

Remembering 10,000 Years of History: The Origins and Migrations of the Gitksan

Heather Harris

Simgi'get, Sigid'm Hanak, Guba Wilxsasxw: Chiefs, Women Chiefs, Chief's Heirs. My name is Heather Harris. I am Cree-Métis in origin, but have lived for many years among the Gitksan of Kispiox Village where the Kispiox and Skeena Rivers meet.

I will begin. *La'oo'ii*, a long time ago, in the time before time, our ancestors lived in a place of much darkness where creatures that are now extinct abounded. It is in that time before time that *Wiiget*—Great Man, Raven—came among the people of the Northwest. He brought light to the people and formed much of the earth as we now know it. The stories the Gitksan tell of Raven's time we call *andamatlasxw*. Some of these stories may be true and some of them may not, but they give us an explanation for why the world we know now is so different than the one remembered then.

Then, after the time before time, when *Wiiget* lived, came time as we know it today, although the world was not yet quite as we now know it. The words of the Bella Bella people regarding the beginning of time as we now know it were recorded by Franz Boas. They told him, "In the beginning there was nothing but water and ice and a narrow strip of shore-line" (Boas 1916: 883). The stories the Gitksan tell of the time we have lived in since then, they call *adaa'ox*, which translates literally as "truth" I will call them oral histories. These stories tell the history of the peoples of the Northwest from the time we came into the area, to what is now called Alaska and British Columbia. This was when the great ice was receding.

The Gitksan know the *adaa'ox* are true because they tell them over and over at home with their families and in public at potlatches, which they call feasts. In the feast, when they tell their history, there are hundreds of witnesses who also know the histories and will politely correct any mistakes. In this way the *adaa'ox* are kept accurate through the millennia. The Gitksan also know the *adaa'ox* are true histories because scientific knowledge from the Western ways of knowing is beginning to confirm them.

When our elders tell their *adaa'ox*, they say, *la'oo'ii*—"a long time ago." They do not say "10,000 years ago" or "8,000 years B.P.," as I will do, but then I am a product of both their knowledge system and the Western system. Dates will help us to communicate and understand each other because that is the way the Western understanding of the past works. What the elders can do is give chronologies. Each elder knows dozens, maybe hundreds, of *adaa'ox*. They can only put dates on those that occurred since the White people came and began naming years, but they can always tell you which events occurred before and after other events. Often, the elders will indicate roughly when in their history an event occurred by the use of important time markers such as, "before the flood," "soon after the flood," or "when the people first lived at Tx'emlax'amid." Do not be deceived when the elders say, "not too long ago" for this can mean 500 or 1,000 years ago. They see that as not long ago in their perception of historical time because most of Gitksan elders can tell their history stretching back to what Western science calls the late Pleistocene and early Holocene.

The Gitksan and other peoples of the Northwest consider the *adaa'ox* as the exclusive property of the families involved in the event related. If I do not belong to a family that was involved in a particular historical incident, I cannot relate that incident without permission. Many *adaa'ox* have been written down and published by Barbeau (1928, 1929, 1961), Boas (1895a,b; 1916), Garfield and Forrest (1961), Harris (1974), Swanton (1905, 1909), Tate (cited in Maud 1993), Teit (1921a,b), Wright (n.d.), and others. This actually breaks the laws of the Gitksan and other peoples of the Northwest. The people are generally happy though that so many *adaa'ox* were recorded by these anthropologists from elders who are no longer living because the stories are not being passed on orally as they once were. For 80 years or more now, school, work, and nuclear family housing have separated elders from young people, interfering in the way these histories were once passed down.



Figure 1. Hagwilget Canyon. Although the archaeological evidence has demonstrated only 5,000 years of human habitation at Hagwilget Canyon, the oral histories of the Gitksan indicate that their ancestors resided there at least 10,000 years. (Photo: H. Harris)

Adaa'ox can be told in versions of differing lengths with greater or lesser amounts of detail. While testifying in the Delgamuk land claim case, T'enimgyet—Art Matthews, of the Wolf Clan of Kitwanga, said that a complete cycle of *adaa'ox* can take four months to tell and can contain the *yuu xamtxw*—wisdom, and the *gan didils*—way of life or culture of the people (1988: 4524). I have listened to my *hlumxs* (in-law), Antgwulilibiksx—Mary Johnson, of the Fireweed Clan of Kispiox, tell an abbreviated version of her *adaa'ox* for six days. The best known of these are the short versions told to children and anthropologists. These are the type that are published. I have probably heard or read at least 600 of these stories, but that is a small part of what there is to hear.

