

Extract from ‘expert opinion’ report relating to Gitxaala use and occupancy.

## **Gitxaala –A North Coast Aboriginal People.**

In my opinion Gitxaala was an aboriginal community and people prior to, and at the time of, European contact in 1787. Further, Gitxaala has continued as a community and a people up to the present day.

According to Gitxaala adawx<sup>1</sup> (oral record) the village of Lach Klan<sup>2</sup> has been continuously inhabited long before the arrival of Europeans on what is now known as the coast of British Columbia.<sup>3</sup> Throughout adawx recorded by William Beynon (Canadian Museum of Civilization; Columbia University; American Museum of Natural History) and in contemporary oral accounts clear reference is made to the antiquity of the Gitxaala as an aboriginal community prior to the arrival of Europeans.<sup>4</sup>

The adawx of the Sky brothers (see note 3) documents a series of atrocities and subsequent movements of one of the lineages of Gitxaala. In this adawx we learn of the trials and travels of Wudinux, a house leader of the Gitxaala Ganhada clan. This account took place before a significant flood event:<sup>5</sup>

“ . . . they went down along the coast farther south, until they reached Bank’s Island. Here they lived together as one household. Later they went to another place, until they came to the Kitkatla village at the end of Pitt Island known as Wilhahlgamilra-medik (where the grizzly plays along the shore), and they lived there. While there, the waters began to rise and come into the houses. The people anchored on a rock which the water had not covered. There they stayed for a long time; until the water went away suddenly, and they way they were on a mountain on Bank’s Island, Laxgyiyaks. The people went down to the water’s edge and

---

<sup>1</sup> Adawx is an oral record of “historical events of collective political, social, and economic significance, such as migration, territorial acquisition, natural disaster, epidemic, war, and significant shifts in political and economic power. . . . adawx are formally acknowledge by the society as a whole and collectively represent the authorized history of the nation” (Marsden 2002:102-103).

<sup>2</sup> Lach Klan is the contemporary village of Gitxaala, located on Dolphin Island

<sup>3</sup> See, for example: The Origin of the Name He:l, recorded by William Beynon, 1916: “Then these men departed, and Tsibasa returned to his central village at Laxlan[Lach Klan];” The Tlingit Attack the Kitkatla, Nathan Shaw (Gitxaala), recorded by William Beynon, 1952: “. . . the Kitkatla had established a village at Laxklan for their feasts and winter ceremonials;” The Sky Brothers, Sam Lewis (Gitxaala), recorded by William Beynon, 1916: “The people went down to the water’s edge and they again moved, and they found some other people at Laxklan, and here they remained until the present day.”

<sup>4</sup> In William Beynon’s unpublished *Tsimshian Geographical and Ethnical Material* (notebook 6)[New York: American Museum of Natural History] he contextually dates the existence of Lach Klan to the time before Ts’ibasa came down the Skeena River: “When T’sibaesae and his Gispowudada group came down the Skeena from T’amlax’aem they went to where there were already some of the laxsk’ik (Eagle) group in Lax K’laen. . . . This was a gathering place where these people had their elevation feasts and where they held their [?] feasts” (Beynon notebook 6, page 7).

<sup>5</sup> The ‘Flood’ or ‘deluge,’ as so named by many of Beynon’s early respondents, can likely be identified as a major earthquake event that occurred several millennia ago. New archeological evidence indicates a large flood or Tsunami event at some point prior to 2000 years before present. Andrew Martindale’s research team has found silt layers that can be understood as a flood event which—in the absence of direct dating are estimated to be between 3500 and 5000 years before present (Andrew Martindale personal communication November 5, 2007). A similar silt layer has been found in a core sample from Shawatlan Cove, Prince Rupert Harbour, by Morley Eldridge and Alyssa Parker (Fairview Container Terminal Phase II Archaeological Overview Assessment, March 8, 2007). These archeological data corroborate accounts of a significant flood event with the adawx and allow for the conclusion that adawx which reference the flood significantly predates European arrival.

Extract from ‘expert opinion’ report relating to Gitxaala use and occupancy.

they again move, and they found some other people at Laxklan, and here they remained until the present day” (Sam Lewis, 1916).

