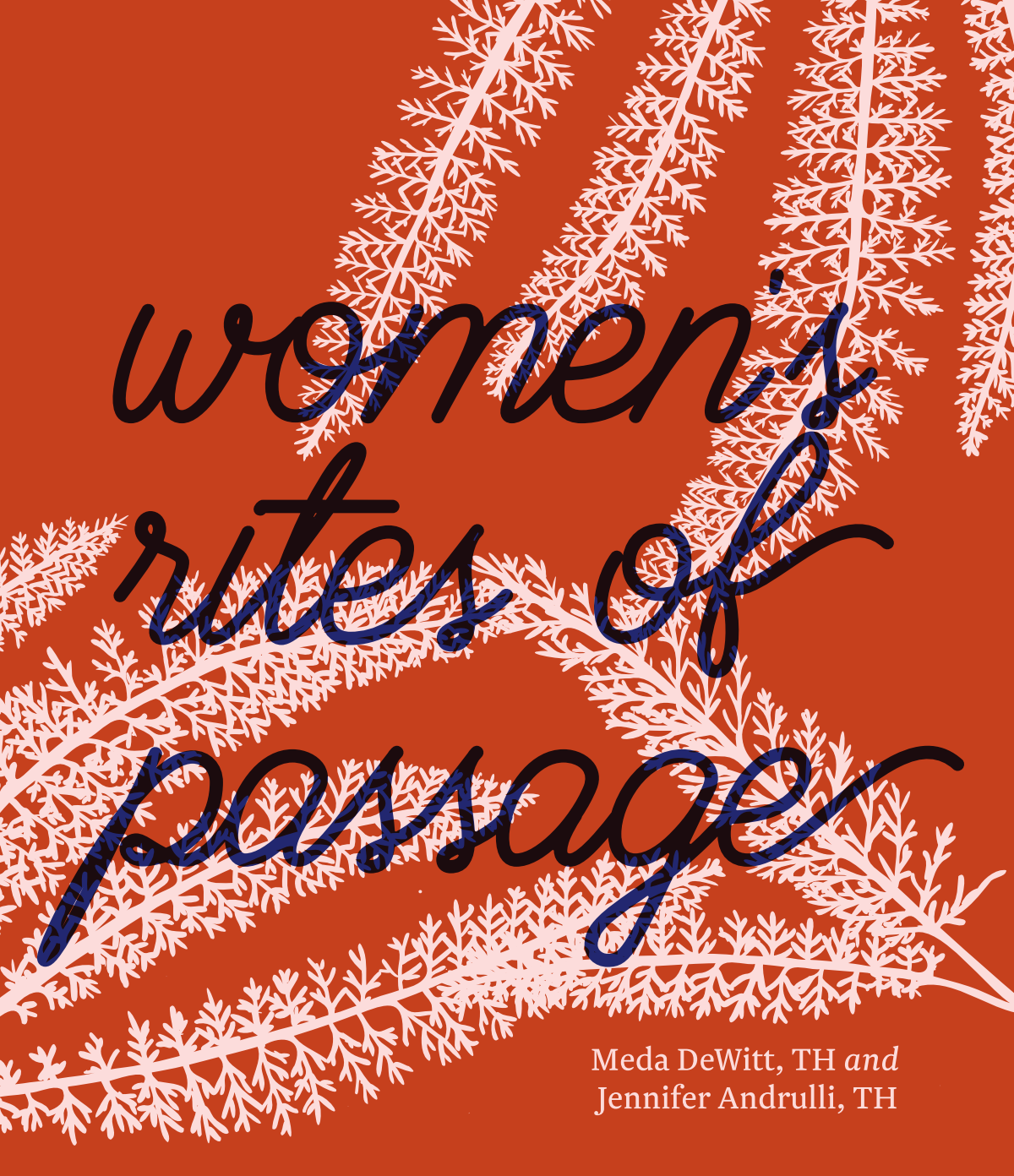
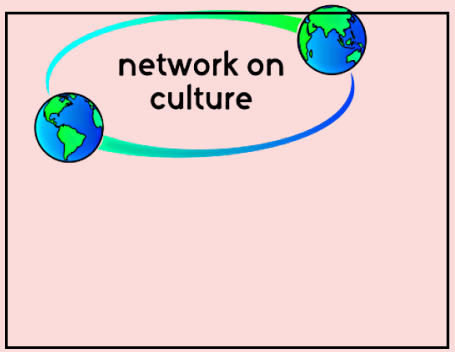


Meda DeWitt, TH *and*
Jennifer Andrulli, TH

ANCHORAGE MUSEUM



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Alaska Native Peoples cultivated intricate rites of passage to support girls and boys on their journey of life. Values, roles, and responsibilities were instilled and cultural traditions transmitted, governing human relationships with each other and relationships with the natural and supernatural worlds. Traditional protocols honoring maturation through life were based on Indigenous people's perspective of how to create healthy humans, families, and communities, living in reciprocal relationship with the environment. Rites of passage are used as an intensive knowledge-, wisdom-, and skills-transference process, grounding the participant in their cultural identity and sense of self. They mark someone's readiness to transition into their next phase of life or mastery.

There are many periods of passage during a person's life, generally associated with biological, psychological, or social-position transitions. Preparation for rites of passage would be integrated throughout the participant's life via stories, activities, lessons, and observations, and through supporting family, clan, and community members through the rites. These methods created for the participant anticipation and willingness to go through the process, an understanding of what was expected, and a sense of accomplishment once the rite of passage was completed. The current degradation or loss of rites of passage and other ceremonies in Alaska Native communities is linked to recent changes in social and political climate that have occurred due to Western contact, colonization, and assimilation.

While there are a satisfactory number of historical accounts from which to gain an understanding of the physical activities and structures of Alaska Native women's puberty customs, none demonstrate even a basic knowledge of women's wisdom, traditions, or power, nor any greater cultural understanding. The limited access to women's knowledge in the historical record is likely due in large part to the explorers themselves being men, and the custom of interviews being conducted with other men within the Indigenous population. (Frederica de Laguna was one female anthropologist who later edited and annotated male accounts to correct exaggerations and inaccuracies, including in her 1991 edited edition of George Thornton Emmons' *The Tlingit Indians*.) Another challenge is that anthropologists historically chose to observe at some distance, with only with limited interaction, believing this would limit their influence on the behaviors observed. Therefore, accounts collected by explorers, colonial observers, and missionaries were restricted, and the Indigenous rites observed—particularly menarche and menstruation rites—were depicted as superstitious, shameful, and primitive, with little sense of their ritual and complexity.

Today, Alaska Native cultural and traditional knowledge revitalization reinforces identity and reestablishes the positive and beneficial aspects of our heritage. Through language revitalization, traditional marking renewal, traditional healing programs, and trauma-informed care, we are cultivating resilience grounded in culturally distinctive health and wellbeing concepts.

