The Native American Graves Protection & Repatriation Act

Integrating Science & Stories: Tlingit Ancient History

By Rosita Kaaháni Worl, Ph.D.
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The discovery of near 10,000 year old human remains in a cave on an island in Southeast Alaska in 1996 set the stage for a remarkable encounter between Native people and scientists. This event was overshadowed by the Kennewick Man discovery which occurred in the same time period. The Kennewick Man conflict between scientists and Native Americans is well known by those whose professional work is affected by the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA), but the events surrounding the Alaska discovery are relatively unknown.

Simply put, Native people in Washington state demanded the return of Kennewick Man for reburial under NAGPRA, and scientists challenged the federal law in court, arguing for the need to study the remains.

Relationships between Native Americans and scientists in the Kennewick case were confrontational. The Alaska scientists, on the other hand, embraced NAGPRA and were granted permission to study the human remains. The interrelationships among the Natives, scientists, and governmental representatives in the Alaska case were cordial.

The Alaska case is an exemplary model of consultation and collaboration between scientists and Native Americans. It demonstrates that a mutually respectful interrelationship in which both Natives and scientists participate equally can facilitate a
successful consultation process. However, rather than attempting
to answer questions as to why one discovery was marked by
confrontation and the other by cooperation between scientists
and Native Americans, I would like to focus on that aspect of
NAGPRA that gives legal validity to the oral traditions and
traditional knowledge of Indigenous populations and demonstrate
how oral traditions parallel and enhance scientific theories of
Southeast Alaska prehistory.

Oral Traditions and Traditional Knowledge

NAGPRA allows Indian tribes to show cultural affiliation by a
preponderance of the evidence based on “geographical, kinship,
biological, archeological, anthropological, linguistic, folkloric,
oral traditional, historical, or other relevant information or expert
opinion.”

This legislative mandate placed oral traditions and
traditional knowledge on an equal playing field with scientific
evidence. It did not necessarily mean, however, that scientists
would yield to this legal dictum. That archaeologists do not
uniformly accept oral traditions has been reported by David Hurst
Thomas (2000). However, Thomas reported that a number of
archaeologists are reconsidering the value of Native oral traditions
and questioning whether these accounts might provide otherwise
unavailable perspectives on events of importance to them.

Irrespective of the question surrounding the validity of
Native oral traditions, NAGPRA requires that oral traditions be
considered in cultural affiliation determinations. Such was the
case in 2001 in which the NAGPRA Review Committee found
that the preponderance of the evidence indicated a relationship of
shared group identity between the 9,300 year old human remains
from Spirit Cave, Nevada, and the Fallon Paiute-Shoshone Tribe.
The Committee supported repatriation of the human remains
and funerary objects to the tribe despite the absence of conclusive
archaeological evidence demonstrating a relationship.

Colin G. Calloway (2003) proposes that oral traditions can complement, illuminate, and breathe life into dry archaeological data. He suggests that oral traditions contain echoes of how ancient people understood their origins, themselves, and the world into which they came. This characterization describes the Alaska case in which both scientists and Native people are explaining the finds associated with the On Your Knees Cave discovery.

On Your Knees Cave

In the summer of 1996, paleontologist Timothy Heaton discovered human remains in a cave, popularly called On Your Knees Cave, located on Prince of Wales Island in the southern region of Southeast Alaska. He advised U.S. Forest Service archaeologist Terry Fifield, who immediately contacted several tribes in compliance with NAGPRA.

The law requires that the intentional removal from or excavation of Native American cultural items, which include human remains, from federal or tribal lands for the purposes of discovery, study, or removal of such items is permitted only after consultation with the appropriate Indian tribe.

The Tlingit determined that the NAGPRA consultations should proceed with two tribes located in the immediate vicinity. The Klawock Cooperative Association and Craig Community Association agreed to grant permission to study the human remains. In the following seasons, Tlingit interns and volunteers also participated in the archaeological investigations, led by E. James Dixon, curator of archaeology at the Denver Museum of Natural History.

The success of the consultation process and the granting of permission to study the human remains can be attributed to both parties—the government officials and the Tlingit themselves. Fifield, the Forest Service archaeologist who initiated
the consultation, is well known and regarded by the Tlingit on Prince of Wales Island. It undoubtedly helped immensely that he contacted the tribes immediately upon the discovery of the human remains. The Tlingit have a long history of dealing with the federal government. Their political astuteness was predisposed by a complex social organization and relationships based on autonomous clans. They began to unite both militarily and politically to deal with Westerners from their earliest confrontation beginning in the early 1800s. They have a history of dealing with Westerners and governmental officials to protect their interests. By the time of this discovery, they were also familiar with NAGPRA. This historical, political expertise also greatly facilitated the consultation process.