Evidence for the antiquity of Gitxaala can also be found in the accounts of non-aboriginal merchants and traders who visited Gitxaala territory in the late 1700s. James Colnett, skipper of the British Merchant Ship *Prince of Wales*<sup>6</sup>, is acknowledged to be the first European to enter the Gitxaala territory. Colnett and his crew met Sabaan, a house leader of a Gitxaala Ganhada house, in 1787, at the south end of Banks Island, a portion of the Gitxaala southern territory. Some time after this initial meeting Colnett was invited to a feast in the company of the leading Gitxaala chief of the day. (Galois 2004; see also, the adawx of Sabaan<sup>7</sup>).

In 1792 the Spanish skipper, Jacinto Caamano, participated in a Gitxaala yaawk (feast). As described by Susan Marsden:

“Jacinto Caamano’s vessel, anchored near the south end of Pitt Island, was approached by Homts’iit, a Raven clan chief of the Kitkatla tribe who danced the peace dance for him. He and his people were invited on board. Homts’iit gave Caamano the gift of an otter skin and Caamano served refreshments, after which Homts’iit exchanged names with Caamano, making them allies. Three weeks later Caamano attended a feast at Tuwartz Inlet. Caamano described a series of feasting events in considerable detail, the first of which took place on August 28, when Homts’iit visited the ship to invite Caamano to a feast. Since the main elements in these ceremonial invitations are a peace dance and a *naxnox* demonstration, the feathers to which Caamano refers were probably eagle down, the symbol of peace, and his various masks probably represented his various *naxnox* powers” (Marsden 2007:179-180; for a translation of the original journal of Don Jacinto Caamano, see Wagner and Newcombe 1938).

In 1795 the American skipper of the ship Ruby, Charles Bishop, describes his meetings with Gitxaala people. Most notable in his descriptions is the repeated references to “Shakes” (*Sm’ooygit Seax*) the Gitxaala “Huen Smokett (Great Chief)”<sup>8</sup>. Bishop notes the importance of locating himself within Sm’ooygit Seax’s domains:

“As Shake’s dominions are very Extensive and Contain many good Harbours and inlets, the Principle business is to look out for one near the residence of the Chief as in the Situation you are shure of Procuring the Furs of the whole Tribe, and in this

---

<sup>6</sup> See Galois (2004:2-4) for a brief description of James Colnett’s biography. Colnett was born in Devon, England in 1753. Colnett “spent three and a half years under the tutelage of [James] Cook” (Galois 2004:2). In 1786 Colnett left the British Navy and “signed on with Richard Cadman Etches & Co as captain of the *Prince of Wales* and commander of a two-vessel commercial venture” (Galois 2004:3).

<sup>7</sup> Dorothy Brown of the Kitkatla. “Saaban” in Susan Marsden, ed., *Suwilaay’msga Na Ga’niiyatgm, Teachings of Our Grandfathers* (Prince Rupert: School District 52, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> The Journal and Letters of Captain Charles Bishop on the North-West Coast of America, in the Pacific and in New South Wales 1794-1799. Edited by Michael Roe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967; see, especially, pages 65 – 72, 90-93.

Extract from ‘expert opinion’ report relating to Gitxaala use and occupancy.

respect the Season must be consulted, for they shift their Habitations often, we having fell in with several evacuated villages. In the Spring and Early in the Summer the natives are found near the outside coast for taking halibut and other Ground fish, but when the Salmon go up the Freshes to Spawn they shift to the narrows and falls for Procuring their winters Stock of this delicious food.”<sup>9</sup>

These early visits by Europeans to Gitxaala territory occurred in the context of a preexisting social order. The Gitxaala people were in place and had clear ideas of laws, protocols, ownership, and rights of use. In both Colnet’s and Caamano’s logbooks and the adawx of the Gitxaala can be found descriptions of the Europeans attempting to take things from Gitxaala territory and being rebuffed by the Gitxaala.<sup>10</sup>

Archeological data in the region is sparse –not for lack of sites, but rather for lack of work in the region. To date most archeological work in the Ts’msyeen and Gitxaala world has been conducted in the Prince Rupert Harbour area, in the Kitselas Canyon area of the Skeena River, and most recently, on the Dundas Islands. David Archer conducted a field survey of Kitkatla Inlet and area in the late 1990s. Additional episodic work has been done as part of development and logging plans. Most such surveys are cursory in nature and tend to focus on surface features and Culturally Modified Trees (CMTs). CMT data indicates human presence and resource use dating back several hundred years prior to European arrival. Radiocarbon dates from archeological sites in the region extend back to nearly 10,000 years before present (Martindale 2007<sup>11</sup>).

