

II THE TAHLTAN PEOPLE

Introduction

The Tahltan are an Athapaskan speaking group of people who occupy the Stikine Plateau area of northern British Columbia (Figure 1) between the Coastal and Cassiar mountain ranges, and between 56° and 60° north latitude. On the basis of latitude, climate, and vegetation, the area occupied by the Tahltan is considered part of the Subarctic or Boreal Forest Region of Canada. In terms of cultural areas, the Tahltan have variously been classified as belonging to the Western Subarctic (Kroeber 1939), the Cordilleran Cultural Area (Jenness 1932), the Pacific Drainage Cultural Area (Osgood 1936), or the Yukon Subarctic Culture Area (Driver and Massey 1957). More recent studies of Athapaskan groups (McClellan 1970, McClellan and Denniston 1981, VanStone 1974) define Tahltan as belonging to the Subarctic Cordilleran Cultural Area in a classification based on physiographic units which recognize significant ecological factors.

According to linguistic studies (Krauss 1973, 1979, Krauss and Golla 1981:82) the language spoken by the Tahltan people is a dialect of a language referred to as Tahltan-Kaska-Tagish. This language has been called Nahane, a term which is no longer used in this sense. Mutually intelligible dialects of this language are (or were) also spoken by Kaska groups of the Dease and Liard drainages, the Tagish around Bennett and Tagish Lakes, and the Tlingitized Athapaskan group of the upper Taku River and the area of Atlin and Teslin Lakes. The phonology of Tahltan-Kaska-Tagish resembles that of Sekani and Beaver but is sharply distinct from both Tutchone and Slavey-Hare languages.

During the 19th century only a few brief descriptions of the Tahltan people were recorded by early explorers and travellers in the Stikine area. These include Blake (1868), Campbell (1958),

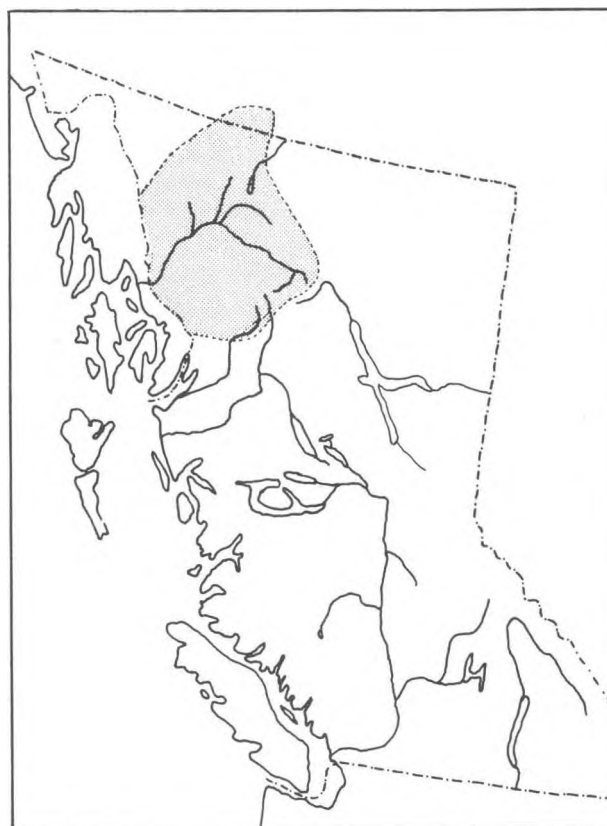


Figure 1. Location of Tahltan territories

Dawson (1888), Muir (1915), and Pike (1967). The principal ethnographers of the Tahltan are Emmons (1911) whose work was carried out in 1904 and 1906, and Teit (1906, 1912, 1919, 1921, 1956, n.d.) who appears to have spent considerable time with the Tahltan people over a period of several years from 1903 to 1915. It is unfortunate that much of the information gathered by Teit has never been published. There are also a few unpublished notes on the Tahltan recorded by the early missionaries (Palgrave n.d., Thorman n.d.) at the turn of the century.