I will now tell you more about how the Gitksan and their neighbours see history. Each matrilineal kinship unit, which the people call a House, has the responsibility to keep its own history. The elders of each House can tell you their history in chronological order, usually from very early times, the late Pleistocene or early Holocene, to the present. The stories sound much like the stories in the Old Testament of the Bible, recording the history of individuals, families, tribes, clans, and peoples. These stories often relate momentous geological events, such as landslides, volcanic eruptions, the precipitous draining of glacial lakes, and “the flood” caused by sea level rise, melting glaciers and marine intrusions. They record momentous social events such as migrations, territorial discoveries, and wars. They also record the peoples' relationship with those powers Westerners might call “supernatural,” but which the people see as part of the natural world.

I will tell you very briefly the history of the Gitksan as it can be traced back through time by putting together the stories of all the Gitksan Houses. I must give credit to Susan Marsden, who is now the Curator of the Museum of Northern British Columbia in Prince Rupert, for initiating the enormous task of putting the histories of all the Houses together (Marsden 1987). My own work develops what Susan began and emphasizes the early postglacial period.

Now I will begin. At the beginning of time as we know it now, before the Gitksan were called Gitksan, their Raven and Wolf Clan ancestors were the first to come into the Northwest when the land was new, before there were trees. The ice was just leaving the land at that time and there were large lakes in the river valleys, such as the one in the Skeena Valley that was called the Very

Oldest Lake (Maud 1993: 95; Boas 1916: 346). According to geomorphologist Allan Gottesfeld (pers. comm. 1994), the existence of this glacial lake spanned the time from 9,500 to 9,300 B.P.

When the Wolf and Raven clan people first came to the Northwest, they came from the north by interior routes, possibly south down the valley of the Liard and west along the valley of the Peace (Marsden 1987: 28). They were said to be speaking a Dene language at that time (Boas 1895a: 555). They settled then in an open tundra area at the headwaters of the Stikine, Nass, and Skeena that the Gitksan call *Laxwiiyip*, "concerning big land." *Laxwiiyip* is in what is now the territory of the Tahltan people and it was near Mount Edziza where we have been gathering obsidian from earliest times (Fladmark 1986: 49; Smith 1971: 201). The *adaa'ox* relate how both hunting and fishing were important to those ancient people. In these early years they often built their communities at canyon and other good fishing locations although initially these places were at a much higher elevation than today, the valleys being filled with sediment sometimes more than 100 metres deep (Ian Spooner, pers. comm. 1994). Their villages were built with the Raven Clan living on one side of a river and the Wolf Clan on the other.

The early Wolf and Raven Clan peoples eventually moved down the Stikine River to the coast where they encountered the Tlinget-speaking Eagle Clan people. Wolf and Raven people built paired villages with the Eagles now too. Mostly because of a series of wars, the Wolf, Raven, and Eagle Clan peoples began moving south along the coast where they encountered Ts'imsian-speaking people already well settled in the Metlakatla area. Some Wolf and Raven Clan people travelled overland to the Upper Nass and Skeena where they often settled at canyon locations.

The Wolf, Raven, and Eagle Clan people began moving up the valleys of the Skeena and the Nass. At the up-river canyon villages, such as Kuldo'o, Gisga'ga'as and Hagwilget, the Wolf and Raven ancestors were replaced by the Ts'imsian-speaking people. These people came from very ancient villages on the coast, such as Kadu and Ts'a'os (Marsden 1987: 64). These ancient places may have been located in areas that were glacial refugia (see Fladmark 1979: 55; 1982: 99; 1986:15). The earliest remembered ancestors of the House that once adopted me came from these coastal people, led by a chief called Ts'ooda. One of the names that was used by Ts'ooda's family in these early postglacial times, over 10,000 years ago, is still being used today. That name is Ts'iiwa, held by my adoptive uncle, Walter Blackwater of the House of 'Niist. We know that Ts'iiwa lived over 10,000 years ago because there are stories about him that occurred before the Great Flood—the precipitous sea-level rise dated by Western science to between 10,500 and 9,500 years ago (Daryl Fedje, pers. comm. 1995). Ts'ooda's people were said to be speaking the Ts'imsian language when they first came up the Skeena from the coast (Wright 1986: 17).

