



DISCUSSION GUIDE

Honoring Women

Reclaiming Coming of Age Ceremony

The purpose of this discussion guide is to facilitate thoughtful discussion around the topics introduced in this Indigenous Forum presentation video. The discussion guide can be adapted for use in the classroom as well as salon-style gatherings.

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This video is a presentation of the 2019 Indigenous Forum, organized by the Bioneers Indigeneity Program and featured annually at the Bioneers Conference. Indigeneity is a Native-led Program within Bioneers/Collective Heritage Institute that promotes indigenous knowledge and approaches to solve the earth's most pressing environmental and social issues through respectful dialogue. Since 1990, Bioneers has acted as a fertile hub of social and scientific innovators with practical and visionary solutions for the world's most pressing environmental and social challenges.



INFORMATION PAGE

Honoring Women Reclaiming Coming of Age Ceremony

DESCRIPTION OF VIDEO

Dr. Cutcha Risling Baldy shares her story about how the Hoopa Valley Tribe revitalized women's coming-of-age ceremonies. Through the flower ceremony, young women are honored at a time when the broader American society sends them messages that they are "lesser than" males. Dr. Risling Baldy explains how this tradition prevents teen suicide, educates young women about domestic abuse, and fights patriarchy.



Watch video: bioneers.org/honoringwomen

Featuring: Dr. Cutcha Risling Baldy (Hupa/Yurok/Karuk)

KEYWORDS

ADOLESCENCE – The period of life when a child develops into an adult, roughly between 10 and 19 years old.

PUBERTY – The period during which adolescents reach sexual maturity and become capable of reproduction.

MENSTRUATION – A 2 to 7 day cycle in a woman's body when the lining of the uterus is shed and passes through the cervix to the vagina and out of the body as menstrual blood. While the cycle is about 28 days on average, it can range from 21-45 days. According to the Hupa menstruation represents a time when a woman is at her most powerful.

COMING OF AGE CEREMONY – An event in which people acknowledge and mark the transition in a person's life from childhood to adulthood.

HUPA TRIBE – An indigenous tribe located in northwestern California. The majority of tribal members are enrolled in the federally recognized Hoopa Valley Tribe.

FLOWER DANCE – A dance that is part of a coming of age ceremony for women in the Hupa tribe, that has been revitalized since the colonization and genocide of Native Americans.

PATRIARCHY – A system of society or government in which men hold power and women are largely excluded from it.

CULTURAL REVITALIZATION – The process in which a group of people belonging to the same culture bring back and forward their heritage, language, traditions, beliefs and ceremonies.

LINKS

[Bioneers.org/indigeneity](https://bioneers.org/indigeneity) | nativewomenscollective.org | cutcharislingbaldy.com



INTRODUCTION AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Honoring Women

Reclaiming Coming of Age Ceremony

Women's coming of age ceremonies are celebrations of a girl's first menstruation that demonstrate how young women are powerful members of their communities. Prior to invasion by western settlers, women and men in Northern California's Hoopa Valley Tribe were considered equal, and spirituality was a part of all aspects of life. After gold was found in California in 1849, American settlers attempted to eradicate Northern California Indians by killing them and forcing survivors to assimilate to the American way of life, which included systemic attacks on Native women and their ceremonies. As a result, many tribes stopped practicing women's ceremonies. In recent years, Native women throughout California have come together to bring back ceremony as a way to strengthen their community and heal from genocide.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the difference between the way Hoopa tribal members celebrate a woman's first menstruation and what your community does?
2. How does the Hoopa women's coming of age ceremony support young women? Young men? What happens in the ceremony to help girls transition into women?
3. What would happen if ceremonies celebrating menstruation and womanhood were commonplace in the USA? How would society be different?



VIDEO GUIDE

This guide provides a roadmap to various ideas, keywords and concepts to support video navigation.

