

First Peoples: Walking with Spirits

This is our home, where the spirits of our ancestors live and where we trust our children will continue to live.

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Our oral traditions hold that we, the First Peoples of the Tongass, have lived here since time immemorial—or for more than ten thousand years according to the most recent scientific evidence. Our fervent desire is to live here for another ten thousand years and beyond. Our homeland in Southeast Alaska gives rise to our cultural values, which are grounded in a spiritual relationship to our environment, including all the living beings of the land, sea, and universe. The spirits of our ancestors also roam through our homeland.

We Tlingit are divided into two major groups, Eagles and Ravens, known as moieties. Each moiety is divided into clans, which are then further divided into house groups. Traditionally, Tlingit were required to marry someone of the opposite moiety, although this requirement has relaxed. However, children continue to follow their mothers' moiety, clan, and house membership, as did their mothers and their mothers before them.

Our clan memberships and names create bonds with our ancestors, who held the same names, and with future generations, who will also carry these names. This assures each Tlingit immortality through those who will carry their names. All members of a clan are viewed as kin even in the absence of a biological relationship. We see ourselves, not only as individuals, but as members of distinct social units through which we act collectively. We are also children, not only of our fathers, but our father's entire clan. While we maintain autonomy within our clans, the intermarriage between Raven and Eagle clans unifies us as Tlingit People.

When I introduce myself I say:

Yeidiklas'akw ka Kaa.háni yóo xát duwasáak.

My name is *Yeidiklas'okw* and *Kaa.háni*.

Cháak' naa áyá xát.

I am an Eagle.

Shungukeidí naax xát sitee.

I am from the Thunderbird Clan.

Kaawdliyaayí Hit dáx áyá xát.

I am from the House Lowered from the Sun.

Jilkaat kwáan áyá xát.

I am from the Chilkat region.

Lukaax.ádi achxán áyá xát.

I am a grandchild of the Sockeye Salmon Clan.

My Tlingit name is *Yeidiklas'okw*. It is an ancient name, which is communally owned as real property by our clan. It has been handed down through untold generations until its meaning has been lost in the shadow of time.

My ceremonial name is *Kaa.háni*, which means "Woman Who Stands in the Place of a Man." This name recalls a historical event that occurred after the introduction of rifles into our society, sometime after 1741. It was obtained when we traveled inland to Canada to trade with our neighboring tribes. We exchanged rifles for furs that were piled to the height of a rifle, and a woman conducted the transaction, which was generally carried out by men.

I am an Eagle of the Thunderbird Clan and the House Lowered from the Sun from Klukwan in the Chilkat region, which is in the northern reaches of the Lynn Canal in the north of Southeast Alaska. Although the larger society thinks of the Thunderbird as a mythological creature, we know that the Thunderbird is real and is near when we hear the sound of thunder, caused by the flapping of his wings as he flies, and when we see the lightning caused by the blinking of his eyes. He is the founder and ancestor of the Thunderbird Clan.

The name of our clan house, House Lowered from the Sun, derives from the story of a marriage between one of our ancient clan members and the Sun. She lived with the Sun but returned to our clan homeland when she became lonely for her family. To this day, our hair turns red as we age as a result of our ancestor living with the Sun.

Through my father, I am also a child of his clan, the *Lukaax.ádi*, or the Sockeye Salmon Clan of the Raven moiety. My grandfather's clan obtained the Sockeye Salmon as a crest when two of their young men fell off a canoe into the lake and were taken by the Sockeye Salmon to live with them.

Our clan crests are endowed with spirits, and in my case my spirits are the Eagle, Thunderbird, Sun, Killer Whale, Shark, White Bear, and those of my grandfather's clan, the Raven and Sockeye Salmon. Our crests symbolize our spiritual relationship to the land and our environment. Our claims to these crests and spirits provide an enduring link to our homeland and to our universe. We wrap ourselves in these spirits when we wear our ceremonial regalia, which are decorated with our clan crests and spirits.

