

Land and Subsistence in Tlingit Folklife

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For many Native American people, subsistence remains at the heart of traditional culture and of contemporary folklife as well. For other cultures of the United States, “subsistence” may be an unfamiliar concept, but today many Native Americans cling tenaciously and assertively to the subsistence rights that are central to their ethnic heritage, cultural identity, traditional spirituality and legal standing under numerous treaties with the United States government.

The Tlingit Indians live in Southeast Alaska, the part of Alaska that is about the same size and shape as Florida. It is a land of rainforest and fiords, where few communities are connected by road. In this spectacular setting, the natural, material, social, ceremonial and spiritual worlds are tightly connected in most of the activities and artifacts of Tlingit folklife. Animals are central to cultural identities and processes. A Tlingit individual, following his or her mother's line, is born into one of two moieties: Raven or Eagle. Traditionally, one married a spouse from the opposite moiety, so that each person's father and a man's children were of the opposite moiety. Each moiety includes several clans, also named after animals and using animals as their emblem, or totem. We should emphasize here that these totems are not objects of religious worship or veneration, but are heraldic in nature. Often referred to as “crests,” they indicate one's ancestry and social identity. Some clans of the Raven moiety and their crests are: *Lukaax.ádi* (sockeye, or red salmon), *L'uknaax.ádi* (coho, or silver salmon), *L'eineidí* (dog salmon), *Kiks.ádi* (frog) and *T'akdeintaan* (snail, seagull or tern). Some clans of the Eagle moiety and their crests are: *Teikweidí* (brown bear), *Dakl'aweidí* (killer whale), *Chookaneidí* (porpoise) and *Kaagwaantaan* (wolf). A person becomes a member of one of the clans at birth and is given a personal name, which often also describes or alludes to an animal.

The social use of resources occurs daily in

Tlingit life, especially the sharing of food. As this article was being drafted, a Tlingit man delivered a cardboard box of seal meat as a gift for the mother of one of the co-authors. Seal is important for Tlingits. The skin is used for sewing moc-casins and vests, the meat is eaten, and the fat is rendered into oil used to preserve other foods or to be eaten with foods such as dried fish. Traditionally, the intestines were braided and preserved in seal oil, but this practice is relatively rare today.

With spring comes the herring run in Southeast Alaska, and herring eggs are a favorite. The best herring spawn is in Sitka, and the Sitka Tlingit have traditionally been generous to their friends and relatives in other communities, sharing the richness of their harvest. In May the eulachon (“hooligan” — small, smelt-like fish) run, and people who live near the supply commonly share with those who live farther away. Major summer activities are berrying and putting up fish. Berries are picked and jarred or frozen, to be eaten all year in social and ceremonial uses.

Fishing has for centuries been the primary source of food for the people of Southeast Alaska. The summer runs are abundant, and fish were traditionally smoked, dried and stored for winter use. Native people of Southeast Alaska have always been innovative, and now also use new technology such as freezers for storing fish. There are stories of people using hair driers and laundry driers to preserve seaweed at times when the weather is too rainy for drying it in the sun. Smokehouses are not as common as a century ago, but many families and communities continue to smoke and dry fish. The fish are purchased from commercial fishermen, caught by sport fishermen of the family, or are obtained on subsistence permits.

Recently, two problems have emerged. Often, areas designated for subsistence use are at con-

siderable distance from population centers, so that fishing in these areas may cost more money than can be afforded by those who have the greatest economic need for subsistence. In recent years, fish hatcheries have given fish away after their eggs have been removed for breeding. Unfortunately, these hatchery fish are not firm enough to preserve by smoking, and after freezing they are too mushy to be cooked in any way except boiling. Tlingit people are concerned about increased reliance on fish hatcheries if there are problems with the fish.