Honoring Women Reclaiming Coming of Age Ceremony

| Idea, Keyword or Concept | Time Stamp |
|---|--------------|
| PART 1: Reclaiming Coming of Age Ceremony | 0:28 |
| How colonization affected the Hoopa women | 1:25 |
| How the women's dance was brought back | 2:44 |
| Cutcha's menstruation story | 4:47 |
| PART 2: What is Your Inspiration? | 8:54 |
| The role of fathers and men in affirming the importance of the flower dance | 10:09 |
| Self-esteem in girls and boys during puberty | 11:01 |
| Statistics regarding adolescent girls, drug/alcohol abuse and suicide | 11:32 |
| What studies say about ways to support young women | 12:45 |
| Components of the flower dance | 13:03 |
| Frog woman and coyote story | 13:31 |
| Patriarchy, the Cherokee Nation and negotiating treaties | 14:58 |
| The impact of women's coming of age ceremonies on young men | 16:23 |
| PART 3: Why Ceremonies are important | 17:58 |



TRANSCRIPT

Honoring Women

Reclaiming Coming of Age Ceremony

Featuring: Dr. Cutcha Risling Baldy (Hupa/Yurok/Karuk)

I'm Dr. Cutcha Risling Baldy. I am Hupa/Yurok/Karuk, enrolled in the Hoopa Valley tribe in Northern California. I'm also currently the Department Chair of Native American studies at Humboldt State University, and the executive director for a nonprofit called the Native Women's Collective, and we're celebrating our 10-year anniversary this year.

The work that I do is actually on the revitalization of women's coming-of-age ceremonies, especially those in California. I wrote a book about it.

And the book really was a product of the work that I was doing with people in my community because we didn't do our women's coming-of-age ceremonies for a long time, not in the same way that we used to.

[1:25]

Colonization, when it came in, really targeted our women, and especially the fact that we celebrated women, that we thought that women should be in positions of power, that we treated them equally, that we believed in feminism, that all genders should be treated equally, and this went against colonizer's culture where women, where considered more like property. And so because of that, they saw our women's ceremonies and the things that our women could do, and they really targeted them for eradication, and they made it very dangerous for us to practice them. And they would target the women that we would celebrate at this time because usually we celebrate a young woman after she's started menstruating.

[2:06]

And so we have a ceremony for her to tell her that we believe that menstruation is very powerful, and represents a time when a woman is at her most powerful, and her highest ability to connect with and to speak with sort of higher selves. And so that way of looking at menstruation felt very foreign to people who were coming here. And they decided that they needed to stop that, but they also needed to make sure that they put our women in their place because then they knew that they could take apart the rest of our culture if they took apart our women.

[2:44]

So for about, in some tribes, like 150 years, and other tribes, 50 to 60 years, we didn't do women's ceremonies, not publicly. And then about, geez, 17 years ago, groups of people in my community got together to work to bring this ceremony back to revitalize it. And, the thing that I open the book with is actually my story of how I started doing this as a project that I wanted to write about because I knew that for a lot of years it was not us who were writing the stories of who we are as Native People. And it wasn't us that was writing the record of what ceremony is, and why it's important. And when I knew that this revitalization was happening, I knew that I didn't want somebody else from outside to write what we were doing or to document what was happening. I wanted us to document what we were doing.

So I interviewed all of the girls who have done the ceremony in the first 10 years of their revitalization, so that they could speak to why this is so important, and so that they could talk about what the impact is that it's had on their lives and in their communities, and things that have changed with us as like adults, and then also men and young men because of us doing this type of work.



[4:05]

Myself, I was 12 when I started menstruating, and I have to go talk about the book a lot now so I talk about my first menstruation a lot. I talk about menstruation in general a lot, which is why anybody—I have no shame. You can ask me any question you want. I'll tell you all about it. I've had to do all kinds of research. One time this Uber driver picked me up, and she was like, what are you doing here? And I said, I have to go talk about my book. She said, what it's about? So I told her, and then she goes, do you want to hear about my first menstruation? And I was like, I do. Like why not? Right? Like why are we afraid to tell that story? That's important.

[4:42]

And so I started doing all this work because when I—So I was 12 when I started menstruating, and my mom took me out to dinner to celebrate at the fanciest restaurant that we have in our tiny, little town. And our waiter's name was Gary, and I know that because he came up and he said, "Hi, my name is Gary. Are we celebrating anything today?"

[5:07]

And I was all—I was like, "she's going to say something," and I was giving her this look, and she said, "No, we're just a mom and daughter out to dinner." And at that dinner, she said to me, "You know, Cutcha, we would've done a dance for you right now. We would have celebrated you. We would have told the whole community how important you are. We would have made it obvious that this is very important, and brought you through this, but we don't do that anymore, but—And I know we haven't done it in a long time, but if you want me to, I will find a way to do it for you right now." And I looked at her, and I was like, "ew, Mom, gross. I don't ever want to do that." And I told her, "no." So she let it go.