Some of the younger Tlingit were initially ambivalent about
allowing scientific studies and some were violently opposed to any investigations. Elders and clan leaders attending a conference on historical and sacred sites at which the Forest Service archaeologist presented a report on the cave findings endorsed the scientific work. They were pleased that the scientific findings relating to the antiquity of the human remains corroborated their contention that the Tlingit have owned and occupied Southeast Alaska “since time immemorial.”

Some of the Elders concluded that the individual found at the cave site had given himself to the present-day Tlingit in order that they might learn more about their ancestors. This belief is grounded in the concept of Haa Shuká, in which the Tlingit hold that the present generation has direct ties and responsibilities to their ancestors as well as to future generations. Haa Shuká links the past and the future generations, and in the Tlingit way of thinking, it was logical to seek knowledge from an ancestor.

The scientific findings were significant and support a Pacific coastal migration to the Americas. According to E. James Dixon (1999: 119, 180), the isotope analysis indicates that the diet of the individual found at On Your Knees Cave was dependent on marine resources. The archaeological data also inferentially demonstrates that humans living in Southeast Alaska were using watercraft to harvest their food and to conduct trade on the mainland to obtain resources that were not available on the island by 9,200 B.P.

**Long Ago Person Found**

The ideological construct of Haa Shuká also guided the Tlingit in another case. It involved the discovery of the human remains of a young man, who had perished 550 to 600 years ago on the glacial ice fields between Alaska and Canada in northwestern British Columbia, in 1999 (Beattie, et. al. 2000: 129-147).

It must be emphasized, however, that the Tlingit have resisted activities that involve the disturbance of shaman graves. The
spirits of shamans are powerful and remain with the body and their paraphernalia even after their death. In one instance, the federal government offered the Juneau Tlingit $1 million if they would drop their opposition to proposed development at a site at which a shaman was buried. The Tlingit declined. They were also successful in stopping the development at this site.

NAGPRA did not apply to the remains discovered on Canadian territory in the Tatshenshini River watershed. However, the coastal Tlingit sought a meeting with the Canadian Indians of the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations to discuss reburial plans and disposition of the artifacts found with the human remains. They assumed that he was a coastal Tlingit.

The Tlingit recalled a song that they had obtained in trade from the Tutchone Interior Indians. The song was adopted to commemorate the injury and loss of one of their ancestors, Kaakaldeiní, who died returning to the coast from a trading expedition into the Interior. The Tlingit believed that the remains of the young man found on the glacial ice fields were Kaakaldeiní. They were surprised to learn that the Interior Indians thought that “Long Ago Person Found,” as the young man found on the glacier was named, originated from the Interior.

The Interior Indians wanted to have the human remains cremated as well as the artifacts found with the body. The coastal Tlingit, on the other hand, in keeping with their beliefs surrounding Haa Shuká, argued for the need to study the objects and to maintain them for future generations. A compromise was adopted in which it was agreed that the human remains would be cremated along with his medicine bundle while the clothing and other objects would be held for study.

Both groups of Indians concurred that scientific studies of Long Ago Person Found should be allowed. They also agreed that blood samples should be gathered from both the Northern Tlingit and the Interior Indians to determine kinship ties with Long Ago Person Found. Sealaska Heritage Institute and the Champagne
and Aishihik First Nations sponsored a program to test 250 Native people for DNA matches, and the DNA results showed nine people from Alaska and eight people from Canada are related to Long Ago Person Found.

The Tlingit, through the Sealaska Heritage Institute, are supporting ongoing studies including the work of two ethnobotonists, who have been researching the pollen associated with Long Ago Person Found. The isotope analyses of bone and muscle show that more than 90 percent of his dietary protein was from marine resources, and he more than likely was on the coast shortly before he died (James H. Dickson, et.al. 2004: 481-486). The Tlingit also sent a traditional Haida basket weaver to Whitehorse, Canada, to study the woven hat. She has reintroduced the weaving style, which had been lost, to contemporary weavers.
Tlingit Ancient History

Frederica de Laguna (1960) found that the Tlingit classified their oral traditions into different categories. These stories were grounded in various geographical regions or sites and in personal names. Their history included the mythical period which recorded the creation of the world. A second category was represented by clan histories that recorded both supernatural and natural events. They described their origins, migrations, acquisition of crests, and interrelationships with other clans.