The coastal people had a different kind of social organization than the Wolf and Raven Clan people who came from the northern interior. The coastal people did not have clans; they had smaller kinship units and lived in settled villages with exclusively owned territories nearby. When they joined with the matrilineal Wolf, Raven, and Eagle Clan peoples, the foundation was laid for the social structure the Gitksan have today. The Gitksan Nation is made up of a number of *wilp*, or Houses, that are matrilineal kin groups. Each House is politically independent and owns territories, fishing sites, crests, hereditary names, and other property. Through common historical ancestry, each House belongs to one of four clans: Wolf, Frog-Raven, Fireweed-Killer Whale, or Eagle.

These early peoples began to spread throughout the Northwest, discovering uninhabited lands, taking them as their own House territories, settling there, joining the power of the people with the power of the land. The peoples of the Northwest do not war for land. Land can only leave the House in compensation for very serious crimes such as murder, although even this is very rarely done, so most territories have been in the same House for millennia. It was very early on, maybe 6,000 or 7,000 years ago, that most of the land was taken up (Marsden 1987: 30). After that time, when people moved, they often had to join clan relatives because they could not find empty land (Barbeau n.d.: 56).

Sometime after the Wolf, Raven, and Eagle Clan people settled much of the Northwest, an event occurred that gave rise to the origin of the Gisgaast, the Fireweed Clan, the only clan that originated in the area. This event may have occurred over 7,000 years ago (Marsden 1987: 98). At that time, Wolf and Raven Clan peoples lived in paired villages (Barbeau 1961: 17; n.d.: 42, 99; Boas 1916: 270, 300). They intermarried but sometimes fought each other. The Fireweed



Figure 2. The mountain, *Stekyoodenhl*, where an enormous landslide took place around 6,000 B.P. The Gitksan say it was caused by the Mountain Goat People taking revenge for abuses they suffered at the hands of people. (Photo: H. Harris)

ancestors may have been Wolf Clan people. They fought with their Raven Clan in-laws and were all wiped out except a young woman in menstrual seclusion and her grandmother. This young woman, Ska'wa', founded the Fireweed Clan.

The descendants of Ska'wa' founded Tx'emlax'amid, a very large village located just downriver on the opposite bank of the Skeena from where Hazelton is now. There they were joined by their former enemies, the Raven Clan, and later by Wolf Clan peoples. The people thrived at Tx'emlax'amid for many centuries, possibly from around 7,000 B.P. until they were forced to scatter into smaller groups by a downturn in the climate and increased snowfall around 4,000 B.P., a period called the Little Ice Age or Neoglacial by Western science (Ryder 1986: 1300). At Tx'emlax'amid, this was a time of cultural florescence. Throughout the Northwest, at Tx'emlax'amid, Hagwilget (Ames 1979), Gitselasxw (Allaire 1979; Coupland 1988), and the many communities in Prince Rupert Harbour (Inglis and MacDonald 1979), what is known as the Northwest Coast Culture became established.

The time at Tx'emlax'amid was generally a time of peace and prosperity, but major disruptions came in the forms of a huge landslide on the nearby mountain, Stekyoodenhlxw (Figure 2) (Mathewes 1987). An enormous debris slide displaced the lake at its foot (Gottesfeld and Gottes-

feld 1986) and a climate amelioration described as a snowfall in summer (Barbeau 1928: 240; Harris 1974: 64), were the events that ended Tx'emlax'amid. When the people were forced to scatter from Tx'emlax'amid, they went out in small groups, claiming all remaining pieces of empty land and establishing most of the Gitksan villages we know today. Some joined relatives in other Northwest nations, such as the Ts'imsian, Nisga'a, and Wet'suwet'en.