Special thanks to our Elders who kept the flame of cultural and traditional knowledge alive in their hearts. To our wisdom-keepers, traditional healers, medicine women and men, culture-bearers and leaders who understand the value of revitalizing and reclaiming cultural sovereignty. We thank medical historian Robert Fortuine for his valuable contribution to documenting Alaska Native traditional healing practices and traditional ecological knowledge; due to time constraints for this project, we pulled extensively from his work *Shamans and Seal Oil* for historical accounts. Colonization policy, epidemics, the influenza pandemic of 1918, and forced religious conversion contributed to a time of great hardship for all Alaska Native people. Harold Napoleon (1996) shares eloquently in his essay *Yuuyaraq: The Way of the Human Being* that the "Great Death" spread like wildfire, killing 6 of every 10 people and wiping out entire villages, giving birth to a generation of orphans (p.3). After the Great Death, there was mass conversion, and people began to abandon, in a sense, their own culture. In abandoning their culture, they abandoned themselves. There was also born in them a sense of shame and guilt, because they were taught that the way they had been living their lives was what caused them to die in such great numbers (p.15). Our traditional healers and medicine people endured generations of religious persecution, suppression, and oppression. We are resilient; our traditions are alive, sacred, and to this day kept close to the heart within families. Few contemporary Alaska Natives write publicly about the depths of their Alaska Native spirituality. It is intertwined and woven into all that we do, for we are of the land and we are our Ancestors.

The political climate changed and colonization policies relaxed with the passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 (AIRFA) (42 U.S.C. § 1996), which protects the rights of Native Americans and Alaska Natives to exercise their traditional religions by ensuring access to sites, use and possession of sacred objects, and the freedom to worship through ceremonials and traditional rites. By the mid 1980s, the Catholic leadership realized that Yup'ik dancing could be a positive force, unifying communities and involving young people in cross-generational activities (Barker, Fienup-Riordan, & John, 2010, p. xxvi). In our lifetimes, as the religious suppression of Indigenous Alaska Natives have begun to relax, we have witnessed and participated in renewal of culture, language, and traditions. We see strong, united, and educated generations standing together, cultivating change, revitalizing language, and nurturing those most precious to the continuation of life itself: women and children.

Land Otter Medicine/Star Gentian

TLINGIT

TLINGIT

Historical Accounts

We have the following historical account from Fortuine (1986):

Tlingit rituals associated with the first menstrual period were harsh indeed. The girl was secluded for as much as a year in a tiny rude shelter built some distance from the family dwelling. The hut was constructed of evergreen branches and had one barred opening facing the sea and another facing the street (Krause, 1956, p. 152; Niblack, 1888, p. 370). The girl's face was smeared with charred fungus and she was required to wear a special cloak, hood, or broad-brimmed hat that prevented her from looking at, and thus contaminating, the sky (Holmberg, 1856–63, p. 320). She was permitted to leave the hut for only brief periods at night, always while wearing her special headgear (Krause, 1956, p. 153). During the seclusion year, the girl ate only what her mother or a female slave brought her, and could suck only small amounts of water through the hollow wing bone of an eagle. No other comforts were allowed, and the hut was apparently not cleaned (Holmberg, 1856-63, p. 320). The girl was expected to occupy her time diligently, pursuing womanly tasks to prepare her for married life ahead (Langsdorff as cited in Niblack, 1888, p. 370). The slave who had assisted her to dress was given her freedom, and the old clothing was destroyed as a symbol of [the slave's] former condition (Holmberg, 1856-63, p. 321). The Tlingit believed that the failure to observe such customs would result in many misfortunes, including poor fishing, absent game, storms, and fatal accidents (Kaminskii, 1985, p. 48). At the conclusion of her long seclusion, the relatives of the young woman arranged a great celebration, at which she was presented to the guests decked out in fine new clothing, sometimes made even of sea otter skin (Fortuine, 1986, p.77).

TLINGIT

Alaska Native Perspective

Nora Marks Keixwnéi Dauenhauer, a Tlingit poet, short-story writer, and Tlingit language scholar from Alaska, shares her perspective of women's rites. She illustrates the depth and richness as she describes the meaning of the rite and the experience of it, removing the stigmatization that occurs through a Western lens.

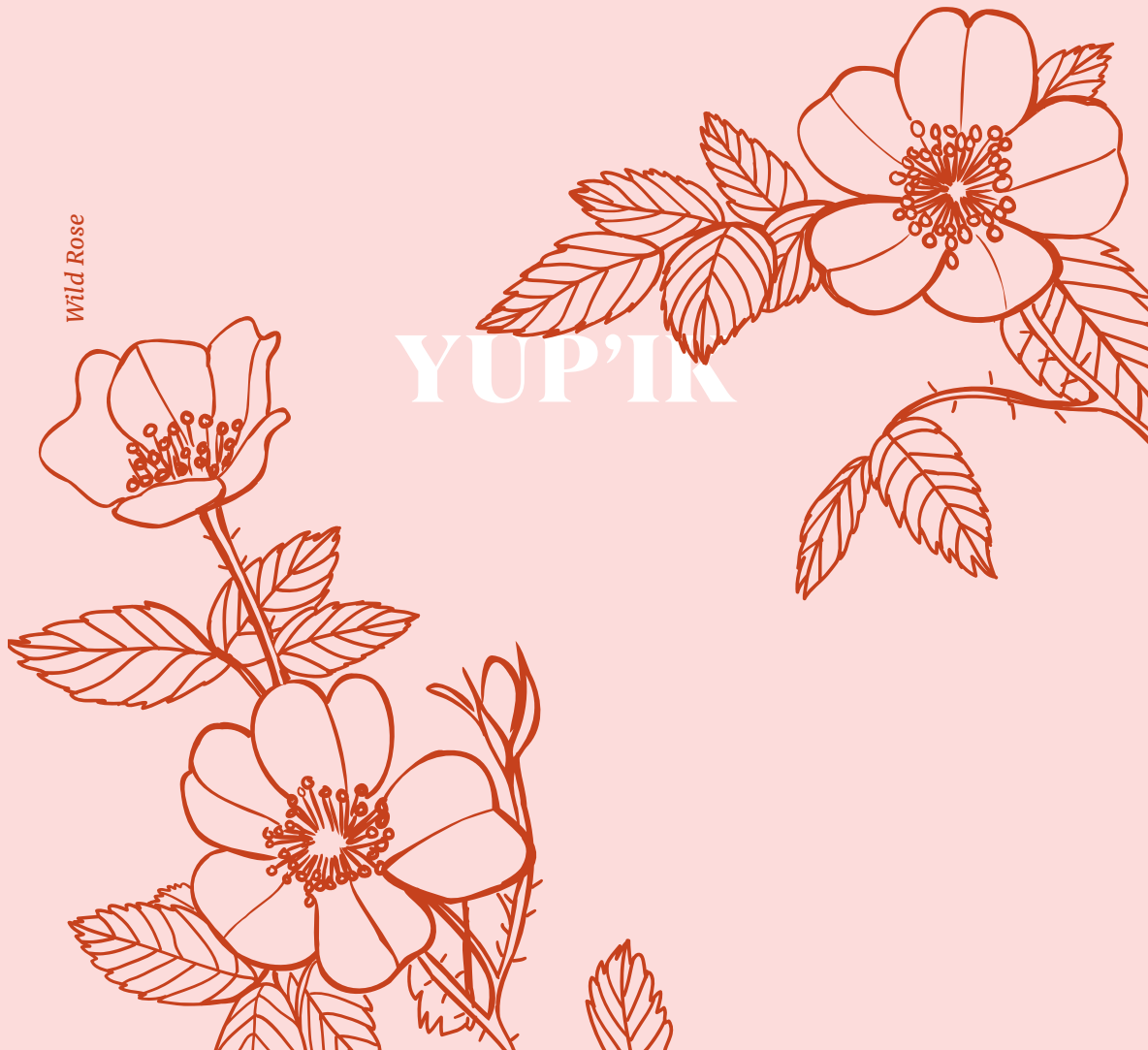
This is one of the great miracles and mysteries of life, and in many traditional societies women were and are considered to have great power, especially at this time. The power can also be unconscious and dangerous, and many ritual taboos often apply. In traditional societies, the onset of menstruation is also one of the great rites of passage in a woman's life, and in the life of the community (Dauenhauer, 1987, p. 421).