Clan crests also reflect our history. For example, in the late 1800s a military officer known as Lieutenant Schwatga failed to adequately pay my great-great-grandfather, *Yendeiyáink*, for carrying the naval officer's supplies over Chilkoot Pass. Since names are considered real property among the Tlingit, *Yendeiyáink* took Schwatga's name and his uniform as payment for his debt, and today we Thunderbirds claim ownership of his name and wear the naval uniform as a crest. Other clans, such as the *Deisheetaan* and *Kaagwaantaan*, had encounters with the U.S. military and also claim ownership of the naval uniform for debts owed to them.

The Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian

Archaeological evidence found in a cave on Prince of Wales Island in 1996 indicates that indigenous people have lived in the Tongass for over 10,300 years. It is the aboriginal homeland of the Tlingit. The Haida Indians migrated to Alaska from the Queen Charlotte Islands off the British Columbia coast prior to the arrival of Europeans in 1741. In 1891, the U.S. Congress enacted legislation to establish a reservation for the Canadian Tsimshian people who migrated from British Columbia to Alaska.

Although we speak different languages, the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian share a rich cultural tradition that evolved from the harvest of abundant resources of the Tongass and other areas of the Northwest Coast of North America. Such resources, most notably the harvest of salmon, allowed our ancestors to establish permanent settlements and to develop one of the most complex indigenous hunting and gathering societies in North America. The ancient forests of the Tongass also greatly contributed to our culture. The earliest European visitors were awed by the monumental totem poles in front of the large wooden, plank tribal houses, which could house up to one hundred tribal members. They were impressed by the 60-foot seaworthy canoes in which the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian came to greet them with their songs and ceremonial oratory in languages they could not understand. These canoes also allowed our ancestors to traverse the coast from Prince William Sound to the northern coast of Oregon, a distance of some 1400 miles, trading for goods not readily available in our homeland.

Ceremonial Life

The persistence of our culture is most evident in our ceremonial life. When a clan member dies, we have a series of ceremonies beginning with the funeral or memorial service and a rite known as the Forty Day party.

The largest ceremony is the *ku.éex'*, which Westerners often refer to as a “potlatch.” During this ceremony, we honor our ancestors and those in our clan who have died during the past year. Both Raven and Eagle clans sponsor these *ku.éex'* ceremonies, which are primarily held during the fall, and individuals from the opposite clans are invited as guests. We invite our ancestors and deceased relatives by calling out all their names and by displaying our regalia with our crests. Bowls of food, gathered from the bounty of the land and sea, are transferred to them in the spirit world by burning the food in a fire and by giving food to the guests. During this ceremony, we may also designate a new clan leader to restore the social order that was disrupted with the loss of our previous leader. Those of the opposite clans are repaid for assisting us after the death of our clan member. Members of the host clans contribute sums ranging from \$20,000 to \$75,000. These funds, along with subsistence foods gathered from the land and sea, blankets, and a variety of commercial foods and goods, are distributed to the guests. Through these ceremonies, our bonds to other clan members are reinforced and our ties to members of the opposite moiety are renewed.

In 1982 our Elders—through our tribal organizations, the Sealaska Corporation (the Native entity created under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971), and the Sealaska Heritage Institute—implemented a new cultural activity, the first Celebration. Unlike traditional ceremonies, the Celebration is not clan-based nor are any ceremonial rites performed. Rather, we—as Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian—collectively participate in a dance festival to celebrate the survival of our culture through a tumultuous historical period, which began with the U.S. purchase of Alaska in 1867 and lasted through the first half of the twentieth century, when it seemed that our culture might be threatened with extinction. Missionaries, educators, and civil authorities alike saw our ways as heathen and deemed it best for us to learn the ways of the White Man. Many of our own grandparents, who saw the death of our

culture as inevitable in the face of our land being expropriated and the wholesale repression of our cultural values and practices, also thought it best for us to adopt the Western culture.

