

Celebrating Diversity and Tradition: Exploring Indigenous Rites of Passage and Inclusivity

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Rites of Passage for Indigenous Youth

Throughout the journey from birth to eventual return to the spirit world, each child was guided by their parents, grandparents and extended kinship through a series of ceremonial practices that serve to honor their evolving earth walk on the land, to their kinship, and their spirit. These sacred ways of knowing and being played a pivotal role in instilling kinship reverence for land-based principles.

In addition to these foundational rites, various other ceremonial observances are woven into the fabric of community life, often recurring at different junctures in an individual's existence. For instance, a significant rite of passage is the naming ceremony, where newborns are given names by their kin based on their spirit, gifts, significant events and/or unique attributes. Their name gives their life purpose, protection, a reminder of who they are and where they come from, as well as a community recognition of their spirit. These contemplative undertakings, embarked upon at distinct stages of life and sometimes as integral facets of rites of passage, offer each person opportunities for profound spiritual reflection and connection, walking and being with both the earthly and the divine.

Rites of Passage and Inclusivity



Annual Two Spirit Pow wow, by 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations. Circle of friendship or friendship dance. Toronto, Ontario, Canada - May 27, 2023. Golden Shrimp/Shutterstock.com

Rites of passage can vary greatly among different Indigenous cultures and communities. In some cases, these rites may be gender-inclusive, recognizing and honoring the diverse identities and experiences of individuals within the community, including Two-Spirit, LGBTQIA+, and non-binary individuals. Two-Spirit individuals, in particular, are rooted in Indigenous cultures, representing individuals who embody both masculine and feminine qualities or occupy a unique gender status, traditionally regarded neither as strictly male nor female within tribes. However, traditional rites of passage may be more rigidly tied to specific gender roles and norms, potentially excluding or marginalizing those who do not conform to these expectations.

Efforts are being made in many Indigenous communities to adapt and evolve traditional rites of passage to be more inclusive of diverse gender identities and experiences. Involving reinterpreting or expanding existing rituals, creating new ceremonies that explicitly acknowledge and celebrate the diversity within the community, and fostering dialogue and education around issues of gender and sexuality.

RESOLVE Alberta Steering Community Member Dr. Lana Whiskeyjack



Cree artist Lana Whiskeyjack, at her studio Whiskeyjack Art House, has a new exhibit of work based on the teachings of the 13 sacred moons opening at the Art Gallery of Alberta on April 7. PHOTO BY GREG SOUTHAM /Postmedia

Lana Whiskeyjack, a nêhiyaw (Cree) visual storyteller, scholar, and arts actionist educator is a multifaceted artist, scholar, and author known for her innovative interdisciplinary Indigenous knowledge translation through arts and land-based practices at the University of

Alberta. Lana's work as an associate professor in the department of Women's and Gender Studies, encompasses community-engaged research, scholarship services, and teaching, all grounded within nêhiyawêwin (Cree language) and Cree ways of knowing.

Her collaborative research delves into gender and sexual diversity, rites of passage, rematriation, kinship systems (wahkohtowin), and health and wellness. With a background in Arts, Canadian Studies, and Indigenous Studies, Lana received her doctorate from the University nuhelot'îne thâyots'î nistameyimâkanak Blue Quills in 2017. She has been featured in documentaries such as "Lana Gets Her Talk" (2017), focusing on confronting historical trauma through arts-based practices.

In her approach to research, Lana emphasizes community-based methodologies and long-term relationships, engaging with various Indigenous organizations and knowledge keepers to enrich and deepen understanding of being a human of this land. Her commitment extends to revitalizing Cree language and culture, developing programs for urban Two-Spirit youth, and exploring Indigenous women's health and gender issues. As an educator, Lana draws upon Indigenous teachings, integrating traditional knowledge, language, and land-based practices into her teaching philosophy. She fosters reciprocal learning relationships, employing circle dialogues and arts-integrated approaches to connect learners with land-based wisdom and inspire critical analysis. Through her work as a multidisciplinary artist and educator, Lana Whiskeyjack embodies a commitment to Indigenous resilience, creativity, and community empowerment.

The tapahtêyimôkamik Project (the Humble Lodge)

The tapahtêyimôkamik project is a community-led initiative focused on exploring various aspects within Indigenous communities. This includes themes such as gender and sexual diversity, rites of passage, rematriation, kinship systems (wahkohtowin), and health and wellness. Through collaboration with Indigenous organizations and knowledge keepers, the project engages in community-based research and develops programs to support urban Two-Spirit youth, revitalize Cree language and culture, and address Indigenous women's health issues. The goal of the tapahtêyimôkamik project is to restore balance of power within Indigenous communities, promote inclusivity, and reclaim Indigenous knowledge and traditions. For further details, please visit ualberta.ca/strengtheningrelations.

Photo courtesy of tapahtêyimôkamik

Territorial Acknowledgement The University of Alberta, its buildings, labs, and research stations are primarily located on the traditional territory of Cree, Blackfoot, Métis, Nakota Sioux, Iroquois, Dene, and Ojibway/Saulteaux/Anishinaabe nations; lands that are now known as part of Treaties 6, 7, and 8 and homeland of the Métis. The University of Alberta respects the sovereignty, lands, histories, languages, knowledge systems, and cultures of First Nations, Métis and Inuit nations.