Liz Cheney also articulates living cultural understanding in a paper on becoming a mother. While this is not the puberty seclusion ceremony, it represents another transition into a new identity with new responsibilities and expectations, a transition also significant to the Tlingit.

All through the pregnancy, the expecting mother was being continually told by her grandmothers, aunties, and mothers the role and importance of being a mother. Many of the women from around the village would come by to wish the unborn child a safe passage from the land of the ancestors. The expecting mother would spend her days listening and learning the rhythms of motherhood. She would sit quietly in places she felt drawn to and describe the beauty to her child. Whenever she worked on anything, she would take the time to describe how and why she

was doing it. It was believed that if she did not speak quietly to her silent observer inside and share with it beautiful songs and stories, then the child would be born with empty ears, always trying to make noise, and it would have empty eyes, unable to see beauty (Cheney, 1996, as cited in DeWitt, 2012).

The understanding of how a person fits into social structures and what protocols they must follow allows the person to fulfill that role to the best of their ability. This identity is reinforced as their worth is reflected back to them, through gratitude and reciprocity from other community members and from nature.



YUP'IK

Historical Accounts

Ann Fienup-Riordan has gifted us with a contemporary anthropological feminine perspective of Yup'ik culture and oral traditions. We are indebted to her for bringing forth words of our Living Elders, who remember, practice, and teach *Yuungnaqpiallerput*, the way we genuinely live, inspiring younger generations as we reclaim and revitalize our culture, language, and traditions. Culture is not static, and Yup'ik families continue to blend our ancestral knowledge into the modern world. The coastal Yup'ik viewed the daily activity and personal rituals of women as having a profound impact on the relationship between humans and animals (Fienup-Riordan, 1985, p.187). After a menstrual seclusion rite of passage, girls followed protocols and restrictions which evolved as they matured into marriage and motherhood. The protocols were developed to harness the special powers which come along with the ability to produce human life, such as the power to both draw and repel animals (Fienup-Riordan, 1985, p.163).

From Fortuine (1986), we have this historical account:

> A Yupik adolescent girl was considered unclean for 40 days after her first menstrual period, during which time she was secluded in a corner of the dwelling with her face to the wall and a parka hood over her head. During the summer months she might be permitted to spend her time of seclusion in a rough shelter away from the main house, but in either case she could not go out during the day and only once each night. At the end of the 40 days she bathed, put on new garments, and henceforth was eligible for marriage (Nelson, 1899, p. 291). Many restrictions were imposed on the girl at menarche. She was expected to work quietly and industriously during her seclusion on such tasks as weaving baskets, sewing boots, or other practical activities that prepared her for adult responsibilities. During the first ten days she was given no water to drink and could not eat fresh fish or pick up food with her hands. After this initial period, she still could not dip water but had to drink through a tube, usually made from the wing bone of a bird. Her boots were taken away and a belt was tied around her hips with a piece of fish hanging from one side and a little sack full of ashes from the other. When she was finally permitted to go outside she had to wear her boots and her hood up at all times to shade her eyes. These practices had the dual purpose of protecting the community from the girl's "uncleanness" and protecting her in turn from supernatural powers. During subsequent menses, a woman observed many of the same restrictions, such as not touching water or the ground directly, and shading her eyes from the sun (Fortuine, 1986, p.46).

YUP'IK

Alaska Native Perspective

Living *yuuyaraq*, the Yup'ik way of life, is to know and understand *yagyarat*, the rules of life. John (2010) shares multiple yagyarat for living in reciprocal relationship with both human and nonhuman beings in the form of plants, animals, minerals, and natural phenomena. These are the critical rules that apply to the relationship between humans, the land, and the sacred world. For example, when a girl becomes a woman, it is traditionally believed that the spiritual impact of the menstrual cycle could affect the survival effort of the community; the belief is that a woman's aroma is extremely powerful in the sacred world. This is the reason why a woman who began menstruating was secluded in her hut for up to a year before she could participate in social activities (John, 2010, pp. 42–43).

In a 2020 personal communication, Karen Brooks eloquently shares her family's journey from cultural collapse to empowerment. She writes that familial and personal ceremonies and celebrations, honoring the transitions through life, cultivate and nurture multigenerational and epigenetic healing and understanding:

My late Yup'ik/Siberian Yupik grandmother, Helen Joe, was born at a time of great change in Tununak on Qaluyaat (Nelson Island). She was an orphan of the Great Death, the influenza pandemic of 1918. She was found floating alone in an umiak (boat), her parents lost to the Bering Sea. Life was difficult for orphans; she was a survivor. I loved her very much, she was kind and gentle with me. When I would take her arm and say, "This is so fluffy," she would laugh. Sometimes, late in the evenings, she would sing Yup'ik songs, she would line up all the children and teach us how to dance. We would move and turn to the rhythm of her song, sometimes I felt like a bird in the sky. When I was eight years old, Grandma took me aside, she silently pulled down her lower lip, on the inside she had tattoos. She did not say a word, she just looked at me, it was that profound. I carried this experience with me until I figured it out, years later. I was taught to hold Yup'ik spirituality close to my heart and not to share my gifts. I was hushed when I asked questions about dreams, visions, and subtle feelings. Like Grandmother's tattoos, we kept the sacred secret.

Growing up, I went to the churches of my friends, experiencing multiple Christian denominations, listening, observing, and questioning. I witnessed the similarities and discrepancies within the doctrines, I had many questions the Church would not answer, my keen nature was always getting me in trouble with the clergy.

My relatives did not talk about their pain. It was repressed, coming out as anger, abuse, and addiction. I could feel the shame beneath the surface, yet no one talked about it. I dedicated my life to healing and understanding so I could break the chains and stop the cycle for my children. I spent time with the Elders, listening and learning. One Elder would only let me ask one question per visit; it took me years to learn what was remembered. As I learned, I shared with my children, we grew together.

My journey also took me through the wisdom teachings of world religions. In the red road teachings of the Sioux, I found First Nations honoring the traditions of their Ancestors, hosting community ceremonies dedicated to the spiritual journey of their people, such as sweat lodge, sun dance, pipe ceremony, and vision quest. Classic yoga texts showed me in matter-of-fact terms that if I sat quietly, practiced controlled breathing, and paid close attention to the awareness of my mind, I was able to access altered states of consciousness. This is the very

state my Ancestors accessed to thrive in the Arctic. These are not magical states of being, but our birthright as human beings. In my martial arts qi gong practice, I saw similarities to Yup'ik dance movements. Breath, intention, stamina, and endurance combined in a moving meditation designed to enhance connection to natural forces. In Chinese acupuncture, I found similarities with Yup'ik traditional poking and tattooing on areas of pain and inflammation. I sought out the essence of truth within world religions and cultures, identifying what served my family and community and blending the ancient and modern to meet the needs of all my patients, no matter their heritage, with honor and understanding.