While the people lived at Tx'emlax'amid, there were other communities, large and small, scattered throughout Gitksan territory, some just as ancient and enduring. These include Gitangasx, Blackwater, Anlagasemdeex, Gisga'g a'a, and Kaldo'o. The locations of all but one of these are well known by the Gitksan, and none has been investigated archaeologically.

Since the time of the dispersal from Tx'emlax'amid, social factors seem to be of greater consequence than environmental ones in most *adaa'ox*. This may be because the level of technological sophistication allowed for easier adaptation to climatic variation. Any difficulties in coping with the cold of the Little Ice Age of the 15th to 17th centuries A.D. have not been recorded in the *adaa'ox*, as was the case with the climatic deterioration of 4,000 years ago. Catastrophic geological events, of course, have continued to be recorded in the *adaa'ox*. Two such events of recent years include the volcanic eruption on the Nass River about 300 years ago (Barbeau n.d.: 79-83; 97), and the landslide that blocked the Bulkley River about A.D. 1860 (Jenness 1943: 477; Joseph 1985,).

Many intriguing questions remain to be investigated by means of bringing oral history together with archaeological and paleoenvironmental evidence. It is possible that archaeology could reveal events that are not recorded in the oral histories of the Northwest. However, the oral historical record of the area is so extensive and detailed that it is more likely that what archaeology might reveal, which oral history does not, are changes in technology and other incremental developments, rather than the momentous events recorded in the *adaa'ox*. The oral histories of the people of the Northwest could be very valuable in guiding scientific research. For example, from the oral histories I have heard, on more than one occasion and in more than one location, the earth turned over, destroying a village and killing people (Barbeau 1929: 80; Garfield and Forrest 1961: 23). I have heard very detailed descriptions of how the people had to flee sudden rises in sea level far inland from where the ocean is today (Boas 1916: 346). I have heard of ash covering a village half-way to the house tops (Barbeau n.d.: 60). I have heard that, for a time, the Skeena River flowed south to Kitamaat rather than west to where Prince Rupert is now (Cove and MacDonald 1987: 136). And in one *adaa'ox* of the Ts'imsian people who lived for a time among the Haida, it was said:

The people of this village heard a distant rumbling. It gradually grew louder, and the earth began to tremble. Soon a burning light appeared on the mountaintop; then a huge roar, and fire burst from all the hills and rolled down upon the Haida village. It was swift, and happened so quickly that the people had no way of escaping this river of fire, which rushed like water down the mountains. All were killed except a young girl (in puberty seclusion with her aunt)... (Barbeau 1961: 12-13).

Such clear descriptions of potentially datable geological events recorded in the oral histories of the peoples of the Northwest warrant further investigation.

To the Gitksan, the *adaa'ox* are the foundation of their history and speak for themselves. But the Gitksan also realize full well that few Westerners accept them as accurate histories. If Westerners are ignorant of the validity of the *adaa'ox*, it usually is of little relevance to the Gitksan, but at times that ignorance can have serious consequences. One such time was during Delgamuukw vs the Queen—the land claim suit of the Gitksan and their neighbours, the Wet'suwet'en. The elders took great care to explain to the court that being able to tell the history of one's family occupation of their land for thousands of years validates their ownership. The chiefs had archaeological and paleoenvironmental evidence to reinforce their claim for the truth of their histories, but the court dismissed the *adaa'ox* as myth.

The Gitksan are interested in the use of archaeology to validate their histories, but there are no Gitksan archaeologists, and few archaeologists currently working in Gitksan territory.