Tlingit people traditionally use the entire fish. If fish are filleted, backbones are usually smoked or boiled in soup. Heads are baked or boiled in soup, but they may also be fermented (traditionally in a hole on the beach, where they are rinsed with each tide change). The result is a food traditionally called *k'ínk'* in Tlingit and affectionately called "stink heads" in English. It may be compared to the turning of milk into Limburger cheese in European culture. Likewise, fish eggs are not discarded, but are preserved in various ways. Most often they are frozen and later served in a soup with seaweed (which is preserved by drying and then reconstituted). They may be salted (as caviar), or fermented as a dish called *kabáakw kas'eex*.

Fall brings the hunting season. Sitka black tailed deer are abundant in most areas, but many Tlingit hunters complain that in areas of heavy logging, there are fewer deer. The protective cover from deep snow provided by Sitka spruce and other tall trees in the rainforest allows winter grazing on moss, skunk cabbage and other forest plants. Where snowfall is heavy, there is risk of starvation for deer. Brown and black bear are hunted to a much lesser extent, and in some communities and families there are cultural taboos on eating bear meat. Sheep and goat are hunted even less. Deer skin is used for drum making and for sewing moccasins and vests. Deer hoofs are made into dance rattles. Mountain goat is the traditional source of wool for weaving Chilkat blankets but is increasingly difficult for weavers to obtain. One problem is that wool is best for weaving when the goats are not in season, so special permits need to be negotiated. But throughout the deer season, the sharing of deer meat is much in evidence. Many Tlingit hunters consider it bad luck to keep their first kill of the season, and often give the entire animal away rather than keep it for themselves. As with fishing, those who hunt typically share with those who do not have access to the resource, and younger hunters provide meat to elders who are

no longer able to hunt for themselves. Also as with fishing, this practice may put traditionally minded Tlingits at odds with the law, because bag limits are designed with the individual in mind, and not the idea that a person may also be hunting or fishing for other people.

In addition to social sharing, the ceremonial distribution of food is at the heart of traditional Tlingit ceremonial and spiritual life. Nowhere is this better demonstrated — and, perhaps, more misunderstood — than in the ceremonial called "potlatch" in English, and *koo.éex'* in Tlingit, where many different aspects of Tlingit folklife come together. It is called "invitation" in Tlingit because the hosts, who have lost a clan member through death, invite guests of the opposite moiety to a ceremonial. The hosts give food and other gifts to the guests, thereby ritually giving comfort to the spirits of the departed by giving comfort to the living. In Tlingit this is called *du naawú x'éix at gugatée* — "he will feed his deceased." Death-bed wishes often specifically request that subsistence foods, usually the personal favorites of the departed, be served.

Verbal and visual folk art are important parts of this traditional ceremonial, especially the rites for the removal of grief. During these rites, the guests display their clan crests represented on carved wooden hats, sewn felt beaded button blankets, tunics, woven Chilkat robes, and other regalia, called *at.óow* in Tlingit. As part of the display of these totemic crests, designated orators from among the guests deliver speeches to the hosts. The purpose of the oratory and the display of visual art is to offer spiritual comfort to the hosts, and to help remove their grief.

The visual art becomes the basis of the oratory. In the guests' speeches the visual art is transformed by rhetoric, especially through simile and metaphor. The frog on the hat, for example, is imagined as coming out of hibernation to remove the grief of the hosts by taking it back into its burrow. The beaded terns on a felt blanket (who are identified as the paternal aunts of the hosts) fly out from their rookery, drop soothing down feathers on the grieving hosts, and fly away with their grief, taking it back to the nests. Through the verbal art of the orator, the spirits depicted in the visual art come to the human world, give comfort, and remove the grief of the living to the spirit world.

This interaction is also a good example of the reciprocity or "balance" so important in Tlingit world view. Hosts and guests comfort each other on spiritual, physical and social levels. The hosts feed and clothe the spirits of their departed



Austin Hammond, wearing a Sockeye Salmon Chilkat robe, faces singers of several clans who gathered at Chilkoot Lake. Referring to this robe, Austin often says, "we wear our history." The robe depicts clan history and serves as claim to the land and subsistence use. Photo by Richard Dauenhauer

through gifts of food and clothing to living members of the opposite moiety; and the guests rally their range of spirits to give comfort to the hosts by removing their grief. As we take care of the living, we also take care of the departed. If we take care of the living, the living will take care of us. If we take care of the departed, the departed will take care of us.