On my journey of reconciling my childhood trauma, I came to understand the deep commitment Grandma Helen Joe made to herself about who she was as Yup'ik. Her tattoos were her *yagyarait arnaurtellriit* (rites of passage) markings, and they were placed on the inside of her lower lip. With this act of personal empowerment, she taught me the value of maintaining a connection to our ancestral ways, and the resilience of my Yup'ik relatives and ancestors. In that moment, Grandma transmitted cultural knowledge, a download that took me years to understand and integrate, a sacred moment when she gave me permission to seek understanding and empowerment through rites of passage.

I work with my community to revitalize and create ceremonies and rites of passage, honoring the transitions and transformations through life. Our culture is dynamic, shifting and evolving. I weave the old ways of my Ancestors into ceremonies that create meaning in the modern world, and support people in liminal space for a period so they can journey through their heart.

For my children, I spoke the truth, told them every story I knew of the hardships of their Ancestors and relatives. There were no secrets, and the truth held a resonance that they could use to understand the experiences in their lives. I am encouraged to see a renewal of traditional marking for Inuit and Yup'ik women; this is part of our process, healing trauma through reclaiming our identity. Traditional Healers and Medicine People have a calling from the time they are little. The medicine has a way of telling you what to do with it, this knowledge comes through our dreams, visions, and knowing in our heart. The scientists tell us this is genetic knowledge, blood knowledge. Our Ancestors taught us that everything has a spiritual essence, a form of awareness, and we can interact with the sentient Universe though our thoughts, emotions, and intentions. This is a shared understanding across the diverse Indigenous cultures within Alaska and around the World. Let us gather, gather with our tribes, remember when we remembered, it is time.

Contemporary Alaska Native Traditional Healers, culture bearers and leaders are revisioning what it means to honor and hold space for rites of passage in the modern world. They are creating space in retreat, where both women and men have support to rest, reflect, process, and be safely with themselves, remembering the understanding. Our resilience manifests when family and community support each other through the transitions of the human experience, and we hold sacred the cycles of life. As we reestablish the positive and beneficial aspects of rites of passage ceremonies, there is opportunity for deep healing in the traditions of the women's house and men's house. We are in this together as families, local communities, and the global village. (Brooks, personal communication, June 21, 2020).

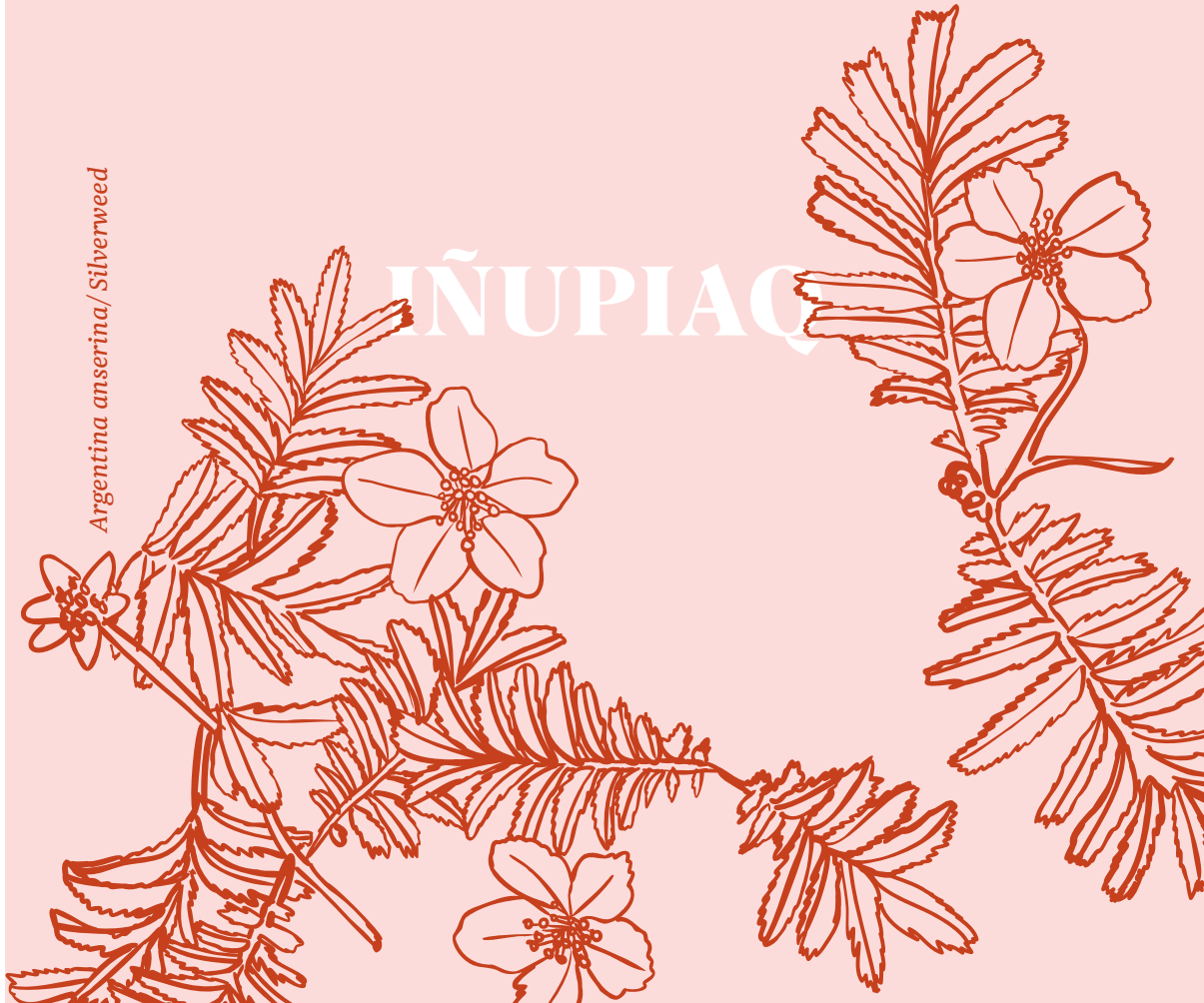
Jennifer Andrulli followed in her mother's footsteps; like Karen Brooks, she continues to question everything. She grew up with Alaska Native Elders, experiencing a grounding in culture and tradition, connected to the land and the rhythms of the seasons in Interior Alaska. She spent the last 25 years training with Elders from many cultures including Tlingit, Athabascan, Mayan, Paiute, Chippewa, Cree, Shipibo, Bwiti, Huichol, Maori, Taino, Hopi, Northern Cheyenne, Australian Aboriginal, Hindu, Taoist, and Sufi, learning ethnoherbalism, bodywork, sacred traditions, and wisdom traditions to support her work in service to community healing and understanding. Andrulli wrote in a 2020 personal communication of her experiences:

I grew up in a Yup'ik and Italian-American family on the traditional lands of the Tanana Athabaskans. I am blessed, my mom was progressive, learning and grounding into the old ways of our Yup'ik culture while navigating Westernization. Internalized oppression is a problem in Alaska. Mom was half Yup'ik and half Finnish; to some Alaska Natives she was not Native enough, and she was bullied and ridiculed, experiencing lateral racism. But as an Alaska Native in the eyes of the white majority, she was also subjected to racial discrimination. As my mom explored the stories of her grandmother, mother, and aunties, she learned the depth of historical trauma stemming from colonization policy, pandemics, forced religious conversion, and the boarding-school era. She was determined to break the chains of intergenerational trauma transmission within her family line. She started reviving the tradition of *ena* (woman's house), meaning regularly scheduled time away from the rest of the family. She created intentional space to transmit cultural knowledge, history, and training in traditional healing and integrative modalities. I was taught the importance of understanding world history and global historical trauma as it relates to present-day health.