Traditional Territories

As recorded at the turn of the century, traditional Tahltan territories included the drainage basin of the Stikine River and its tributaries as far down as the Iskut, Dease Lake and River as far down as the Cottonwood, the upper Rancheria River, the northern sources of the Nass and Skeena Rivers, and some of the southern tributaries of the Teslin and Taku Rivers including the Sheslay and Nahlin (Emmons 1911:6, Teit 1956:43).

Teit spent considerable time with a number of informants in order to locate as correctly as possible the boundaries of the territories claimed by the Tahltan (these are shown in Figure 2). On the west the boundary generally follow the axis of the Coast Range. On the north, from the most westerly point at 133° west longitude, the boundary runs northeasterly parallel to the Taku and Nakina Rivers to near the head of Teslin Lake, crossing the Inlin a little lower than halfway between the Taku and Sheslay confluences. It continues northeasterly, across the Jennings River not far from its mouth, to beyond the Yukon-Mackenzie watershed at 60° north latitude. The Tahltan claim hunting rights to the drainage basin of the upper Rancheria River to its junction with the Liard where they had a trading place. Bending back around the head of Blue River, the boundary runs south and southeasterly, crossing the Dease River about the mouth of the Cottonwood. It continues to the sources of Muddy River almost to 127° west longitude, the most eastern point. From here the boundary follows the Cassiar Mountains south and southwesterly between the sources of the Stikine and Findlay to the headwaters of the Skeena, which is crossed somewhat east of Groundhog Mountain. In the south the boundary follows the watershed between the Skeena and Nass to about latitude 56° , the most southern point. The boundary then crosses the upper Nass near the mouth of Cottonwood Creek, reaching the Cascades again near the heads of Bear and Salmon Rivers (Teit 1956:50-53).

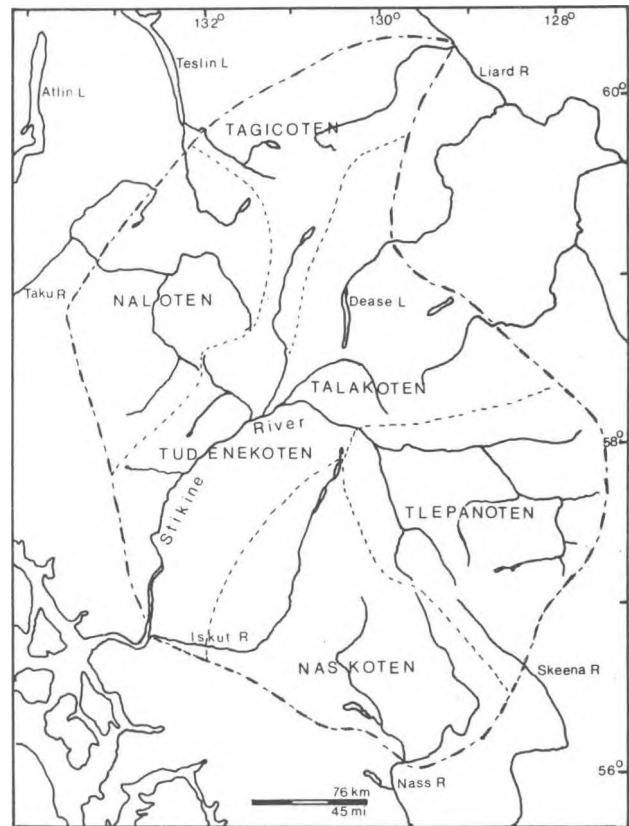


Figure 2. Clan territories and Tahltan tribal boundaries (based on Teit 1956 and unpublished notes)

Through alliances established by intermarriage of Tahltan families with those of other tribes, areas along borders were often shared by both tribes for hunting, fishing, and purposes of trade. In protohistoric times Tahltan shared the lower Stikine River below Telegraph Creek with Tlingit who ascended in summer to dry salmon and berries in the drier interior climate. In winter, Tahltan families had exclusive use of the Stikine as far down as the Iskut for hunting and trapping (Teit 1956:51).

Social Organization

Those aspects of social organization which relate to Tahltan subsistence and settlement patterns will be discussed here. Kinship, or social organization, is the topic of separate and more detailed research conducted by Robert Adlam of the University of Toronto. There is a need to clarify some of the confusion concerning the number and names of Tahltan clans which is present in recent archaeological literature on the Tahltan (Apland 1980, French 1980). This confusion is largely due to having only locally available ethnographic sources to draw upon.

