My Personal Journey for Cultural Identity and Well-Being

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Asikłuk:
Iñupiatun: Ulvaalluataq. Uvaŋa atiġa Asikłuk. Ataataga Sanguk. Aanaga Aileen. Avuaraġa Fred suli Edgar. Aakaga Gussie suli Mary. Iḷatga Iiġalugniagvik. Qawiaraġmiuruŋa. Savaktuŋa University of Alaska Fairbanks. Iñuuruŋa Fairbanks. Nunaaqiq Lower Tanana Athabascan.

English: My Iñupiaq name is Asikłuk (pronounced 'A-seek-a-luke'). My white fox name is Dr. Sean Topkok. Topkok is actually an Iñupiaq name meaning beach. Asikłuk was given to me by my Auk (grandmother), which means Bad Boy. I was not named Asikłuk because I was a bad boy. I was named after one of my great-uncles, whom I will talk about later. If an Elder asks me for my Iñupiaq name, they will know my family tree. In my introduction, I say my parents are the late Clifford and Aileen Topkok of Teller. My family comes from Iiġalugniagvik (place to go fishing), the place name of Teller, Alaska. I am a person of Kawerak. I am Iñupiaq, Sámi, Kven, Irish, and Norwegian. In my introduction, I said I work at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and live in Fairbanks, the community lands of the Lower Tanana people.

I am going to talk about my personal journey for cultural identity and well-being, some of the school districts, research I conducted in Southeast Alaska with Tlingit and Haida people, and then things I live by.

I was one of five brothers. My father was Iñupiaq, Sámi, and Kven. His heritage language was Iñupiaq. However, he did not speak Iñupiaq with us at home, except for some phrases in the Qawiaraq dialect. I did not grow up with the influence of my grandparents. I never met any of my grandfathers. They passed away before I was born. I did spend time with my grandmothers. I did not participate much in my Iñupiaq and Sámi heritages in my early childhood and early adulthood. I grew up in Spenard, a community in Anchorage. I was working at a summer camp with urban Native youth. We brought them camping. I was a camp counselor then, and I was adopted by the late William and Mary Tyson from St. Mary's; they were Yup'ik Elders who worked at the summer camp. I was learning dances along with the campers. Mr. and Mrs. Tyson noticed a mistake whenever I made it, and they said, "Sean made a mistake. All of you have to dance it over again." I thought they were teasing me. They saw a potential that I could retain that knowledge system of the dancing. That started the journey of embracing all my cultural heritages and learning more about who I am.

Our ancestral stories help define who we are today. In Iñupiaq, our legend stories are called unipkaat. One of our legend stories is the Eagle Wolf Dance. It is also known as the Messenger Feast, which differs from the Messenger Feast in the Yup'ik region. There is a book written by William Oquilluk, one of my great uncles, and Johnny Asikłuk Kakaruk, my namesake. They co-wrote a book about the Messenger Feast in the mid-1900s. They noticed that the Messenger Feast has not been performed properly in the Teller and Mary's Igloo areas since the early-1900s. They wanted to document the Messenger Feast. This was the beginning of dancing in the Qawiaraq region (Kararuk & Oquilluk, 1964). The Messenger Feast is told throughout the Iñupiaq region and differs for each community. This is from the Qawiaraġmiut, people of Kawerak, and two of my great-uncles.

Tulik was a hunter, and he went looking around (Kararuk & Oquilluk, 1964). We never say that we are going hunting because that is a natural law we have. When he was going out looking around, he saw a giant eagle. He shot down the giant eagle. While going to the giant eagle, he heard, “Thump, thump…thump, thump…thump, thump.” That was the beat of the drum and the sound of the drum. It was actually the sound of the fallen Eagle’s mother mourning for her son. Tulik was visited by the spirit people. They said, “To show respect for nature, one of our cultural values, you must do the Messenger Feast. You'll be visited by other spirit people so you can learn how to do the dances.” Many spirit people taught him the dances and kept working with him until he knew them back and forth to know how to perform the Messenger Feast.

If I were to equate the Messenger Feast with my own journey, I would say Tulik’s journey was also like my own personal journey. I am learning from my ancestors, learning from my great uncles. Like Tulik, I was also on a journey to find self-identity. William and Mary Tyson were like spirit people to me, helping me learn dances. I wrote an article about Tulik’s journey and my cultural journey to align both to our Iñupiat Ilitqusiat, our Iñupiaq cultural values (Topkok & Green, 2016). My desire is to teach my children and their descendants about ways of celebrating our cultural heritages and values.

We make mistakes. We acknowledge that we make mistakes. We used to have another ceremony during wintertime, during the winter solstice. One of my other great-uncles remembers the ceremony when he was a child growing up in Igloo. He remembers the crisp snow and the drumming. We would wear our best furs and attire and drum for days of celebration of dance, food, storytelling, and eating. Here in Fairbanks, we have a celebration during winter solstice where we sing while the sun is rising. We go to a sacred place in Fairbanks called Troth Yeddha’. We sing while the sun is rising in memory of Gahzee.

We are implementing Native ways of knowing, Native ways of teaching and learning. Beginning in 1995, the Alaska Native Knowledge Network worked with 20 rural school districts statewide out of the 50 and implemented Indigenous ways of knowing and healing. As we did that, we noticed an improvement in the scores and also in community well-being, while the other school districts remained the same. Thinking about the iceberg analogy in which 10% of the iceberg is above the surface and 90% below, we have the surface level and the deep knowledge. The surface level is the culture you see in our attire, our regalia. We never call them costumes. Costumes are for Halloween. The surface knowledge also includes our cooking, games, and drumming. Below the surface, we have edible plants, medicinal knowledge, star constellations, food preservations, genealogy, weather forecasting, and all the deep-rooted knowledge that our Elders have. That is what we need to look at. Above the surface is how to show how we love who we are. Below the surface is understanding who we are (Topkok, 2014). That is part of the iceberg analogy. We bring Native ways of knowing, teaching, and learning into the school system and education. We have the statistics to show that bringing in Native ways of knowing, healing, and teaching works for all Alaskans, whether they are Indigenous or not.