My first childhood memory was of climbing a large spruce tree, looking out over the village and seeing my parents far below. I was curious, rambunctious, and full of energy. To this day, I am often in the forest, working with herbal medicine and sharing the gifts of nature with others. When I was little, I became seriously ill, with a high fever and difficulty breathing. As I lay there, I experienced my first soul journey, flying over the village. In this aspect of consciousness, I had no discomfort, and I discerned it was distinctly different from my waking reality. These soul flights continued for many years, with lucid dreams and meditation-state visions as vivid as waking life. My rite of passage journey came at thirteen. Time was set aside, and sacred space was created by burning the plant *caiggluk* (artemisia tilesii). Prayers were said and intention was held in my heart to seek a vision. Through the process, I journeyed through the stars, down wormholes to a density far away. I was aware of a presence next to me, and all I could see was brilliant diamond blue and white light, I experienced an overwhelming sense of pure knowledge and understanding. No questions in my mind, a knowing in my heart, I was there in a timeless eternity. I started to journey back, following spirals of star patterns and wormholes, until I came back into my body. All I remembered was that I remembered. It was too much information to hold in my mind. In my heart, I have had access to it for the rest of my life. This was my first of many rites of passage. Mom nurtured me as I grew and evolved, she looked for my gifts and provided teachers and experiences to support my growth. She honored and recognized distinct shifts in my human expression, such as mastering a skill, leaving home, and returning from pilgrimages to sacred sites and time with Elders of various tribes in North and Central America. As I got older, I choose to continue learning, and I was blessed to grow with the support of a group of wise women of all races, many nations and religious backgrounds. On the spiral

of evolution and change, I became a member of the global village. Participation in healing and transformation is a choice; it takes practice and discipline. We are each on a mythic journey When this path is honored and celebrated, we feel seen, interconnected, supported, and encouraged by those who have gone before. I honor and respect all my Alaska Native mentors and Elders who have guided me through with a solid foundation of belonging. My grandmother, Rose, who encouraged me to drum. My mother, Karen, who taught me the plants. And my sisters, my greatest reflection, who help me to see where I still have room to grow.

For my family, rite of passage ceremony involves creating sacred space in a setting that provides support, Alaska Native plant medicine, drumming, sound/songs, guidance, prayer, and intention: a safe space to open the heart and explore. I was taught protocols to participate in ceremony from the perspective of woman's house. I was also guided to keep the sacred close to my heart unless I was asked specific questions, at which point I could share the wisdom traditions of my family. To this day, extraordinarily little is shared by Alaska Natives about contemporary rites of passage and ceremony. (Andrulli, personal communication, September 21, 2020).



IÑUPIAQ

Historical Accounts

From Fortuine (1986), we have this historical account:

When a girl from the Barrow [Utqiaġvik] area began her menses for the first time, she was confined to a special section of the house for five days. During this period she wore a special hood of caribou skin that shaded her eyes, since to look at the light was thought to be harmful. The girl could not mix her urine with that of others, and therefore had to be led by another woman some distance from the house to relieve herself. She further was forbidden to touch raw meat, and had to drink from a special wooden vessel. A hunter would lose his power to kill animals if she touched a fresh carcass; likewise, a shaman would lose his powers if she should touch him (Spencer, 1959, pp. 243–244). Many variations on this basic pattern have been described for the northern Eskimos. In Norton Sound the period of seclusion was originally 40 days, but this was later considerably shortened. Here the girl was thought to be surrounded by a strange atmosphere, which, if a young man should come in contact with it, [would make him] visible to all the animals he hunted (Nelson, 1899, p. 291). Around Selawik Lake and the Kobuk River, a girl was isolated for as much as a year and required to wear a large hood to shield her eyes. During this time, she was assisted by her mother and taught the responsibilities of womanhood (Giddings, 1961, pp 20-21, 154; Weyer, 1932, p. 374). At the opposite extreme were the Nunamiut, who required no period of seclusion at all, although the girl had to drink exclusively out of her own skin vessel for the period of a month, and could not have sexual intercourse at least until after her second menstrual period (Gubser, 1965, p. 208) (Fortuine, 1986, p. 62).

IÑUPIAQ

Alaska Native Perspective

Allison Akootchook Warden shares:

There are two markings most Inuit women would have done in their lifetime, the chin and the fingers. Depending on the region and the individual, more markings might be held. When the medicine person entered the seclusion hut during puberty seclusion to perform the marking ceremony, practices were followed to control pain and bleeding. The protocols for traditional markings have been transmitted orally for generations. As I practice the art of traditional markings, I can share that there is a sacred threshold during marking ceremonies where knowledge is transferred through a concentrated burst of ancestral energy. (Warden, personal communication, 2020).

Kunaq Tahbone shares:

My coming-of-age ceremony happened when I received my tavluġun (chin tattoo). I had just finished my reign as Miss Indian World and was preparing to graduate college with an Alaska Native Studies degree, with a focus on Iñupiaq language. I had begun the process of getting *Kakiñiit* (traditional tattoos) years before by asking permission from my *aana* (grandmother), which I did not receive. My parents supported me, but it was important to have my aana's blessing. After a couple years of showcasing my language learning, traditional skill building, and persistence, my aana finally gave me the "ok." My aana grew up in a time when assimilation into Western society was prioritized. I think she was worried I wouldn't fit in or get a job, and that I would be teased. I think

after nearly 10 years, she is happy knowing that I helped sparked a revitalization of our Kakiñiit, and that I am stronger in my identity than ever before. I am now honored to be a Kakiñiit practitioner and have created a ceremonial space for other Indigenous women to receive their tavluġun just as our ancestors did (Tahbone, personal communication, October 28, 2020).

Historical Accounts

We have the following historical account from Fortuine (1986):

The Haida had similar customs, but with important variations. The Haida girl was secluded for only 20 days, although perhaps for much longer in earlier times, and stayed in a screened-off portion of the family dwelling. She was required to fast and to drink as little water as possible. She could not laugh or talk, lest she acquire bad habits in later life. The girl could only leave the house by a special door, and if she should meet a man, she had to cover her face (Krause, 1956, p. 210; Niblack, 1888, p. 370; Swanton, 1905, p. 48). (Fortuine, 1986, p.78).