References to six tribal divisions among the Tahltan by Jenness (1932:373) and Osgood (1936:18) are based on Teit's

unpublished field notes. Teit indicates that the Tahltan were divided into two exogamous moieties, raven (cheskie) and wolf (chiyone). The Tlingit names for these same divisions are 'katsede' and 'taxtlowedi'. Each moiety had three clans (local bands in earlier times) named after geographical areas in which each clan claimed hunting rights. A fourth, more recent, wolf clan, the 'nana'ai', was formed about 1750 through intermarriage of Tahltan and Tlingit. Table 1 presents the various names used to refer to Tahltan clans. Confusion has arisen from the use of Tlingit terms for phratry divisions in referring to clans or families.

Figure 2 presents the geographical distribution of the six Tahltan clans within

Table 1. Alternate Names Used in Reference to Tahltan Clans or Families.

	Teit n.d.	Current Terms	Thorman n.d.	Emmons 1911
Raven phratry	tceskea (Tahltan) katcede (Tlingit)	cheskie		cheskea
Clan 1.	<u>Tudenekoten</u> Ilkaihitoten Edaxhoten	iskahigotine edatigotine	Ticha'an'oten	Kartchottee
Clan 2.	<u>Naloten</u>	nahlotin	Nahlodeen	sub family Narlotin
Clan 3.	<u>Tlepanoten</u>	tlepanotin klogotine	Thlegtodeen	sub family Klabbahnotin
Wolf phratry	tseone (Tahltan) taxtlowede (Tlingit)	chiyone		cheona
Clan 1.	<u>Talakoten</u>	tahlogotin	Tahlagoteen	Talarkotin
Clan 2.	<u>Naskoten</u>	toklowedi	Nassgodeen	Tucklarwaytee
Clan 3.	<u>Tagicoten</u> Nokagotin			
Clan 4.	Nana'ai	nana'a nanga'ai	Shutin	Naniyee

the tribal territories outlined by Teit as above and noted on a map among his unpublished notes. A similar map has been recently presented by Maclachlan (1981) in volume six of the Handbook of North American Indians. The "nana'ai" clan had no recognized territory, but hunted with others or along the lower Stikine River.

The clan was a group of families claiming common origin; the original possessors and inhabitants of a certain district. It was marked by localization, matrilineal descent, and grades of rank. Each clan had its own chief whose position and name were inherited through the nearest maternal line from a man to his brother or his sister's son. Sometimes, however, the nearest relative might be passed over in favour of a more distant one who was wealthier or more prominent. Status was based on personal character and skills; wealth was a sign of competence. While both Teit (n.d.) and Emmons (1911:27) indicate that women could not inherit chieftainship, Campbell, the first White to encounter the Tahltan, relates his meeting with the Tahltan chieftainess in 1838 (Campbell 1956: July 23, 1838).

Hunting territories belonged to the whole clan in common, although generally each family had its favourite and customary hunting and fishing grounds. The chief of the clan directed the hunting and trapping so that he knew where each household was. These matters were arranged before families dispersed from the major village in the fall. Usually each family let the chief know where they proposed to hunt that season. The chief made regulations concerning the use of hunting grounds and settled any

disputes, although he himself had no special privilege or ownership of hunting grounds (Teit n.d.).

Marriage, accompanied by mutual rights and obligations, exchange of goods and services, and access to hunting areas, served to strengthen alliances between clans, particularly those with adjacent territories. Cross cousin marriage appears to be the preferred form of marriage, often with several siblings of one family marrying several of the other. When a woman's husband died she might marry his brother or nephew. Often a man married his dead wife's sister or other close female relative. Although not common, polygyny, as well as adoption, ensured that the physical and social needs of all were fulfilled.

