

Testimony of Marjorie Linne Tungwenuk Tahbone
Former Miss Indian World 2011-2012

Before the
Committee on Indian Affairs
United States Senate

“Reclaiming Our Image and Identity for the Next Seven Generations”

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Introduction

Good Afternoon. Chairman Akaka, Vice Chairman Barrasso and distinguished members of the Committee. I am honored to speak on behalf of my family, community, and people before you today. My name is Marjorie Linne Tungwenuk Tahbone from Nome, Alaska; my Inupiaq name is Kunaq. I was raised just outside of Nome at our family camp and was taught a subsistence lifestyle by my parents Sandy and Carleton Tahbone. My lineage is both Inupiaq Eskimo and Kiowa Indian. Last year I was given the honor of representing all the Indigenous Nations of North America as Miss Indian World 2011-2012. I am currently attending the University of Alaska Fairbanks and am graduating this December with a bachelor’s degree in Alaska Native Studies and Inupiaq language.

Reclaiming my Identity

Growing up in a rural isolated community I had no connection to the outside world, but that is how I liked it. All that seemed relevant was how to live in my environment; where tundra grew, the ocean roared, and the wildlife roamed. I had no troubles growing up, only the troubles of a young child learning from their mistakes. And this is how I lived; when I was old enough for school my family would leave camp so that I could attend during the winter. I loved going to school, I could never wait until it started once again. I remember the day before school I would stay up all night because I was so excited that I could not sleep.

One day while I was in school there was an assembly and all the children were brought to the gym, as I walked in the gym I was shocked and amazed to see a real Indian all dressed up. Upon closer examination I realized that this real Indian was my dad, I had never seen him in these clothes before. I was in 2nd grade and it was the first time we had Indigenous Cultures day. It was this day that I realized I was Indian. Before I always knew I was Inupiaq, and Nome is a diverse community so people saying I was Indian just did not happen.

When I was 12 years old, along with my younger sister were sent down to Oklahoma for the summer where my Kiowa side of the family lived. It was my first time leaving Alaska and meeting any family from down south. My loving grandparents dressed me in Kiowa regalia and taught my sister and I how to dance and sing, even how to say a few phrases in Kiowa. And they told us that we were Kiowa and to be proud of it and we were. When school started the following fall I was the “expert” on Indians because where I was from there are no Indians. But I knew nothing of my tribe, I did not know the creation story, the meaning of songs, or anything relating to Kiowa traditions, I was not raised Kiowa, I was raised as an Inupiaq.

My identity was split between Inupiaq and Kiowa, both cultures on extremely different parts of the globe. Who was I suppose to be? Could I be both? I had Inupiaq mentors but no Kiowa mentors, so to compensate I started to rely on media and books to teach me how to be an Indian. I had seen Pocahontas, Dances with Wolves, Bugs Bunny with Indians, and I took those as accurate portrayals of Indian people. I had unknowingly created a false identity of myself.

On top of my confusion in school I was taught about trees, street lights, and skyscrapers, and yet we had none of those in Nome. We were taught to memorize all of the United State Presidents but not of our ancestral leaders and prophets. I started to wonder how knowing of trees, street lights, and skyscrapers was going to help me survive in the cold Alaskan Arctic. Why was I not taught about the dangers of sea ice? Or how to read weather patterns in my area? Or learn about my cultural history? I was learning things that were simply not relevant to me or the Inupiaq children at my school. At a young age our identities were taken away in exchange for a western foreign one.

Of course we did not have it as bad as the generation that came before us where they were sent to boarding schools and were punished for speaking their language. Now we face a completely

different issue with false identity and negative stereotypes. We as youth are torn between our traditional culture and modern culture. We learn at school what we need to know to pass standardized test even though the questions do not relate to our well-being. We struggle to find our identities alone because our parents were punished for knowing their culture and language and do not want the same punishment for their children. But that does not deter us youth into finding a way to make it all work. We adapt to the ever changing ways of modern society and incorporate our traditional values and lifestyle into it.

All throughout high school I had a false identity of who I was. It was not until college when I really started to ask the question of who I really was. I knew in my heart I was full Inupiaq, but on paper I was only $\frac{1}{4}$ Inupiaq and $\frac{1}{2}$ Kiowa. The paper said I was more Kiowa than Inupiaq but that was not what I knew in my heart. I looked Indian but I ate, dressed, spoke like an Inupiaq. Modern society says I am acculturated and need to focus on living in this new time, the elders say I am Inupiaq and Kiowa, so who was I suppose to be? But I found my identity, I reclaimed it, it was mine. I recognize and acknowledge my Kiowa side and have great respect for the tribe, but I say I am Inupiaq because that is who I identify myself as. It took me all too long to come to this realization and I am sure there are children and teenagers even adults who are going through the same thing. But we have the power to change that, with one word, adaptability. The modern education needs to adapt its curriculum to benefit the children who receive them. The mainstream media needs to adapt its portrayal of Indigenous people to a more accurate and positive one. And our leadership needs to adapt to create a positive environment so that we can work together on these important issues.

Conclusion

I am the youth that you all speak of, and I know you are working hard for us and the next seven generations. But the youth is resilient, we learn and make mistakes by trying to understand how we can bridge the gap between traditional and modern culture, we just need to be guided down the right path by our leaders and community. Once again I thank you for allowing me to speak. Quyanaqpak.