[5:55]

And then a number of years later, I was living in San Diego, and I was in an abusive relationship with a man, and it was becoming very obvious that if I stayed, he was probably going to kill me, and I wasn't telling anybody. I was hiding it. And I wouldn't open up to anyone about what was going on. And one day after a fight, he left me on the bathroom floor, and I picked up the phone and I called my mom, and I said, "Mom, I'm going to leave him."

[5:22]

And she said, "I think you're making the right decision." And I said, "No, Mom, he's right. I'm nothing, and I'll be nothing without him." And she paused for like a really long time, and then she said, "Cutcha, we should have danced for you."

[5:41]

And it was kind of in that moment that she made this decision. She was like, "what is wrong with this culture that they teach our girls that they are nothing? What is happening that they teach our girls that they don't belong, that they aren't somebody?" And we have to do that for them. That's what this dance was for, to teach them that they are somebody to us. So she decided she was going to make it happen.

[7:07]

And I don't like to tell anybody like I had some kind of awakening. I did get myself off the bathroom floor. And my grandma always told me if you don't know what to do, you sing a song, and then you'll get up, and you'll go do what you're supposed to do. And I've always told people like, you find out what's really important to you when you have to leave a situation very quickly.



And I didn't know when he was going to come home, so I got up off the bathroom floor, and I was singing this song, the only one that I had, which was a flower-dance song. It was a women's song. And I packed, and I had to pack very quickly, and I only packed my Sex in the City DVDs and my computer, and then I left, but I kept coming back because I—people do that.

But every time I went back, there was some woman that came into my life that took me out, and that is what my mom was always saying that this dance gives to our young women, was those women that will always be there to take them out, or to help them, or to lift them up.

[8:02]

And so the book is really about, like, why we lost that, but also why it's so important that we're getting that back. And I think when I think about women as life givers, I don't just think about the women that birthed you. I think about all the other women that are in your life that are giving you life every chance that they get. They're giving you breath, and they're giving you song, and they're giving you opportunity, and they're always, always going to be there.

And in our tribe we call them the Seven Sisters. It's based on the Big Dipper. But I think you have that. And so I don't think women are just life givers because we give birth. I don't think we're powerful because we give birth. I think we're powerful, and we give birth, and we give life. So thank you.

WHAT IS YOUR INSPIRATION?

[8:55]

My daughter's 12, which means some days she hates me, and the rest of the time she just thinks I'm kind of annoying. And I think that—I remember being 12, and I remember how much I did not like my mother, and I remember—And actually, my daughter and I just had like a really big thing happen between us, and I called my mom, and she said, "Don't worry, Cutcha, you became a decent person again around 21."

[9:30]

And I was like, "oh man, that's a really long time." Because I remember when she was little, and we were just like best friends, and I couldn't do anything wrong. But what I always tell people about her is—So she's 12 now, but because we've been doing this dance for a little over 15 years, she doesn't know that we just don't do this. Like in her life, this is just who we are as Hupa People. We just celebrate women on their first menstruation. That's what we do.

[10:00]

And young girls come to my parents' house. And when I started my—When I had my first period, my mom made me call my dad on the phone, and I was like, "Hi, Dad, I started my period." And he goes, "Okay." And he was like, "yay." Like, he didn't quite know what to do with that information. But now, girls come to our house, and they say to my dad—because they want my mom to help them plan their dance—they say—He says, "What are you doing here?" And they go, "Well, I started menstruating." And he goes, "Congratulations! You get to have a flower dance!" And that's his just first response. So it has really changed how we approach these things. In her lifetime, this is just who we are.

[10:45]

And as I see that happening for her, I realize how important it has been, this work, because what we know—like what we know about our culture right now through scientific studies, etc., is that at puberty, a young woman's self-esteem plummets, and this is across the board for anybody, but a boy's remains the same or increases.



[11:10]

So whatever we're doing, it teaches young girls that there's something wrong with them. And when we talk about puberty—And in the studies, they always say it's at puberty. At puberty young girls have their self-esteem plummet. They never say when they start menstruating, and it's really around menstruation, so I know that it matters how we teach during this period of time, what we say to our young women.

[11:32]

They also have studies that show that the onset of drug and alcohol abuse for young, native girls in California happens at 11, 12 and 13—that's puberty—that the onset of suicidal ideation happens at 11, 12 and 13, that we as native people have one of the highest rates of suicide among our youth of any group of people in the United States. We're less than 1.7% of the population, and our youth are the most likely to try and succeed at killing themselves, and the youth that are most likely to try to commit suicide are young girls age 11, 12 and 13.