Personal names were derived from legendary or historical events and these stories were kept alive by succeeding generations of individuals who acquired these names and who were thought to be reincarnations of those who participated in the event giving rise to the name. Certain localities had a special meaning and quality of reality because they were the sites of clan history. Names, including personal and place names, and stories are owned by clans and are meticulously transferred through the generations. De Laguna surmises that the clan provides a unity to geography and history, a “logic,” which is more important than a purely spatial and temporary framework.

John R. Swanton of the Bureau of American Ethnology collected a series of Tlingit oral traditions in the early 1900s, and he was the first to record that the two major divisions of the Tlingit—the Ravens and Eagle/Wolf—may have originally stemmed from two separate populations (Swanton 1908: 407). George Emmons, who was a naval officer stationed in Southeast Alaska during the 1880s and 1890s, was greatly interested in Tlingit culture. Besides gathering a significant collection of Tlingit objects and more often from gravesites, he wrote extensively about the Tlingit Indians. He also speculated that the two exogamous matrilineal bodies “may have originated from the meeting and intermarriage of possibly two divisions … possibly ethnic stocks” (Emmons 1991:8).
Both Swanton and Emmons also record that the Tlingit reported to them that they found an older population when they arrived in Southeast Alaska. From the oral traditions, Swanton suggests that the ancient population were of the Raven clans. Emmons cites a prevalent belief held by the Elders he interviewed that the earliest people to reach Southeast Alaska came from the sea and settled on Dall Island off the southwestern coast of Prince of Wales Island, which is the location of On Your Knees Cave. The group that arrived from the sea became the ancestors of the Teikweidi, an Eagle clan. The oral traditions record that the older population was joined by other people who migrated to the coast from the interior.

My research supports the oral traditions collected by Swanton and Emmons that propose that the present-day Tlingit moiety divisions represent two separate populations. The oral histories collected from both Raven and Eagle clans suggest that they arrived in Southeast Alaska via different routes and at various time periods.

The initial colonization of the various communities also appears to have been representatives of a single group representing either a Raven or an Eagle clan. For example, the oral traditions record that the Raven Kiks.adi established the community which later became known as Sitka. The early settlements contained one large community house which was considerably larger than the traditional houses described in the literature around the end of the eighteenth century. The household population consisted of two to eight families (Tollefson 1976: 20). The initial group settling in a geographic area claimed ownership of these lands, which they continued to hold even after other groups joined them. A study conducted by Goldschmidt and Haas (1998) found that in 1946 clans continued to hold firm title to their lands even with the presence of multiple clans within a community.
My work also confirms the oral traditions collected by Swanton and Emmons in recognizing that the Raven clans represent an older population than the Eagle clans. From my study, I identified four major Raven groups. I was unable to establish linkages uniting all Raven clans or to demonstrate that they arose from a single group, which suggested to me a greater antiquity than the Eagle clans. I was able to demonstrate that the Eagle clans emerged from a single group, and at one time, collectively identified themselves as Shangukeidí, a designation which survives today as a name of a clan.

Two common migration themes are evident in Tlingit oral traditions. One describes the Tlingit moving northward from Tsimshian territory while somewhat later, other groups coming from the interior down the Skeena, Nass, Stikine, and Taku rivers. A northward migration including both Raven and Eagle clans occurred.

A closer analysis of the oral traditions reveals that the Eagle clans record their migration from the interior to the coast and then a northward movement. The exception is the Teikweidí which is the early group thought to have arrived on the coast from the sea. The Raven clans, however, trace their northward migration from the Nass and Skeena region.

The ancient movements and settlements are also recorded on ancient rock art which is found throughout the coastal region. They attest to the presence of the early Tlingit and are interpreted as “markers” of land ownership. They also reflect the relationship that the early settlers had established with their environment. They depict wildlife from both the land and sea. The rock art also records trade items, such as the tináa or copper shield that demonstrate the contacts that were established among the coastal and mainland groups.
Glaciations

By 12,000 years ago most of the coastline had been deglaciated. However, during the past 10,000 years, alpine glaciers formed and advanced during two to three periods in the Northwest coast area (Ames and Maschner 1999: 49):

- First before 7,000 years ago;
- Second between 4,500 and 2,000 years ago;
- Last began about 500 years ago and ended in early years of the 20th century.