In 2005, Ray Barnhart started a charter school in Fairbanks called Effie Kokrine Early College Charter School based on cultural values-based education. Anyone could join the space. On the seasonal calendar, students take off a week to go hunting and be on the land, which is part of our well-being. Going outside is imperative for us to be connected with nature. When the animals give themselves to us, it is part of our cultural values. In 2007, at the North Slope Borough School District, the community decided to develop the

Iñupiaq Learning Framework (ILF). In 2010, the North Slope Borough School District Board adopted the framework.

Part of the Messenger Feast is to show nature that we respect them. We thank the whales for giving themselves to the whole community. Part of that is a blanket toss. The ILF includes the historical realm, the individual realm, the community, and the environmental realm. Interwoven and surrounding the realms are language and spirituality (https://www.nsbsd.org/en-US/inupiaq-education-c8d869a3/iupiaq-learning-framework-873fc2bd).

I worked with community members in the Northwest Arctic Borough School District. We asked the community members, “What do you feel is important to teach your children?” They are the experts who know what should be taught in their local areas. A couple of years ago, a group of Elders, cultural bearers, and educators decided that we would develop resources for snow. We have many words for snow because there are different types of snow. There's powdery snow, there's wet snow, there's freshly fallen snow, there's spring snow. They felt that it was imperative that students can survive in the snow and have an understanding of their own place. We developed the materials. We interviewed local community members, and we worked with the Elders. All the lessons are based on the cultural values in Northwest Alaska.

In the summer of 2020, several of us interviewed community members in Juneau about COVID-19 as part of another National Science Foundation grant. We wanted to examine well-being and what people were doing to heal. I interviewed Tlingit and Haida people, the Indigenous people living in Juneau, Alaska. I was able to conduct interviews via Zoom as well as via the telephone. I noticed that what they were sharing to survive is through their Southeast Traditional Tribal Values.

One of the Elders that I met talked about how Indigenous resiliency has survived past pandemics, including governmental institutions, missionaries, viruses, floods, ice age, great earthquakes, famine, and wars. One of the first concerns Kingeisti rightfully expressed is how this information will be utilized and to respectfully credit Kingeisti’s knowledge by not plagiarizing his stories and knowledge. They survived by utilizing language, stories, knowledge, and by living their heritage daily. David Katzeek, 78 years old, belonged to the Eagle Thunderbird Clan. He became the clan leader at age 28 when most leaders were appointed in their forties and fifties. He walked into the forest on October 28, 2020, which is a euphemism for he passed away. Kingeisti was one of the ten Tlingit and Haida people I interviewed for this research. He captured the main Indigenous themes spoken by all Tlingit and Haida people interviewed: resiliency, worldview, cultural values, knowledge, and agitation. As part of the Southeast cultural values, discipline, and obedience to tradition, we know that our ancestors experienced past and current pandemics. Many not only survived but also thrived, utilizing ancestral knowledge. In Southeast Alaska, some past pandemics included influenza and measles brought by American ships, including the ones called Java. Many other documented illnesses were brought to Alaska by outsiders. Dr. Twitchell, a Tlingit scholar, adds at the same time this was happening, there was a full enactment of boarding schools with Indigenous linguistic and cultural genocide. Indigenous people experienced marginalization since contact with non-Native settlers and missionaries. When COVID-19 reached the United States in early March 2020, the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska began an emergency operations center to address COVID-19 and future situations. Jason Wilson said that Tlingit, Haida, and other places worldwide are probably looking at the emergency operations center as a tool to use in the event of all types of emergencies.

Love is a methodology. Love is part of everything. In the Summer of 2021, Linda T. Smith talked to the World Indigenous Research Education Conference about loving as a methodology. The late Chief Marie Smith Jones, the last Native Eyak speaker, walked into the forest in 2008. She gave me words of wisdom to pass on to Indigenous people working with Indigenous issues. She said, “Stop the hate and just love.” Joe Nelson, one of the CEOs of the Alaska Native Corporation, shared that he got a recent tattoo on his right hand right before COVID-19, and it says, “I love you.” When he reaches and shakes somebody's hand, the first thing they see is, “I love you.” Love is imperative in many aspects of Indigenous ways of healing, Indigenous ways of being, and Indigenous worldviews.

My last words of wisdom are that when we think about Indigenous well-being, we can think of the individual, the family, and the community. We can also think about the physical, the spiritual, and the cultural. I want to take care of my physical body, go for walks, be out in nature, and eat good food for my well-being. For one’s spirituality, some people look to organized religions, while other people look to nature. Spiritual wellness is individualistic, how you practice your own moral compass that helps you become a better person. Having a healthy family and having constant communication also help. Ideally, your family is helping you be well. You are also helping your family to be well. So lastly, there is cultural well-being. Embrace your cultural heritages, learn more about who you are, and celebrate who you are. Dance, learn your genealogy, and look below the surface to understand who you are. That journey will continue well after you become an Elder. Practicing the physical, the spiritual, and the cultural helps heal us through past pandemics and helps us maintain our resiliency and adaptations as Indigenous Peoples.

References

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