent the predominance of matrilineal kinship systems and the strong matricultural systems in place in these societies contributes to their cultural effervescence. We do know that the matricultural systems are everywhere considered by Indigenous women as an essential part of their cultural identity, a part to be protected and promoted.

GunalchÈesh haat yee.aadi. Thank you all for reading this issue. Avec nos remerciements pour votre attention.

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