

## Wisdom of the Ages: From Houses to Monsters, the Naming Practices of the Coast Tsimshian Nation

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### Abstract

Prior to European contact, there were no written indigenous languages. Canada's First Peoples relied on the 'truth' of ancestral oral narratives passed down through thousands of years of observation, knowledge, wisdom and experience. The cultural practices of the Coast Tsimshian people were deeply rooted in our reverent relationship with nature. Place, geographic and tribal names that included clans, crests, sub-crests, wonders and privileges were based on this close relationship. For example, the thoughtful giving of a name reinforced and accelerated each person's progress toward her/his highest destiny. As a result, at the time of birth, weather patterns, the time of year and the role of the family in tribal life formed the basis for naming. As it is, the widespread use of traditional indigenous names all across Canada is commonplace. *Canada* itself comes from the Mohawk word, *Kanata* meaning 'Community.' The central focus of the presentation will be on the indigenous principles of naming that include cultural and spiritual insights, and the historical understanding of the meaning of the name at the time of bestowal.

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First things first: I am not an Indian! Even after seven hundred years, I and my family do not accept the name "Indian" as an accurate description of who we are as proud Tsimshian. It is not our fault that Christopher Columbus had a bad sense of direction and completely misunderstood where he was and who it was he was dealing with when he first landed at an island in the Bahamas in 1492. One would think after his fourth trip in 1502–1504, he might have finally gotten it right! Alas, it was not to be.

### Tsimshian House

Each member of royalty and nobility in my tribe, the Tsimshian, belonged to a particular 'House' – it was our birthright. The houses reflected our matrilineal society as well as the cultural foundation of our people. For example, a territory belonging to a particular House also included fishing and hunting rights. As well, the family that headed the house, called nobles (later royalty<sup>1</sup>), also owned their stories, ceremonies, names, crests, wonders, privileges and songs. It was considered to be a great honour when a song was given to another house or to a noble from a visiting tribe.

In my case, I am of the Royal House of Niisgumiik, which translates to the rather inglorious Grandfather of the Sawbill Duck, Gilat-sauuw tribe of the Coast Tsimshian First Nation. I am a Sigyidmhaná'a (Princess/Matriarch), Gisbutwada, Killer Whale Clan (actual translation is 'Blackfish').<sup>2</sup> There are four major clans each with their own house. The clans are: Gisbutwada (Killer Whale), Laxgibuu (Wolf), Laxgiik (Eagle), and Ganhada (Raven). Each of these clans had identifiers in the form of crests.

The name of the house goes back into the mists of time when the first one was named after the first head of the family that claimed it. Old stories describing the actual origination are now lost to the Ancestors and so it is with the utmost trust that the names have been passed down.

Generation after generation the succeeding house head inherited the rights, privileges, responsibilities and all property that went with the name. The hierarchy of a house is as follows: Royalty (only after about 1850), Nobles, Commoners, and Slaves (captives from other tribes).

The **family of the ranking Name Holder** included: wife, children, widowed mother, widowed or divorced sisters and their children, brothers but only if they were not married, widowed aunts, their sons and nephews. It is important to note that the eldest nephew, as long as he was married and proved himself worthy, claimed the role of head of the household. If he was unworthy, then another nephew was considered until the right one was found.<sup>3</sup> The house literally was a huge Plank House built from massive red cedar logs. Depending on the rank, each family had a particular place in the house. For example, the Royal Family claimed the back wall, the slaves near the door.

A **House Chief** was also the **Canoe Chief** and every member of the party had an assigned seat in the canoe that corresponded to his seating rank within the house. Canoes, like houses, were named beings thought to have an existence and history of their own. They same applied to Yaawk celebrations – every tribal member had a specific place in the seating arrangements. This included invited guests from other tribes. Royalty and Nobles always had the best locations.<sup>4</sup>

The **Yaawk** was the main cultural celebration of the Northwest Coast and the place where territorial claims, names, crests were declared in front of witnesses, after which the attendees were richly compensated for witnessing the family's history. Gifts given were according to the rank of the guest. A more commonly known word for the feast is 'Potlatch'. This is from the Chinook trading language meaning 'to give'. However, the tribes prefer to use their own languages when describing this most important ceremony. Often the 'give away' portion of the ceremony is what the outside world has focused on, but it was much more than that. The ceremony was the social, economic, political and ceremonial grounding of my people. The reasons for holding a Yaawk, which, by the way, was an onerous and expensive proposition, included: marriages, death of a chief, naming of children, claiming of territories, crests, privileges and wonders.