### ***Social Organization of the Gitxaala***<sup>12</sup>

Gitxaala society (which anthropologically has been considered part of the wider grouping of Tsimshian peoples)- is organized in a number of ways: clan affiliation, social class, housegroup membership, and village residence. For the Gitxaala each individual (with the exception, in the past, for slaves) belongs to one of four clans: ganhada (raven), gispuwada (blackfish), lasgeek (eagle), or laxgibu (wolf). Clans do not, however, exercise any specific political authority. That rested with the *Sm’ooygit* and their housegroups (see below). Clan affiliation, reckoned matrilineally, does inform who can marry whom and, consequently, alliances between members of specific house groups.

---

<sup>9</sup> Journal and Letter of Captain Bishop, page 72.

<sup>10</sup> For Colnett’s journal, see: **A Voyage to the North West Side of America: The Journals of James Colnett, 1786-1789**. Edited by Robert Galois. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004; see, especially, pages 138-166. For Caamano’s journal see: *The Journal of Don Jacinto Caamano*. Translated by Captain Harold Grenfell, R.N., edited with an introduction and notes by Hen R. Wagner and W.A. Newcombe. British Columbia Historical Quarterly. July and October 1938; see, especially, pages 269-293.

<sup>11</sup> Martindale is the lead research of a multi-year team project examining the archeological record of Dundas Islands. This area figures prominently in Gitxaala and Ts’msyeen adawx. The project web page can be found at: [http://www.anth.ubc.ca/Dundas\\_Island\\_Project.10687.0.html](http://www.anth.ubc.ca/Dundas_Island_Project.10687.0.html). The radio carbon dates are listed in Martindale’s 2007 presentation and have also been communicated orally to Menzies.

<sup>12</sup> This section on Gitxaala social organization draws upon Menzies (2006) “The Case of the Pine Mushroom Harvest in Northwestern British Columbia,” in Menzies (ed), **Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Natural Resource Management** Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press; 87-104 (see, pages 89-90), Menzies and Butler (2007) “Returning to Selective Fishing Through Indigenous Knowledge: The Example of K’moda Gitxaala Territory.” *American Indian Quarterly* Vol 31(3):441-462(see, pages 443-445), and; Marjorie M. Halpin and Margaret Seguin (1990) “Tsimshian Peoples: Southern Tsimshian, Coast Tsimshian, Nishga, and Gitksan,” in Wayne Shuttles (ed) *Handbook of North American Indians*. Volume 7 Northwest Coast. Washington: Smithsonian Institution; 267-284.

Extract from ‘expert opinion’ report relating to Gitxaala use and occupancy.

Historically three or four classes can be identified: high-ranking titleholders and other titleholders; freeborn commoners without rights to hereditary names, and; slaves, those born to slaves or captured in war. Members of the title holding classes formed the hereditary leadership of Gitxaala. They are the *Sm’gyigyet* (singular, *Sm’ooygit*, meaning ‘real people’) or chiefs who held specific rights and responsibility with respect to other community members. The origins of a *Sm’ooygit*’s right to governance can be found in the *adawx* and is often linked to an event in which an ancestor received a gift or privilege from the spirit world, through political conquest, or through an alliance with another community.

Ownership of, access to, and rights of use of resource gathering locations were and largely are governed by multi-generational matrilineages called *walp* or houses. Notwithstanding the prominence of a paramount *sm’ooygit* or leader at the village level, the effective source of political power and authority with respect to the territories laid with the house leaders. Membership in a particular house-group is determined matrilineally, by one’s mothers’ position. This social unit is the effective political building block of the Gitxaala and Ts’msyeen villages. Each house owns and has responsibility for a patchwork quilt of resource gathering and social use areas. Taken in combination, the house territories, situated around natural ecosystem units such as watersheds, form the backbone of each village’s collective territory.