Alaska Native Perspective

Lucy Bell, Sdaahl K'awaas, from the Eagle clan, a woman of the Tsiij Git'anee clan, from Old Massett, Haida Gwaii writes that when a girl turned into a woman at her first menses, **tagwana**, ***it was an important time that was marked with ceremony. She goes on to say seclusion was an important aspect of a woman's coming-of-age ritual; her mother and*** **skaanalang**, ***paternal aunties, guided her through the ritual. She shares her family's revitalization of rite of passage for her daughter:***

We held a small tagwana ceremony for my own daughter, Amelia. Her aunties and a couple of her friends came to our home. Although I wished to have a bigger ceremony for her, I honored her wishes to just have a quiet ceremony. We still honored her and welcomed her to womanhood. Her aunty Sandy Gagnon made her a hemlock wreath. Her maternal and paternal aunties decorated it with all sorts of abalone, money, and jewels. Amelia passed through the big wreath four times. Amelia hung the wreath above her bed and the dried needles that fell on her represented the riches that will come her way in her life. Her aunties also all left her lasting words of encouragement and love. I believe the ceremony strengthened her *liis*, the invisible umbilical cord that connects her to her family and to the Haida Gwaii. It also made her a stronger young woman who knows her place in the world, and ensured that she knows the *aw'lang* and skaan'lang, her matrilineal aunties and patrilineal aunties who will be by her side for her lifetime (Bell, 2016, pp. 111–112).


Borage
ATHABASCAN

ATHABASCAN

Historical Accounts

There are many variations of rite of passage and vision quest ceremonies across Alaskan Athabascan groups. Vision quest marked the end of childhood (Hippler & Wood, 1974, p.II-67). Markstrom & Iborra (2003) provide the following historical accounts in their research of Northern tribes:

In summarizing data across several Northern cultures relative to seclusion and taboos at menarche, Libby (1952) concluded that "stringent puberty observances of the northern Athabascans is not horror of women, of menstruation, or of menstrual fluid as such, but is, in part, a desire not to offend the game and fur animals on whose good will the natives still depend for much of their livelihood" (p. 2). As noted by Powers (1980), anthropologists have tended to regard Native taboos toward menstrual blood and menstruating women as misogynist. Alternatively, menstrual taboos can be examined from a culturally relativistic perspective wherein North American Indians viewed menstrual blood as a power active in healing or curing (Beck et al., 1996) and reflective of the creative forces of nature (St. Pierre & Long Soldier, 1995). We argue that for the Navajo, menstrual flow is regarded as an extension of the same power responsible for creation and annual rejuvenation. Menstruation is the essence of Changing Woman that permits transformation of the initiate into this important supernatural figure (Markstrom& Iborra, 2003, p. 410).

According to Hippler (1973), all Alaska Athabascans isolated girls at the onset of menarche, as they did menstruating women and those delivering children (p. 1533). Fortuine (1986) provides insight into the many variations and customs of maturation rites across the cultures of Athabascans who live in a region stretching from south of the Brooks Mountain Range all the way to the Kenai Peninsula of Southcentral Alaska:

An Ingalik girl undergoing her first period was secluded for a full year in a corner of the house separated off by grass mats. During this time she had to keep a fur hood drawn over her head and wear a pair of small mittens joined by a band of fur extending behind her neck and holding her hands at the level of the breast. A black band was drawn with charcoal across her eyes from temple to temple, the same pattern used on a dead body. The girl was able to leave the house only by night and could not participate in any family activities. At the end of a year the girl bathed, threw away her old clothing and donned a new set, including a special piece of caribou or moose skin ornamented with tassels around the head as a sign of maturity (Nelson, 1978, p. 41). The girl spent much of her time in seclusion learning the arts of womanhood, such as sewing skins, cooking, doing beadwork, and making fishnets (Snow, J. H., 1981, p. 610). Her mother taught her these skills, instructed her in all necessary rituals, and cooked her meals. A Kutchin girl at menarche was isolated in a separate hut as much as a mile away from the family house. While outdoors she wore a special cowl fringed with caribou-hoof rattles to warn others of her approach (Slobodin, 1981, p. 524–525). Her food was brought cut into small pieces which had to be eaten with a stick, while liquids were sucked through a tube made from the wing bones of a bird (McKennan, 1965, p. 58). Among the Han the girl's father gave a banquet for the community before seclusion began (Snow, J. H., 1981, p. 508). She was then isolated under the care of a relative of her future husband. The hut was gradually moved closer to her family as the year went on. During this period, she subsisted on dried salmon eggs, dried meat, berries, and soup made from caribou viscera

(Osgood, 1971, p. 49). The Ahtna girl was isolated for 70 days in a separate brush hut. She was not allowed to eat, drink, or speak for the first three days, and had to spend at least ten days sitting in a very cramped position. Strings of caribou hide were bound around her wrists, elbows, knees, ankles, and fingers to keep the joints supple. After ten days she was permitted to bathe and again at 30 days, when she was moved to a brush hut nearer home. When 70 days had passed, and for the remainder of the year, she was expected to observe all food taboos and to wear a huge moose skin hood with a fringe over the eyes to protect all living things and the sky from her harmful glance (De Laguna & McClellan, 1981, p. 658). Less rigid were the Upper Tanana, who isolated the girl for only two or three months. She too, however, was obliged to observe certain food taboos for a further nine months before becoming eligible for marriage (McKennan, 1959, p. 143). An even easier time was had by a Tanaina girl, who might be secluded for as little as seven days. (Fortuine, 1986, p. 92).

ATHABASCAN

Alaska Native Perspective

Pregnancy as a rite of passage and ceremonial space is shared by Helena Jacobs of the Alaska Native Birthworkers Community:

[The Community is made up of] Native women who offer care to pregnant people, including other Native women, in the same way we have cared for one another for millennia. We are seeking to reclaim our ancestral knowledge, as well as learn new knowledge to grow the capacity of our local caregivers to call back these roles (as quoted in Carraher-Kang, 2020, p. 10).

According to Jacobs, "Birth itself is considered a ceremony, and the specific ways each of us practice holding this ceremonial space differs greatly" (as quoted in Carraher-Kang, 2020, p. 10).

The Community shares:

Our young women want aunties to guide them through their transition into womanhood, our mothers want support to navigate pregnancy and childbirth, our sisters want someone to sit beside them while learning to care for a newborn and grow their families. For millennia our social and community structures demanded ceremonial rites of passage, that a new mother be cared for by everyone surrounding her, and that care was offered locally by women whose wisdom and medicine passed on from generation to generation (as quoted in Carraher-Kang, 2020, p. 10–11).


Colts Foot / Nagoon Berry
SUGPIAQ/ALUTIIQ

SUGPIAQ/ALUTIIQ

Historical Accounts

From Fortuine (1986), we have this historical account:

When an Aleut girl underwent her first menstrual period, often around twenty years of age, she was immediately taken to a separate barabara, or else a special section of the family dwelling was curtained off for the purpose (Merck, 1980, pp. 174, 178). There she remained for 30–40 days, during which time she was not permitted to emerge for any reason. Only her mother or other close female relatives were permitted to visit to bring her food and drink (Veniaminov, 1984, p. 210). Males could approach the site only if they were seeking healing, especially of seasickness, a power that pubescent girls were reputed to have (Laughlin & Marsh, 1951, p. 84). At the beginning of the period of confinement, the female relatives bound each of the girl's joints with a waxed cord, to prevent premature senility, joint disease, and even dangers to the village's food and water supply (Laughlin & Marsh, 1951, p. 84). If the girl attempted to leave her isolated area, her skin was said to turn black and she would become subject to infectious diseases, which might in turn be passed on to others (Veniaminov, 1984, p. 210). When the long period of seclusion was finally over, the girl washed herself daily for five days and then returned to a fairly normal life. Although she was not permitted to go to sea for a period of five further months. The belt she wore during her isolation was saved for its continuing curative powers (Laughlin & Marsh, 1951, p. 85). Similar restrictions during her menses were required of a girl or woman throughout her life. For her second period she was isolated for 20 days and thereafter for seven days of each month when she was menstruating (Fortuine, 1986, p.19).