**Commoners:** These were freeborn people who constantly moved among the houses looking for better deals for themselves. Sounds a bit like Bay Street financiers in Toronto! They rarely made it into the exalted circles of the nobles and royalty because they lacked the appropriate pedigrees. It made marriages into the nobility, which were often economically and politically motivated strategically impossible. They were not entitled to territory, names or any of the privileges accorded people of higher rank. They were critical to the success of a House, however, because they provided the bulk of the labour.

### Tsimshian Crests

Crests are usually named after animals. Keep in mind that Mother Earth/Nature/Environment was and is the main frame of reference for all Indigenous people. The Tsimshian were no different, respect for nature was paramount if they were to survive; therefore, animals played a large part in the naming of things (clans, individual names, houses). Stories and songs almost always accompanied a crest in order to legitimize it within the house. In my case, the main crests are *Gisbutwada* 'Blackfish' and *Mediik* 'Grizzly Bear'. My ancestors had the privilege of displaying these crests on all manner of things: totem poles, frontal posts of their plank house, ceremonial robes and headdresses and other objects which included: bowls, spoons, bentwood boxes, chests, and knives.<sup>5</sup>

It cannot be overemphasized that prior to European contact, without a formal written language, the cultural grounding of my people rested on the claims and understandings contained within oral narratives that were thousands of years old. These stories were held in perpetuity by the descendants of the original family that owned them and the names contained within those stories belong to the highest ranking people within a family. To display a crest that belonged to another house was a major breach of etiquette; it was considered to be the highest form of insult to call into question the claims made by a House.<sup>6</sup>

## Human Names

In my world, when a family requested the name of a child, elaborate gifts were given to the *Halaayt*.<sup>7</sup> In her own time, she would enter a deep meditative state and journey to her special place beyond the white veil. There she would communicate with her own Ancestors as well as those of the child. The declaration of the name to a noble or royal child by the *Halaayt* was further legitimized with the holding of a very special *Yaawk*. It was special because spiritual power held by the Mother was shifted to the child. Other factors a Spirit Doctor used in arriving at a name were influenced by natural phenomena, such as the weather, fast running rivers, huge oceans, seasons, different birds, crawlers or swimmers that may have appeared in her meditation.

When I am asked to give a name, I take the above factors into consideration, along with a few others: Age,<sup>8</sup> belief, tribal affiliation, who the person is now, (if an adult) has he been on the good red road in a good way, and family ties.

Just to complicate things a bit further, Tsimshian nobles and royalty throughout their lifetime were usually accorded with four names: Spring/Summer name, Fall/Winter name, *Halaayt* (Spirit) Name (this is inherited), Crest Name. The names helped the individual see him/herself through the community's eyes and through the different stages of life. Even if the person was uncomfortable with the name, over the years they would have to come to an acceptance and an understanding of it and of those aspects of themselves which the name represented. They did not have the option of denying a name. Even today, the name is the name.

## Monsters and the Supernatural

The Tsimshian did not distinguish between the supernatural and secular worlds because all living things were viewed as a vast continuum existing in 'real' time and in a conscious state of existence. For example, the four elements, plants, trees, animals and humans were connected to each other in often complex and sophisticated ways. Every object that existed in the physical world or sprang from the rich imaginations of the storytellers was in effect in possession of a "real" life, and a "real" name. Supernatural beings blurred the distinction between animals already used in the Crest system by transferring characteristics back and forth. Supernatural beings were a sort of reverse crest system that ran parallel to the secular world, albeit very real, relevant and present.

For example, *Ts'its'amti* (Thunderbird) is a symbol of power, strength and nobility and a special envoy of Great Mystery. Thunderbird's normal role is to act on behalf of those who are weaker than himself and to assist the Tsimshian with their everyday lives. He is unafraid to challenge greater powers, although they are few and far between (Mother Earth and Father Sky being two of them). He is reclusive and prefers not to have anyone near his home which is high up in the mountains. If people come too close, he sends huge avalanches tumbling down the mountain. Also, in his need for solitude he surrounds himself often with great darkness and fog so he cannot be seen, and when he blinks his red eyes, lightning flashes from beneath his mighty wings.

*Gaax* (Raven) is the Culture Hero of the Pacific Northwest Coast.<sup>9</sup> He is a very powerful transformation figure with the ability to shape shift into another animal or human. He was part of the everyday reality for the Tsimshian. He was not constrained by only one form, and therefore, *Gaax* became a power unto himself, as, out of the chaos, he helped Noo Halidzoks (Mother Earth) organize the world.