Today the biennial Celebrations, which are held in Juneau, have grown to be the largest cultural activity in Alaska. In June 2008, twenty-three hundred dancers dressed in traditional regalia emblazoned with clan crests performed over a three-day period. More than six thousand Natives from throughout Southeast Alaska, including many of those who had moved away, returned home to celebrate and honor our traditional culture.

Haa Aaní: Our Land

Southeast Alaska and the Tongass remain our homeland. Our traditional value of *Haa Aaní* expresses the duality of our relationship to the land in both “revering” and “utilizing” it. We believe that the land and all living creatures of the Earth and sea have spirits. When we use any natural resource, we must give thanks to the spirits and tell them how they will benefit our physical and cultural survival. When we cut a tree, we must lay a blanket on which it can fall and spread down feathers to ensure the safety of both the tree and those who are present.

A tangible sign of our spiritual relationship to the land, flora, and fauna is symbolized through our use of various plants. *S’axt’*, which is known as devil’s club (*Oplopanax horridus*), has both spiritual and medicinal healing properties. We harvest it to make medicines and use the stalks in our houses and boats to ward off evil spirits. We even put devil’s club in a canoe we made and sent to Washington DC in the summer of 2008. The canoe is on exhibition in the Oceans Hall of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. We wanted to assure the safety of those who paddled the canoe on the Potomac River. Our Southeast Alaska Native Regional Health Corporation uses devil’s club as its logo to signify its importance to our People. We have also resisted the commercial exploitation of devil’s club until we are certain that the supply and our use are protected.

Our ancestors and shamans are buried throughout our homeland and within the Tongass National Forest. Our spiritual beliefs about the deceased differ from those of most Western societies. We believe in the duality of spirits, with one dimension staying with the remains of our ancestors while the other travels to the land “Behind the Forest.” When someone dies, we say, “He has walked into the Forest.” Our Elders have directed that we do everything within our power to protect our burial sites, in particular those of our *Ixt’*, which is “One Who Walks with Spirits” but is most often translated in English as Shaman. The *Ixt’* has multiple spirit helpers, which remain at his or her burial site. Only his or her clan members are allowed to visit or care for the burial site. In 1998, the Sealaska Heritage Institute opposed the construction of a federal facility on the burial site of an *Ixt’* located outside of Juneau and has been seeking federal protection for the site, so far unsuccessfully. This concern for protecting sacred sites led the Sealaska Corporation to lobby for federal legislation that would allow Sealaska to acquire title to sacred Tlingit and Haida sites throughout Southeast Alaska under its Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) land entitlement.

The land and sea are the basis of our traditional wealth and health and provide us resources for food, clothing, and supplies. Subsistence foods nourish our body and spirits. Our ancestors taught us that when the tide goes out, our table is set. We gather everything from red ribbon and black seaweed to clams, cockles, crabs, and a favorite we call gumboots or chiton. From the seas, we fish for salmon and halibut. We hunt for seal, which provides us with meat and fat, which we render into seal oil. We use the skins to

make moccasins, vests, and other items. During the early spring, we lay hemlock branches along the beaches to catch the spawn of herring.

We gather a variety of berries and hunt for wildlife. One of the most favorite is the deer, which is also important to our people as a symbol of peace. We share our subsistence foods with our family and friends and store the surplus for our fall ceremonies. Children are taught at a very early age about our cultural value of sharing, and they are required to share their first fish, or other resources they have caught or gathered, with their relatives. The harvesting of subsistence foods creates an obligation to share your bounty with your clan members and with Elders, and this act of sharing reinforces our social ties to one another.

The land also provides resources for us to make our art for which we have become internationally known. Women weave the wool from the Mountain Goat into the famous Chilkat robes. The trees from our forest are made into totem poles, canoes, masks, dancing staffs, ceremonial hats, and a variety of other art goods.