SUGPIAQ/ALUTIIQ

Alaska Native Perspective

Alisha Susana Drabek shares:

Respect for the environment and our responsibility as stewards of it is an ancient tradition, particularly among traditional harvest cultures whose people understand the interrelatedness of their care of the environment as the home of the animals and plants who sustain the people. Alutiiq traditions of right behavior and living in reciprocal relationship with the environment extend to the power of women, particularly girls at menarche and woman menstruating. They indicate a strong belief in the reproductive power women possess, as well as the ability animals have to be highly sensitive to humans, consciousness that in order for animals to give themselves up in a hunt, they expect to be respected (Drabek, 2012).


Artemisia Tilesii / Stinkweed
UNANGAX̂

UNANGAX

Historical Accounts

From Shade (1948), we have this historical account:

At menarche the girl is given a charge of one of the older women of the village, who supervises her activities during the period of the rite. The girl is confined to her room, in darkness, for forty days, during which time her food is prepared and brought to her by the old woman in charge. Only boiled meat or fish may be eaten, no vegetables and only one cup of water is allowed her per day. The same dishes are used throughout the period. The hands must be washed before each meal in water in which an herb called *simxux* has been mixed. A bath in luke-warm water is permitted at the end of the first ten days and at five-day intervals thereafter. Combing the hair is not allowed, and food must be eaten while wearing gloves made from an old pair of socks. At night the girl is taken out for exercise by the old woman, but she must remain within a restricted area near her house. She may not walk by the beach, nor cross the fish stream, nor is she allowed to look out to sea or up at the sky. She can have no visitors unless approved by the old woman, and she is told that her eyes will water all the rest of her life if she laughs during the period of confinement. She is told to sew a great deal, for that will insure her being able to sew well in the future. At the beginning of the period pieces of cotton string are tied around the girl's throat, waist, wrists, knees, and ankles, and are never removed during the period of seclusion. On the string around the waist the old woman ties a charm she has made for the purpose. The girl may or may not know what it is or how it was made. At the end of the period this charm is given to some man of the old woman's choice who carries it to sea with him to bring safety. During this time the girl is believed to have healing powers. An old man with rheumatism was brought to the author's informant during her confinement so that she could rub his aching knees with her saliva, which is said to have stopped the pain. The forty days of darkness is followed by another period of ten days, during which the girl continues in seclusion, but may have light in her room. On the morning of the ninth day she takes a bath, afterward cleaning out the entire house, taking everything outside and washing it, scrubbing the walls and floors, bed clothes, and curtains. Then she takes another bath, this time with hot water, in her own house. After the final bath, the girl is considered a woman. For the next five months, she must remain in her room during menstruation for five days at each period. After this she is free from restriction, except that she may not go inside the church at any time while menstruating. In 1941 the girl was told that she must never have anything to do with the preparation of food during her monthly period, but it is said that this rule is no longer observed by the younger women. The older ones, however, still maintain the custom (Shade, C. 1948, p. 146).

UNANGAX̂

Alaska Native Perspective

Sharon Svarny-Livingston of Unalaska contributes this vision, titled "A Windblown Path":

Iklax̂, Santa Fe, New Mexico, September 2002.

In her dormitory suite, she puts the kettle on to boil. She turns and walks to her bedroom and begins to rummage through her top dresser drawer. The drawer is a mess. From all of the flotsam of compact discs, ponytail bands, earrings, floss, nail clippers, feathers, shells, socks and an odd lace potpourri, she pulls out a zip lock bag that is marked, in her mother's hand, yarrow. Iklax̂'s mother puts yarrow in bags for her to use during the school year. She always marks them in a black, Sharpie pen. This is so, she says, that if, by chance her daughter is searched, no one will mistake the dried medicine plant for anything else. Iklax̂ opens the bag, takes a deep breath of the pungent herb, and closes her eyes and thinks of home. Home is an island in the Aleutian Chain. Right now, at the end of September, the hills and mountains are changing colors. Like the fall color extravaganza throughout the states when the leaves on the trees change to brilliant oranges, yellows, and reds—the tundra-laden hills of Unalaska do the same thing. The blueberries are heavy and clustered on the bushes and there is a bite of cold in the air. Looking up in the hills, you will see small groups of berry pickers wearing brightly colored scarves with buckets over their arms, bent over and moving slowly from bush to bush. Mountains, rising severely out of the sea, already call to her even though she has been gone from home for only a month. There might be a dusting of snow on the peaks.

Not many people know of the Unangax̂. Since the Russian invasion in the mid 1700s, they have been called "Aleuts." The Unangax̂ are one of the most resilient groups of people in the world. They have the distinction of being the one race of people inhabiting the same area for the longest period of known time; over nine thousand years, and they are still there. Their existence in the Aleutians was not won without suffering enormous changes that took them to the brink of extinction and then beyond into a black hole of despair. The Unangax̂, which loosely translated means "people of the passes," were a seafaring, sea-dwelling people who carved out a prosperous life in what some claim to be the most inhospitable climate and terrain imaginable. They were hunters and gatherers who were well advanced in such life skills as hunting, food gathering, boat building, tool construction, surgery, acupuncture, weaving, bentwood working, storytelling, and art. They used to number nearly 25,000 strong, and now number less than four thousand, spread all over the United States, due to the evacuation of the people during World War II. Assimilation has been the normal way of dealing with native cultures throughout the world. It was no different in the Aleutians. By far the most devastating event in the history of the Unangax̂ was the evacuation of the people from the Aleutian and the Pribilof islands during World War II. It turned out to be more demoralizing than the near genocide of the people when the population was drastically cut from 25,000 to 1,875 by the Russians, more heinous than the rampant prejudice against and assimilation of the Unangax̂ when the United States purchased Alaska. It was during this period that an almost irretrievable devastation of the culture took hold.

Iklax̂ thinks of her mom and her grandma and wonders of the great-grandmother she never knew. What was it about them that made them so single-minded? What made them so willing to teach one more person how to weave a basket, which

plant to use for fevers, how to split a fish, or how to intricately paint designs on a bentwood hat? She wonders how far she will be able to take this gift that was passed on to her. This gift of valuing herself and her community. She has come to realize that this gift was presented to her without her knowledge, creeping into her being throughout her childhood and young adulthood. The introduction of morals and values passed down through the millennia that the Unangax̂ have called the Aleutians home was not formal instruction, but rather a way of life. It has become the gift of having a sense of duty to her people and her culture. On more than one occasion, it has seemed like a burden, one she didn't choose for herself, but now she thinks of this new path she has chosen for herself, a path that circles back on her mother and grandmother like nothing they might have foreseen. She wonders if she has the stamina to walk the path.