## In Brief – Place Names

Place names are not meaningless sounds, as there is astounding diversity within Canada's Indigenous communities. Place names embody stories about a particular area; they offer valuable insights into history and provide clues about Canada's cultural and social development. For

example, *Toronto* evolved from the Haudenosaunne name, *Tkaronto* which means ‘where there are trees standing in the water.’ It describes how the Mohawk used to drive stakes into narrow waterways to create fish dams. *Canada* comes from the Haudenosaunne word, ‘*Kanata*’ which means ‘village’ or ‘settlement’.

### **The Following Names are Derived from the Colonizers’ misguided Indigenous World View**

*Indian*: – It is ironic, that even though Christopher Columbus never set foot on North American soil, having spent his four sojourns (1492–1504) in the Caribbean (Dominican Republic), the name ‘Indian’ went from the bottom to the top of the world where it has been embedded for just over five hundred years.

*Amer-Indian*: – I can only respond to this name by quoting Lakota writer, Vine Deloria 1988, “We have been cursed above all other peoples in history; Natives have been saddled with anthropologists.”

*Native Canadian/American*: – These came into vogue in an attempt at political correctness because ‘Native’ has a generic meaning referring to anyone or anything at home in its place of origin. It also has negative leanings within the colonizing world view: “The Natives are restless tonight,” which implies we are a primitive, backward, ignorant people.

*Sioux*: French hybrid insult meaning ‘Enemy’. *Preferred names*: Lakota, Dakota, Nakota.

*Iroquois*: – French/Algonquian insult meaning ‘Rattlesnake’. Correct Name: Haudenosaunne ‘People of the Longhouse’.

*Eskimo*: – Eaters of Raw Meat. Correct Name: Inuit ‘original people’.

*Apache*: – Spanish corruption of a Zuni word for ‘enemy’.

*Navajo*: – Spanish version of Tewa word.

### **Conclusion**

“The white man must no longer project his fears and insecurities onto other groups, races, and counties. Before the white man can relate to others he must forego the pleasure of defining them. The white man must learn to stop viewing history as a plot against himself.” (Vine Deloria 1988, 175)

I am descended from a noble people. We are fighting hard to heal our spirits and regain our lost history and with it our names. We are not accepting of many names imposed upon us by misguided, deliberate misunderstandings and all out racism. We identify ourselves by our rich, magical, glorious original names borne out of thousands of years of walking our earth as proud Tsimshians. May Your Spirits be Strong, All My Relations. Kopet, that is all.

### **Notes**

1. After the ascension of Queen Victoria to the British throne in 1837, a royal family was introduced into the Tsimshian culture around 1850. My ancestors were intrigued with the idea of a Queen sitting on a throne surrounded by nobles, palaces and jewels. Hence, sixty thousand years of cultural history now includes a royal family. My great-great-grandmother was the first Sigydmhanga’a (Princess/Matriarch) in the House of Niis-gu-miik.
2. My ancestors did not view this sacred animal as a killer, but rather, as a saviour and keeper of our history. ‘Gitsbutwada’, in fact, means ‘Black Fish’.
3. It was also not uncommon for women to head up households. Sigydmhanga’a’s (Princess/Matriarch) played a dominant role in the tribes as leaders, negotiator/mediators, clan mothers.

4. I couldn't have said it better myself, so this section is paraphrased from Jay Miller's excellent book on Tsimshian Culture: *A Light through the Ages*. University of Nebraska Press, 1997.
5. All these items are now considered to be collectible art. In the world of my Ancestors they were simply practical, everyday items. There was, however, no reason that they should not be beautiful.
6. They are no 'original' oral narratives that I know of regarding how the names of the principal crests were assigned. Much like our acceptance that the four elements were already in place at the time of the creation of the original world, we also simply accept that principal crests' names were a given based on antiquity. The older the crest, the greater the number of times the name is found in various clan stories adds legitimacy to the claim of an 'originating' crest.
7. The term 'Shaman' is often used when referring to these very powerful people. However it is a term that comes from central Asia under the misguided notion that North America's Indigenous people came across a land bridge known as Beringia. 'Halaayt' is the umbrella word to describe all things spiritual (person, event, ceremony). A *Halaayt* could be either female or male.
8. As tribes work hard to heal after the devastation of recent history, naming most often occurs today with adults.
9. The term 'trickster' is discouraged as it is a negative term borne out of the shock of the missionaries when they discovered that Culture Hero, Raven, could be considered on the same level as Jesus Christ. The only alternative in their eyes was to imbue him with negative traits and relegate him to Satan's Den. This is a paper unto itself.

### References

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