Each clan had its own names, stories, songs, dances, and crests, which were presented at feasts held in the large communal houses when families gathered at the major villages and camps (Teit n.d.). Emmons (1911:27) is of the opinion that matrilineal descent and inheritance of rights was adopted by the Tahltan through trade with the coastal Tlingit, having originally had a social organization based on patrilineal descent. While admittedly many aspects of the social organization were adopted or elaborated along with ceremonials and displays of wealth, through intensified relations with the Tlingit, it would appear that matrilineal descent is a long term Athapaskan trait. Through lexical reconstruction matrilineality has been related to the proto-Athapaskan or proto-Nadene speech community (Aberle 1974:76, Dyen and Aberle 1974).

Subsistence Economy and Trade

While the Tahltan shared many cultural traits with other Athapaskan peoples as well as their coastal neighbours, their subsistence economy reflects their adaptation to a unique geographical area and environment. The ethnographic record indicates that the Tahltan were traditionally

semi-nomadic in their yearly round of subsistence activities. The seasonal round is reconstructed in detail in Chapter 7. It is characterized by a pattern of yearly aggregation at summer fishing villages and dispersal during the rest of the year in smaller family groups to travel and hunt

within the clan territories. This central based wandering type of community pattern (Beardsley *et al.* 1956:138) is characteristic of several western Athapaskan groups having salmon producing rivers within their territories (VanStone 1974:39)

During the season of the salmon runs, Tahltan families gathered at permanent fishing villages along the major salmon producing rivers for two to three months. Large communal houses, constructed of spruce and pine poles with gabled roofs covered with spruce bark, were used as shelters and for drying large quantities of salmon for storage. Fishing activities involved communal effort and sharing of the season's products. Summer congregation at the permanent villages was also a time of ceremonies, feasting, and trading.

In late August families dispersed to upland areas to snare marmots and ground squirrels, which they dried in quantity for winter. Sheep, goats, and bear were also hunted at high elevations in early fall while a variety of berries were gathered and preserved. Major fall and winter hunting camps were returned to regularly on a seasonal basis. Permanent shelters at these camps were of the single or double lean-to style, made of poles, covered with bark and boughs, and banked with earth. Caribou was a major winter resource which provided not only meat, but also bone and antler for tool making, hides for clothing and bags, as well as babiche, and sinew for thread and fine cordage. Caribou fences with snares set at regular intervals were constructed at strategic locations. Bows and arrows were used when stalking the more solitary browsing animals. Projectile points and knives were generally made of obsidian which was abundant on the slopes of Mt. Edziza. Other tools and utensils were made of wood, bone and antler. Fur bearing animals were caught by means of traps and deadfalls, and furs were used for robes and bedding.

The Tahltan travelled extensively overland on foot, using snowshoes in winter. They rarely travelled by water,

using spruce bark canoes or rafts to cross lakes and rivers. Fresh water fish were caught in the many small lakes and streams, mainly in spring. Beaver, bear, grouse, and rabbits were procured in the river valleys during spring along with a variety of vegetable foods.

Close trading relations were maintained with several Tlingit clans who ascended the Stikine from the coast in large canoes to trading camps located between Telegraph Creek and Tahltan River. To the Tlingit, the Tahltan traded caribou and moose hides, furs, robes of marmot and ground squirrel, sinew, babiche, obsidian, snowshoes, and articles of skin clothing and bags in exchange for fish oils, dentalia and haliotis shells, shell knives, stone axes, wooden boxes, woven baskets, Chilkat blankets and other ceremonial items (Teit 1956:97-98). The Tahltan also traded with the Kaska and Sekani peoples further to the interior, and profited in the exchange of coastal goods obtained from the Tlingit for furs from the interior tribes.

In proto-historic times at least, all Tahltan clans recognized the area around the Stikine-Tahltan confluence as the tribal headquarters, and most families visited there annually either to fish or trade. It was rare for a family to stay in its own hunting grounds for more than two or three years without coming to Tahltan confluence (Teit n.d.). Indeed, while the body of anyone who died was cremated within a few days of death, wherever the family might be at the time, the ashes were carried back to Tahltan for ceremonial burial and a funerary feast in honour of the dead person.

The Tudenekoten clan (after Tudessa, meaning long river, the Tahltan name of the Stikine) had prior rights to the Stikine River in the vicinity of the Tahltan confluence where many of the fishing and trading camps were located, and in which various clans gathered. It became the highest ranking and most dominant Tahltan clan in tribal activities during proto-historic times.