The ancient history of the Tlingit records both the advance of glaciers and sea waters or floods. The Tlingit identified these glacial advances as Lingít Aaní Kúxdei a Keewlik’its’ or “The World Tipped Back on Its Axis.” This phenomenon witnessed by the early Tlingit may be explained by isostatic changes in which the land goes up and down and which is accompanied by changes in sea levels. As glacial ice builds, it depresses and forces the land beneath it and
adjacent to it downward while land some distance away is forced upward.

These glacial upheavals are reported in oral traditions and are accompanied by migration stories. Herman Kitka, a 90-year-old clan leader of the Sitka Kaagwaantaan, tells that the last ice age (500 years ago?) began with “winter the year round, not really cold, only snowing everyday.” He reports that they “moved away from the winter year-round areas and kept moving south as the ice fields came close.” They settled near “giant trees” and remained in this land with different seasons, which we assume to be south of the Alaska and perhaps Canadian coast, until the ice fields started to disappear in the north.

The accounts of their northward return route are precise with Elders citing specific geographical regions and locations at which they stopped and settled before continuing their northward movement. Clan oral traditions and songs also tell that those who returned from the interior to the coast did so when the rivers were all but blocked by glaciers, and people had to pass under ice bridges that have since disappeared.

After the retreat of the glaciers, the Tlingit began to expand along the Gulf Coast as part of a general northward movement. The Haida movement into Alaska from Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands) displaced the Southern Tlingit groups which added to the pressure of a northward migration.

**Crests**

The greater antiquity of the Raven clans was also suggested to me by their crests. Crests, and the spiritual dimensions they embody, are obtained through encounters with wildlife. Many of the wildlife that the Tlingit encountered were adopted as crests and are considered to be ancestors of their clans (others are spirit helpers or guardian spirits). Salmon is perhaps the most critical resource to the Tlingit, and the fact that Raven clans own all salmon crests,
including the sockeye, king, coho, and dog salmon, supports the notion that the Ravens were present at the coast at an earlier time period than the Eagle clans. They secured the rights to the salmon crests prior to the arrival of the Eagles. The only maritime crests claimed by the Eagle clans include the killer whale, shark, and porpoise (Worl 1998).

**Art**

Bolstering the greater antiquity of Raven clans was a surprise find I discovered in my examination of the Tlingit ethnographic objects at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. I had classified the collection according to the Tlingit social organization, and I was very astonished to see the greater complexity and sophistication of Raven crest designs. On the other hand, the Eagle
crests and objects appeared to be simple or “primitive” in contrast to
the art symbolizing Raven clans.

Conclusion
Tlingit oral traditions support the notion that they reached
Southeast Alaska along a coastal route followed by a later migration
from the interior to the coast. The stories also describe a northward
movement along the coast into Southeast Alaska. The oral accounts
tell of glacial advances and flooding and the retreat of the Tlingit
into the interior and to the south. The ancient history records a
return and migration northward along the coast as the glacial ice
receded. Periodic glacial advances and retreats are also recorded in
the scientific literature, but we are unable to determine which ice
advances were associated with the recorded oral traditions. We are
certain, however, that humans were present in Southeast Alaska at
least 10,000 years ago when the coast was free of ice and that they
remained on the coast since that time.

The ancient histories suggest that the Tlingit emerged
from two populations with one arriving in Southeast Alaska earlier
than the other. The archaeological evidence describes different
technological traditions evolving or arriving in Southeast Alaska at
various periods, but whether they represented different populations
is not known. Recent DNA studies reveal that Native peoples have
lived in Southeast Alaska for more than 10,000 years and that the
Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian are descendant populations from the
earliest Indigenous inhabitants.

In the DNA study in Southeast Alaska, NAGPRA required
consultation, but it is clear that collaboration between scientists
and Native people went far beyond the legal requirements and
resulted in multiple benefits. Native people endorsed scientific
research that did not involve their shamans. They contributed their
financial resources to support the scientific investigations. They
also participated in these activities based on their own traditional
beliefs and assumptions which were respected by academic and governmental scientists. The scientists encouraged the participation of Native people in their investigations. They also demonstrated receptiveness to Native oral traditions to complement their own findings. Through these collaborative efforts, we are learning more about the colonization and settlement of Southeast Alaska.

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