

how do i honor my ancestors if i do not know them?

a story and reflection from lexi wagor

i was haunted by this question for a long time. like so much of our diaspora, i do not and may never know the names, faces, and stories of most of my shimanchu ancestors. i lack the painstakingly recorded family tree and deep well of stories that i constantly hear about in shimanchu circles. **i have always known the blood and spirit of my uyafaafuji are deeply embedded in my bones and being**, and i cherish the handful of memories that have been passed down to me with care and tenderness, but for many years grief and anger hemorrhaged from this void in my family history. **i felt, and still feel, robbed of pieces of myself.** of ourselves. and through this pain, i began to see beyond this perceived absence and form an understanding of my ancestor's presence. i am, i always have been, surrounded by our collective ancestors.

our many islands were born from ryugyu, the sea. and we, the island people, were born from the breath of jiichi, earth mother, and utin, sky father. sea, earth, and heaven - our most revered ancestors, guides, and teachers. the sources of our strength. who my human uyafaafuji became when their flesh was no more and who i will become when my flesh is no more. i hear their voices carried in the wind. in spring buds blooming through late frost. in raging wildfires that bring devastation and usher in new life. in the full moon coming up over the dark horizon. in powerful waves relentlessly crashing into the soft, sandy shore. i am constantly enveloped by them, like ryukyu limestone cradled by the tangled roots of gajumaru trees.

these ancestors called me back to them, before i knew who they were. i did not grow up spending time communing with uyafaafuji of the elements. for all intents and purposes, i was a "city" kid. as i grew and gained some form of independence in guiding my life's trajectory, i felt an urgency to be with them, and learn from them. as the first person in my family to have the

opportunity to go to college, my parents were less than thrilled that i intended to study art. after following that track for two years, i flipped the focus of my studies without thought - moving into environmental science. just now as i write this, i am reflecting on the forces that guided me to this starting point. while i am unsure if it was my namagaa yuu who worked as one with nature or usachi yuu who are nature, i am sure that the divine intervention of some ancestor steered me on this journey.

in college, i felt lost and alone in the environmental sciences. there were no faces that looked like mine and i struggled deeply with imposter syndrome. statistics we gathered and tests we ran could never account for or contain all that this world is and does. i grew tired and knew academia could never give me what i needed. as i moved into the world of environmental restoration, i felt such emptiness at restoring "wild" and "natural" places without addressing the root causes of these issues. i could not feel my ancestors near me while trying to erase all signs of human presence from the

landscape, as if people had never been and shouldn't be there. i felt the uyafaafuji tickling my ears with their wise whispers. western science will never fix western problems, as we cannot out-engineer the environmental (or sociopolitical) effects of the colonialist state. it was here that i found the real work that needed to be done in honoring ryugyu, jiichi, and utin.

today, i work to give these ancestors a voice in spheres of capitalism where they have been stripped of their sovereignty and their gifts to us are classified as little more than resources and services. how can i help others reframe how they view landscapes and build stronger relationships with ryugyu, jiichi, and utin? through what senses, actions, and meditations can i create and strengthen bonds with elemental uyafaafuji? what can i do to contribute to a future where we break the

endless cycle of exploiting the land? while the answers aren't always clear, it is my sacred ancestor-given duty to contemplate and create these futures.

of course, this work is complicated by the fact that i am a settler on stolen indigenous land. i live as an uninvited guest on the lands of the elwha people - who have been at the forefront of the inspiring dam removal work along the mighty river that they have coincided with since time immemorial. i am incredibly humbled to learn from them, and work on their lands. i must continually ask myself: in what ways do environmental "protections" and "restoration" actions allow for the continued violence and exploitation of lands and waters, as well as their traditional caretakers? this work i engage in is meaningless if it does not dismantle the systems in place, from which i have benefited, that separate and commodify bodies and land.

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i close this hanashi with commitments and affirmations, for myself and for all of the shimanchu that do not know those who came before them. i must remember that there is more to honoring my ancestors than what lies in my human lineage. i honor my ancestors in remembering that i am never alone, and neither are you. i honor my ancestors by opening my awareness to feel them all around me. i honor my ancestors by embodying their resilience and by getting out on to the landscape and creating new/better worlds for generations to come. ❖

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