Villages consist of groups of related and allied housegroups who traditionally wintered together in a common site. While there has been some changes following the arrival of Europeans (for example, Lax Kw’alaams consists of the members that were formerly nine separate winter villages clustered in the Prince Rupert Harbour and Metlakatla Pass area) the village of Gitxaala has been continuously inhabited before and after Europeans first arrived in their territories. Within the village there is a paramount *Sm’ooygit* who is the house leader of the most powerful house group, in the dominant clan. While this person has traditionally wielded much power and economic wealth within the village it is important, nonetheless, to point out that his authority resided in the power and prestige of his house group.

In Gitxaala society the leading *sm’ooygit*, like elsewhere amongst the Ts’msyeen world, “can expect constant and liberal economic support from his tribesmen” (Garfield 1939:182. As Halpin and Seguin note in their article in the *Handbook of Native American Indians*, “The village chief was the chief of the highest-ranking house in the village, and the other houses, in all clans, were ranked under him in descending order” (1990:276). Halpin and Seguin go on to comment that “traditional narratives report that the Southern Tsimshian [which would include Gitxaala] chiefs received tribute in the form of the first sea otter and seal caught by each canoe of sea hunters and other fur animals captured by land animals” (1990: 276).

### ***The Continuance of Gitxaala as a Community and a People***

Gitxaala has continued as a community and a people up to the present day. This can be

Extract from ‘expert opinion’ report relating to Gitxaala use and occupancy.

documented through references to Gitxaala people contained in, for example:

1. Ships’ logs (Colnett, Caamano, Bishop)
2. Hudson’s Bay Company journals
  - a. Kitkatla sequence
  - b. Fort Simpson sequence
  - c. Frasier Tolmie’s journal
  - d. John Work’s journal
3. Indian Affairs Annual Reports (1864 – 1990)  
<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/indianaffairs/index-e.html>

**Ships’ Logs:** The Journals of James Colnett (1787), Jacinto Caamano (1792) and Charles Bishop (1795) all contain accounts of meeting with Gitxaala people whose behaviour and demeanor provides evidence of a people organized with a clear sense of social norms, etiquette, and laws (discussed above). Colnett documents meeting with Sm’oogyit Seax (a close brother of Ts’ibassa and head of an affiliated walp). He also encounters Sm’oogyit Homts’iit –though not under as positive a setting as Caamano does<sup>13</sup>. As described above Caamano travels into the heart of the Gitxaala southern territory and is, after a sequence of events, invited to participate in a *yaawk* hosted by Homts’iit. Bishop spends significant periods of time engaged in trade with the Gitxaala, particularly with Sm’oogyit Seax. These early European encounters document elements of Gitxaala society and social order that were extant at the moment of contact.

**Hudson’s Bay Company Journals.** Subsequent to Colnett’s, Caamano’s, and Bishop’s visits to Gitxaala territory the Hudson’s Bay Company established a trading fort within the territory of the northern Tsimshian (Marsden and Galois 1995<sup>14</sup>). References to Gitxaala can be identified in the HBC Fort Simpson journal and the journals of men working for the HBC (see, for example: Henry Drummond Dee 1944, 1945; Tolmie 1963).

Donald Mitchell (1981) outlines the way in which variants of Sm’oogyit Ts’ibasaa’s name (Sebassa, Sabassa, Dzi’basa, etc., Mitchell 1981:80) was interchangeable with the Gitxaala in the mid-years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: his name “seems to have been employed as a synonym for Kitkatla, occasionally it identifies only the person himself, and in some instances it may refer to the house, lineage, or place” (Mitchell 1981:81). References to the Gitxaala as a people continue through the period of the fur trade.