[12:13]

So this period of time is so important for what we teach our young people about how they're supposed to be in this world, and we teach it in this very sterile, really awful way that somehow they internalize something bad is about to happen to me, and I'm not proud of it, and then we send them off into the world, and these girls have to figure out a way to recover from that. And it doesn't happen in your everyday life. You don't have big celebrations of menstruation on television.

[12:46]

Now studies also show, it's very simple to fix this. All you have to do is share with young women your experiences of puberty and what it was like, and tell them your story. It's that simple. You just have to talk about it. So in this dance, that's what we do. We bring her. We sing. We dance over her. We celebrate her. We tell the whole community she's important.

But during the day, we do talking circles. We visit with her. We show her all her community members that love her. We teach her about how to take care of herself. We teach her about herbs. We teach her about steaming. We teach her about bathing. We teach her about language. We actually have a conversation with her about domestic violence. We teach her about the cycle of violence. This is traditional to our ceremony.

[13:30]

We have a story that is about Frog Woman and Coyote, and Coyote beating up Frog Woman. And then we have a conversation with a girl at 11, 12 and 13 about what you do, who do you go to, what happens, what are the questions you want to know about.

And at the end of that story, it ends with Frog—Coyote beats her up again, and he goes to get her. He's like going to go down and grab onto her, and she looks at him and she says, "No!" And then she says, "No! My back is like blue stone." And that's—in Hupa way, we say the blue stone is the hardest stone you can be. It's the toughest material we know, and what she's telling Coyote is you're not going to do this anymore. "My back is like blue stone. I'm too strong for you."

And I didn't know how important that was until I was at a conference with my daughter.

[14:17]

But we did go to this one conference together, and she was making pottery with them. That was one of their things that you could do at the conference, and she made me a little bowl that actually sits on my desk because they had these tiny blue stones. She put them around the outside of this bowl, and then she wrote on the top, "my back is like blue stone."



So, this is why. It's because of that, and we give that every girl that comes through with us, and we know it makes--it makes a difference. We know that it's changed everything, and so I don't think it's—I don't think it's hard for us to continue anymore just because we know that's what we're supposed to do. It's what we've been doing since the beginning of time.

[14:52]

WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON PATRIARCHY?

[14:58]

It's not going to work. It really is not going to work. We will figure that—Like at some point we're all going to look around and be like why is this still not working? Oh, patriarchy. That's why.

[15:08]

And you know who knew that? The Cherokee. The Cherokee came to the table to negotiate their treaty with the fledgling—at the time—United States, and they were—The Cherokee brought women, and they sat the women down at the table, and they were like, "You're going to talk to our women. That's who you talk to." And the colonists were like "We don't talk to women. We don't even let women in the room." And the Cherokee chief stood up, and he was like, "Where are your women?" And they said, "oh, we don't let women be involved in this." And they said, "That's why this is never going to work. That's why you all are not going to be around that long, because you need your women."

[15:50]

And at a point, my great grandfather, he was like, "Yeah, I'm a feminist because why wouldn't we be?" Who doesn't like the idea of the equality of all genders. Like where—Get on board, right?

[16:03]

And I think—I do this work a lot, and then I go do talks, and all the time I will have people stand up, and they'll be like, "That's real nice you're doing stuff for all your women, but like what are you doing for the men?" "What about the men?"

And I'll be like, "Yeah, you should do that."

[16:23]

I can't solve every problem, but also you want to know—And I have this answer. I go, "You want to know what we do for young men in our communities?" Flower dances, women's coming-of-age ceremonies because for five, seven or 10 days, we ask young men to come to a space where they are not the center of the universe. And we tell them, you are not the center of the universe. And I think that's a really important lesson for them to learn. And we say, your job is to be in service of this young woman. And I think that's an important lesson for them to learn.

And then in the end, what my mom says—In the book she talks about this, and she says, when you have danced for a girl and sung over her, and worked with her, and brought her wood, and seen her come out as a woman, you can no longer think of her as an object. You cannot objectify her any more. And that's what we do for our young men. We center our young women, so that for a minute they can go like, "Huh, in this world exists a space where I'm not the center of the universe." And I think that's something that we need to constantly push back against.

[17:40]

I love that we are doing that for young men. I love that when they come and listen to me talk, all of them afterwards will come and say to me like, "I really enjoy listening to you talk." But none of them are like,



“except about the gross period stuff.” They’re just like about everything. They share with me in that experience.

I think breaking down those barriers are really important.

WHY IS CEREMONY IMPORTANT?