REFERENCES CITED

- Allaire, L.
1979 The Cultural Sequence at Gitaus: A Case of Prehistoric Acculturation. In *Skeena River Prehistory*, edited by Richard Inglis and George MacDonald, pp. 18-52. National Museum of Man Mercury Series, No. 87, Ottawa.
- Ames, K.
1979 Report on Excavation GhSv2, Hagwilget Canyon. In *Skeena River Prehistory*, edited by Richard Inglis and George MacDonald, pp. 181-218. National Museum of Man Mercury Series, No. 87, Ottawa.
- Barbeau, M.
1928 *The Downfall of Temlaham*. Macmillan Company of Canada, Toronto.
1929 Totem Poles of the Gitksan, Upper Skeena River, British Columbia. *Department of Mines, Bulletin 61*, National Museum of Man, Ottawa.
1961 Tsimshian Myths. *Anthropological Series 51*, National Museum of Canada, Bulletin 174, Ottawa.
n.d. Wolf Clan Invaders. Unpublished manuscript. Library of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en, Hazelton, British Columbia.
- Boas, F.
1895a Traditions of the Ts'ets'au't. *Journal of American Folk Lore* 9(35):257-268.
1895b Traditions of the Ts'ets'au't. *Journal of American Folk Lore* 10(36):35-48.
1916 Tsimshian Mythology. *Thirty-first Annual Report of the U.S. Bureau of Ethnology, 1909-1910*, Washington, D.C.
- Coupland, G.
1988 *Prehistoric Culture Change at Kitselas Canyon*. pp. 29-1037 Mercury Series No. 138, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Ottawa.
- Cove, J., and G. MacDonald
1987 *Tsimshian Narratives*, Volume I. Mercury Series No. 3, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Ottawa.
- Fladmark, K.
1979 Routes: Alternative Migration Corridors For Early Man in North America. *American Antiquity* (44) 1: 55-69.
1982 An Introduction to the Prehistory of British Columbia. *Canadian Journal of Archaeology* 6: 95-156.
1986 *British Columbia Prehistory*. National Museum of Man, Ottawa.
- Garfield, V., and L. Forrest
1961 *The Wolf and the Raven: Totem Poles of Southeastern Alaska*. University of Washington Press, Seattle.
- Gottesfeld, A., and L. Gottesfeld
1986 Stekyooden Landslides. Unpublished manuscript. Library of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en, Hazelton, British Columbia..
- Harris, K.B.
1974 *Visitors Who Never Left: The Origin of the People of Damelahamid*. University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver.
- Inglis, R., and G. MacDonald (editors)
1979 *Skeena River Prehistory*. Mercury Series, No. 87, National Museum of Man, Ottawa.
- Jenness, D.
1943 The Carrier Indians of the Bulkley River. *Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 133*, Anthropological Papers Number 25, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- Joseph, A.
1985 Interview notes in author's possession.
- Marsden, S.
1987 An Historical and Cultural Overview of the Gitksan. Unpublished manuscript. Library of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en, Hazelton, British Columbia.

- Mathewes, R.
1987 Paleoenvironmental Evidence of Climate Change and Human Activity in Northwestern British Columbia. Unpublished manuscript. Library of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en, Hazelton, British Columbia.
- Matthews, A., Jr.
1988 Delgamukw V. The Queen, Trial transcript Vol. 73. Library of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en, Hazelton, British Columbia.
- Maud, R.
1993 *The Porcupine Hunter and Other Stories: The Original Tsimshian Texts of Henry W. Tate*. Talonbooks, Vancouver.
- Ryder, J.M.
1986 Neoglacial History of the Stikine-Iskut Area, Northern Coast Mountains, British Columbia. *Canadian Journal of Earth Sciences* 24: 1294-1301.
- Smith, J.
1971 The Ice Mountain Microblade and Core Industry, Cassiar District, Northern British Columbia, Canada. *Arctic and Alpine Research* 8(3): 199-213.
- Swanton, J.R.
1905 Haida Texts and Myths, Skidegate Dialect. *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin* 29, Washington, D.C.
1909 Tlingit Myths and Texts. *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin* 39, Washington, D.C.
- Teit, J.
1921a Tahltan Tales. *Journal of American Folk-Lore* 34(133): 223-253.
1921b Tahltan Tales. *Journal of American Folk-Lore* 34(134): 335-356.
- Wright, W.
n.d. Men of Medeek. Unpublished manuscript. Library of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en, Hazelton, British Columbia.
- Wright, T.
1986 Commission Evidence for Delgamukw V. the Queen, Volume 1. Library of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en, Hazelton, British Columbia.