Ritual distribution of food and other gifts is explained by Tlingit elder Amy Marvin in her telling of the "Glacier Bay History" (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1987:277). Only if food is given and eaten with an opposite clan can it go to the relative who is mourned. "Only when we give to the opposite clan . . . does it become a balm for our spirits." We find this passage so powerful that we used her Tlingit words and a paraphrase translation as the title of our book *Haa Tuwunāagu Yís, for Healing Our Spirit: Tlingit Oratory* (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1990). The introduction to this book explains in detail the ceremonial oratory, visual art, and distribution of subsistence food.

Meals are an important part of the memorial ceremony. Subsistence foods are especially valued and are carefully preserved for ritual distribution. Menus typically include: deer stew, seal meat (baked, boiled or smoked), salmon (as dryfish, soup, baked or fried), halibut, seaweed and salmon egg soup. Many families have special pots, often inherited, for preparing ceremonial food. At a recent memorial in Sitka, the cooking pot for the deer stew was two feet high and three feet in diameter!

It is important to notice here the role of visual art in Tlingit folklife. The totemic crests called *at.óow* in Tlingit are not detached objects of art

abstractly displayed in static isolation, but are arts ritually displayed in spiritual and social action in ceremonials. To the extent that subsistence materials are needed for making art objects themselves, subsistence and art become linked. For totem carving, one needs large trees; for weaving, one needs spruce roots and cedar bark. For Chilkat weaving one needs mountain goat wool, although sheep wool is now commonly substituted out of necessity. Traditional dyes are made from moss, lichen and minerals.

Subsistence food affects the physical as well as the social and spiritual being. Studies and articles (Drury 1985; Kennedy 1990 a,b; Tepton 1990; Young 1988) have been done on the nutritional value of traditional foods and on the impact of change in diet from Native American to European American food. Obesity, diabetes, cancer and heart disease have become much more prevalent. These effects can be attributed not only to nutritional content, but also to the process by which food is obtained. The act of getting and preserving traditional food keeps one more physically fit than shopping at a store (and using leisure time to sit by the TV and VCR).

For reasons of health, social interaction and spirituality, subsistence rights and activities are as important to the cultural identity of Native Americans as sport hunting and fishing rights are to the individual identity of European Americans and other citizens of the United States. Because these pursuits lie so close to the spiritual core of all the people involved and are so deeply rooted in their respective folk belief systems, subsistence becomes an extremely emotional and highly political issue.

Commercial exploitation of land and resources

is basic to European American world view, and people with this ethnic heritage often find it frustrating to see land and resources *not* used for cash profits and "development." For Native Americans, money has traditionally been an abstraction, whereas their connection to the land has been personal and spiritual. Theirs has been a subsistence, not a cash, economy. Commercial pressure also threatens subsistence. Many Tlingit foods are highly valued by the Japanese, and Native Americans fear commercial exploitation will damage traditional subsistence areas.

Today the subsistence issue remains one of the most heated legal and legislative battles in Alaska, involving both state and federal agencies. Natives are protesting a recent policy to deny subsistence use in some communities because of their size, regardless of ethnicity and lifestyle of the residents. Natives often feel bitter that most people making the law and setting policy in Alaska are newcomers from "outside" who will not retire and die in Alaska. They make laws for others and will leave without having to live with them. Natives feel that laws involving them are being made by Non-natives, people from other cultures not familiar with subsistence and often hostile to it. Natives feel that most subsistence laws and policies discriminate against the lifestyle and culture of Native people. For example, beginning in 1979 it took three years to get legal permission to use traditional gaff hooks to take salmon for subsistence use. Natives often feel increasingly disenfranchised on their own land.

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