She sighs, opens her eyes, turns, grabs a white bath towel, and walks back to the kitchen. Hooking the towel around her neck, she takes a large, round bowl out of the cupboard, reaches into the bag, takes a good handful of yarrow leaves and flowers out, and places them in the bowl. She carries the bowl back to her room and places it on the floor in the spot she made ready for her self-developed ritual. In a half circle are material things that represent some small portion of herself. Her self-portrait, done in oil pastels, sitting in her yoga clothes, encircled by various medicinal plants, cobalt blue medicine bottles, and ravens performing their incredible acrobatics in the air. A necklace of ivory and abalone, made by her grandmother, drapes over one corner of the pastel. Her guitar and a braided bunch of Unalaska sweet grass, picked at a secret sweet grass spot, complete the half circle. Pausing, just to really look at the space, she believes herself ready. She returns to the kitchen just as the kettle begins to boil, grabs a potholder and the kettle. In her room, she places the kettle on the potholder next to the bowl, and facing the east, she sits down in front of it with her outer thighs touching the floor, her knees bent and her ankles crossed.

She is glad that her roommates are not home. The room is still and quiet. Drawing a deep breath, she takes the kettle and pours its contents onto the yarrow in the bowl. While putting the kettle down, she pulls the towel up over her head and leans over the bowl, inhaling the hot, fragrant steam of the yarrow plant. She is preparing herself, making herself ready to complete a circle broken over one hundred fifty years ago. As she breathes in the steam and her face beads with sweat, her mind is racing, going over the many images that the yarrow scent is bringing back.

She remembers her first flight to Unalaska. She is five. Her Mom is taking them home. Home to where her mom grew up. Home to grandparents and a village of Unangax̂. Her older sister says she is crazy, taking them to a remote island so far from Dad. Iklax̂ sleeps most of the flight. She remembers the plane banking sharply and asking her mother, loudly, if it is supposed to do that and the laughter that trickles through the rest of the passengers. Her mother is holding her hand tightly and craning her neck to see out the window. She sees mountains and the Bering Sea, rough and gray on a November day. She remembers the hard landing and the force of the reverse thrusters of the jet engines. She remembers her mom saying that if there were not so many puddles, she would kiss the ground, and she laughs at what a funny sight that would be. She remembers sitting at the table in the dining room of her grandma's house, eating smoked salmon spread on pilot bread crackers, drinking tea and seeing otters diving down into the ocean, popping back up with crab and urchins. She remembers walking on the beach with her grandma and talking her into carrying the huge rock covered in crystals she found to add to her crystal collection. She remembers the incredible cushiony

tundra; how she sinks into it and it cradles her body. She remembers the wild wind and the crashing of the waves on the shore and the Jesus beams coming out of the clouds. She remembers the brilliant emerald green of the hills and mountains of summer and the purple orchids and the wild iris. She remembers walking on a trail with her mom that was made over nine thousand years ago by their ancestors. She remembers her first haul of salmon and filleting them. She remembers a fox that stole her hat, only to drop it in the water. She remembers getting sick on the overwhelming smell of incense at church where she stands for what seems like hours, as she listens to the Father's melodic voice and the chanting of the choir.

As the water cools, she tosses off the towel, gathers the plant matter and places it gently on her cheeks, and she holds it in place until she can lay back. She closes her eyes once again and she tries to clear her mind and balance herself with the earth by thinking of herself cradled in the tundra. She lays there quietly, feeling herself being held and supported. She waits until she feels the urge to continue. She sits up, removes the leaves from her face and places them back in the bowl. She takes up the braided sweet grass and, softly singing about the environment and her duty to care for it, she lights the ends of the sweet grass and pulls the smoke up past her chest and over her head. She breathes it into her soul and sings.

Kudaliiĝin maqax̂takan txichin aguqangin
The way of our beginning, our ancestors
Udaadan tanangin kugan Unangan anangin
Our people's land and sea around here
Ix̂taqangin lulalix matalix anĝaĝiingin matakun
Believe in them and keep them going through time
Aniqdun ngiin aqaaĝan aĝnangin qulingiin akux̂ gumalgakux̂
For those generations not yet seen.

She imagines herself as she moves to the beat of drums, her body flows through the graceful movements of the dance. Her voice lifts the words of her ancestors into the present. In her mind's eye, she wears a traditional dress made of fur seal and otter pelts, adorned with beach-found shells and bird feathers from her father's hunts. Her brown feet are bare, and her ankles are encircled with shells and sea otter fur. Her hair is plaited in two braids. A special ceremonial labret, made of ivory, is inserted in her lower lip. Earrings line the shells of her ears and dangle from her lobes. From the nose bone she has inserted for the ceremony hang ivory beads and shells that she has arranged on strands of sinew. Eagle feathers, with the ends wrapped in whale sinew, adorn her braids and flutter with her movements.

Iklax̂, Iliium, Nawan Alaxsxan, 9000 years ago

I am in the center of the *ulax̂*, just in front of the center post leading up to the opening where exits and entrances are made into our home. It is warm and slightly stuffy in the ulax̂. The long room is filled with women sitting in a half-circle facing me, all wearing their chugax, some with the top portion around their waists due to the heat. I am faced with a rich pallet of brown and black hues. I see otter, seal, bird feather, and sea lion pelts, the women's dark hair and varying skin tones glowing from the light softly thrown by the oil lamps. The sea of feminine faces, faces so much like my own with high cheekbones and dark, half-moon eyes, and breasts of all sizes and shapes before me, make me feel surrounded and supported by these women of my kinglax̂tix̂, my tribe.

Anaadang, my mother, has brought me here. She is the only person I have seen since the onset of my first blood cycle and the beginning of my second one. I am done being a girl. I am a woman. I have been alone in a tiny ula*x̂* built especially for me to transition me to my new status in life. I was dressed by Anaadang in a sea lion skin with no slit down the front. During this long time, I sat there within an animal hide sewn so my front was covered, seeing no one. Especially not any men. My power during this time is so strong that if a man puts eyes on me, he will become deaf and blind. I sat with this skin with no slit down the front so that my breath would not move the air and my eyes would not see the rain else my tears would flow all the time, forever. Anaadang has collected all my excretions and bloody discharge and buried them in a ditch outside so that the wind will not carry the smell to the animals, for if it does, anything I sew as a woman will make the animals afraid and if I have sewn a skin covering for my husband's *iqyax̂*, the animals he is hunting will flee.

I can see the *qugaĝilix*, the spirit shaman, making ready her lamp black and bone awls. I am brought to her and she cleanses my face with *chngaatuudax̂* and cleanses my spirit with the smoke from *tagix̂*, a bundle of sweet grass. She lowers me onto the firm laps of my female mothers and begins to make *angun*, the tattoo marks of my village across my face.

Iklax̂, Santa Fe, New Mexico, September 2002.

She hopes she has prepared herself well. No woman in the Aleutians has received facial tattoos in over 150 years so she has had to make up her own process. Tattoos on the face became taboo with the conversion to the invader's religion. She wonders how her grandmother will feel about her altered state. She knows her mother will approve. Her mother has only told her to be sure of herself as this will alter more than her looks; it will alter the perception of who she is and how she fits in the world. She feels right. She knows this is not a traditional reason for claiming the tattoo. She is not looking to make sure she does not cross lineages when she chooses a partner. This is her own personal way of carrying forward and caring for her culture.

Iklax̂ hears a knock on the door. She knows it is the one she has chosen to put the marks on her face.

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