Haa Shagóon: Our Ancestors and Our Destiny

Our cultural value of *Haa Shagóon* ties the present generation to both our past and future. We have obligations to our ancestors and responsibility for future generations. The significance of this cultural value is practiced in multiple ways, such as basket weaving. When our ancestors gathered roots from spruce trees to weave into baskets, or hats and other objects, they did not take all of the roots but left enough to ensure that the tree would live and provide benefits for the future generation. We, who enjoy the benefits of their act, must likewise ensure that we protect our natural resources for future generations.

Our ancestors, over the course of thousands of years of occupation and migrations within the region, gave names to more than three thousand sites and features throughout Southeast Alaska. We developed a strong sense of ownership of the land. When Russia sold Alaska to the United States in 1867, our clan leaders met to decide how they would protect ownership of our land. Instead of waging a war they knew they could not win, they hired a lawyer and sent him to Washington DC to convey to the federal government that Alaska Natives owned the land; if the United States wanted to buy Alaska, they should buy it from the rightful owners.

The 1867 Treaty of Cession, the Organic Act of 1884, and the Statehood Act of 1959 acknowledged landownership rights of Alaska Natives but did not outline how aboriginal land rights would be addressed. In 1968, the U.S. Court of Claims paid the Tlingit and Haida Indians just over \$7 million for the taking of lands within the Tongass National Forest and Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve.

In 1971, with ANCSA, Congress recognized our aboriginal title to the remaining land in Southeast Alaska but conveyed title to only a portion of our homeland. Our leaders wanted full ownership of our lands and promoted the use of corporations to implement the settlement. They rejected the reservation system under which the federal government holds lands in trust for other Indian tribes. Sealaska Corporation is now the regional entity in Southeast Alaska, and it owns over 300,000 acres of lands and another 300,000 acres of village corporation subsurface lands. Village and urban corporations, which each received 23,000 acres, were established for thirteen communities in Southeast Alaska. Because non-Natives were the predominant population in five communities, Congress did not award land to the Natives

within Haines, Tenakee, Wrangell, Petersburg, and Ketchikan. Native residents there are still seeking their land entitlements in Congress.

Cultural Survival

Our identity was challenged by others who came to our land and who sought to eradicate our traditional culture. Our shamans were punished and sent to prisons for practicing their trade. Missionaries and the federal government established boarding schools where Native languages and culture were not allowed. In 1944 I was kidnapped from my grandparents, who were living in Petersburg, and I was taken more than 100 miles away to a Presbyterian boarding school known as Haines House. My Tlingit mother (actually my biological aunt) used to “rent” me from this Christian school—or orphanage—so that I could spend time with her. It took my family three years to get me out of the school.

Fortunately, the Tlingit and Haida continued to practice their ceremonies, sometimes in hiding, as well as our subsistence economy and traditional harvests. We continued to make arts and crafts for the tourist trade. Though it seemed our culture might become extinct, the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian recognized and valued their traditional ways of life.

The Southeast Alaska Natives organized the Alaska Native Brotherhood (ANB) in 1912 and later the Alaska Native Sisterhood (ANS). Initially the ANB and ANS focused on securing landownership rights and civil rights. By the 1960s, a cultural renaissance was beginning, and Southeast Natives threw off the cloak of oppression and brought their cultural practices into the open. ANCSA provided the economic strength and organization for Southeast Natives to restore our indigenous language and to protect and revitalize our culture. We are also using our education to identify conflicts between our traditional values and the institutional forms we have adopted to serve us. We are examining ways to integrate our values into these modern institutions to ensure our cultural survival.

Our relationship to the land and to the Tongass is the basis of our cultural survival. Subsistence hunting and fishing nourishes our body and spirits, and sharing the bounty of the land with our family and community reinforces our clan ties. Our continued occupation of Southeast Alaska and our relationship and obligations to our clan and tribe explain why we have survived as Native People. Ten thousand Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian continue to live in Southeast Alaska and within the Tongass. This is our home, where the spirits of our ancestors live and where we trust our children will continue to live. We hold that the cultural diversity borne from the bounty of the Tongass is a resource to be protected for the country at large, for our People, and for future generations.