The journal of John Work (b. 1792 – d.1861), for example, documents a series of encounters with Gitxaala people. Work’s journals are held by the British Columbia Provincial Archives. His 1835 journals are of particular interest. Work notes weather, activities in Fort Simpson and about the HBC ship Lama, trade with indigenous peoples and references particular named people and groups. On March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1835, for example,

---

<sup>13</sup> See Galois (2004) pages 163-164 for an account of the increasing hostilities between Colnett’s crew and Sm’oogyit Homts’iit. See Wagner and Newcombe (1938) pages 288-293 for Caamano’s contrasting experience.

<sup>14</sup> Marsden, Susan and Galois, Robert (1995). “The Tsimshian, the Hudson’s Bay Company, and the Geopolitics of the Northwest Coast Fur Trade.” *Canadian Geographer* 39(2):169-83.

Extract from 'expert opinion' report relating to Gitxaala use and occupancy.

he notes that: "Late last night a party of Sabassa men passed here, but did not come aboard."<sup>15</sup> The journal's editor, Henry Drummond Dee, comments that: "Sabassa (sometimes rendered as Sebassa or Sebasses) seems to have been a collective term applied to the Indians of Laredo and Principe channels. The tribe was often named after the chief, who was given a hereditary name. The chief Sabassa is mentioned in Tolmie's Diary, entry for April 3, 1935" (see Dee 1944, page 229).

Traveling through Principe Channel April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1835, Work drops anchor on the south end of Banks Island where he had "expected to find the Sabassa Indians but not one is to be seen. Different old villages on both sides of the Canall as we came down, where they used to resort, are all at present abandoned." [Dee comments that the "only reason for abandonment was the usual seasonal one, when the Indians went from place to place for Salmon and the like."<sup>16</sup>] (Dee 1944:233).

Back at Fort Simpson, Work notes on July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1935, that: "Late last night two canoes arrived from the Canalls a little inland from Sabasses." Then again on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1835: "A Canoe of Indians arrived from about Sabasses some where" (Dee 1945:50, 52).

William Fraser Tolmie's journal covers a similar time frame and also includes specific references to Gitxaala people and territory<sup>17</sup>. Tolmie was based in the Hudson's Bay Company post in Milbank Sound and, while in the employ of the HBC traveled between there and Fort Simpson. His journals note the passage of time, events at the HBC posts, and various people and ships that passed by.

The Fort Simpson journals of the Hudson's Bay Company, including the sequence identified as Kitkatla Journals, also make note of the business of the HBC post and its trade with Indigenous peoples. The arrival and passage of various native peoples are noted, including specific references to Gitxaala people in a manner similar to the references noted above by Work and Tolmie.

**Indian Affairs Annual Reports.** An online search of the Indian Affairs Annual reports finds at least one reference to Kitkatla as a community and/or a location per year from 1864 through 1990.

**Establishment of Reserves as an indication of Gitxaala's continued existence.** The initial three Gitxaala reserves were established in a meeting with *Sm'gyigyet* in 1881.

---

<sup>15</sup> "The Journal of John Work, 1835. Part II. Edited by Henry Drummond Dee. 1944. *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* Vol. 8(3)227-24; see page 229.

<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that abandonment of village sites from about 1770 through to 1862 might well be indicators of the devastating effects of epidemics such as smallpox. Cole Harris documents the genocidal effects of a smallpox epidemic that swept through the lower Fraser River and Gulf of Georgia area. Traveling through the region a few years later Vancouver comes across many 'abandoned' village sites; one of which has the appearance of a mass grave (Cole Harris (1994) "Voices of Disaster: Smallpox around the Strait of Georgia in 1782." *Ethnohistory* Vol. 41(4):591-626). I have been told of a history in the Gitxaala area in which an island was used as a mass burial for a village that fell ill to disease. It is not possible at this time to accurately date the story, but it is likely an account of either the 1862 smallpox epidemic or possibly an earlier epidemic.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, pages: 271, 272, 307, 311, 312, 314, in Tolmie (1963) **The Journals of William Fraser Tolmie: Physician and Fur Trader**. Vancouver: Mitchell Press Ltd..

Extract from 'expert opinion' report relating to Gitxaala use and occupancy.

The majority of the now existing reserves were allotted in a meeting between O'Reilly and apparently T'sbassa at Kuowdah (Lowe Inlet) in 1891. A Royal Commission established the final two reserves in 1916.