[17:58]

In Hupa way we say that before the time of people there was the time of animals, and before that there was the time of our First People. That’s who we call our K’ixinay. Our ceremonies were given to us by the K’ixinay people to help us to keep the Earth in balance, and they tell this story about how before—in the before time in our valley, which is where we say that we came into being, a dark cloud came, and it settled over us, and it was blocking out the light.

And it was causing disease and destruction, floods and...problems with the Earth, and all the kinds of things that I think we would identify now as like environmental issues. It was keeping us from being able to grow food. And the K’ixinay came and they said we have to do something to push this cloud away, so what we’ll do is these ceremonies. And if we do them we can push the cloud out, we can rebalance the Earth, and we can have new days. And they told the Hupa people, “If you do this, then the cloud won’t come back to settle over you; but if a cloud comes again, you do this and you’ll be able to push it out.” And that to me is decolonization.

[19:24]

We have everything that we’ve ever needed to be able to do this. They gave it to us at the beginning of time. They told us our responsibility was to honor the earth through our ceremonies, that if we did that, everything would be okay. And it was hard to do that because they outlawed them. Colonizers outlawed them, would target them, would target them for spaces where they would come and take our women and children, would target them for massacres, would target them when we were in those spaces to round us up. It became dangerous to do those things. That’s how much they knew how powerful they were, because they had to try to stop them. If they didn’t think they did anything, they wouldn’t try to stop them, but they knew that we were doing something, and they were afraid of that power. And we have done them ever since.

[20:26]

And in Hupa we are fortunate enough we’re on our aboriginal territory, so we have done these things unbroken since the beginning of time. And when I started doing this work, I remember a lot of people kept telling me: “But you lost. You lost the flower dance, you lost this women’s ceremony.”

And I never really liked that. I was like, I lost it? And I kept telling people, “We didn’t lose it, it got violently wrested away from us. That’s different.” We didn’t just go, “oops, I don’t know where it went, misplaced it somewhere, should have put a little thing on it so it would ding when it moved around,” or whatever, like it was taken from us on purpose.

[21:04]

But the more work I did, the more I realized—So in Hupa way we have three ceremonies that we do in the all-time dancing place. They call it the [Indigenous language TERM], the always dancing place. One is the jump dance, and then the other is the deer-skin dance. Those are what they call our world renewal ceremonies. We’ve done those unbroken since the beginning of time.



[21:26]

You will sometimes hear the jump dance referred to as the Thanksgiving dance. That is because when the fort came in, they were like, You can't do ceremonies anymore. But we were not going to stop them. So we kept doing them, and then they came and they're like: We told you not to do ceremonies. And then we were like, No, no, that's a Thanksgiving dance. We're celebrating Thanksgiving, and then they were like, "Oh, okay, got it." So they let us keep that one.

[21:55]

So you see how we were doing whatever we could to hold onto this because we had been told this is what was going to push that dark cloud away.

Now the third dance that's done for all time in the K'ixinay afterworld is the Flower Dance, the women's ceremony. So to me that shows how important it was. It was one of our three world-renewal ceremonies. You had to do this to make the world in balance. You also had to have the women's ceremony.

[22:20]

But when I was doing the research, what I realized is like, we can't lose it. It can never be lost, because it's being done right now. Like it's just up there; it's waiting for us. So all we had to do was ask it to come back. All we had to do was say we want it and call it back, and then it came.

And it all happened the way—I wish I could say it wasn't that way, but really what happened is groups of women started going, "I want to do this; I want to do this." And then things just came. Suddenly we were like in the archives and we found things we'd never seen before. We were in museums and saw things we'd never seen before. We were talking to elders and they remembered things they didn't even know were in their brain. They just remembered suddenly. "I remember this thing about this dance." Because we asked for it.

[23:10]

So I know that ceremony exists in and of itself, in a world that needs us to help rebalance it, because what our ceremonies do is connect us to this place in a way that reminds us that we need to be humble to the earth. Like, we are not the owners of it. We're not the people who are supposed to decide exactly what happens. We are the people who work with it. Right? We're like a part of it.

[23:38]

So, what I love about our ceremonies then is they are adaptable to who we are today, and what we need today, as much as they were yesterday. They weren't meant to be like rote actions of things. They were supposed to be things that we did to help in the world that we had right now. And we can do that right now.

And we as Native people, our imaginations are there to help us make those things come back into being. And all we have to do is ask for it, and the K'ixinay will take care of the rest.