Salmon People and Long-Term Cultural Success on the Northwest Coast

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Existence Scapes: What is it possible to think and do?

- Humans receive a stream of sensations
- Sensations are interpreted through both physiological and cognitive processes
- Constructions of meaning – and the basis of much behavior – arise through mediated processes that rely on concepts and understandings that are learned and are the basis for creative engagements – both social and environmental
- Existence scapes comprise the realm of possible understandings, behaviors and creative responses given a set of core cosmological and ontological principles
- Existence scapes become embodied habitus shared with other members of a cultural group
DEFINING CULTURAL TRAITS

- Maritime/riverine Orientation
- Salmon – major subsistence resource
- Woodworking – Communal houses
- Unilineal descent groups
- Stratification
- Highly developed property rights
- Potlatch ceremonialism
- Distinctive Art
- Salmon as People associated with ritual behavior
Northwest coast Cultural Stages: A Basic System of Periods

- **Early**: 12,000 to 6,000 – occupation and limited development, fluctuating land/sea interface, no permanent villages but maritime adaptation with long-distance trade is found

- **Middle/Transitional/Developmental**: 6,000 to 4,000 – stabilization of land/sea interface, emergence of cultural traits and patterns associated with wood working

- **Pacific/Developed/Late**: 4,000 to contact - development of cultural complexity - mass salmon harvesting in estuaries 4,000 BCE, large wood houses, 2500 BCE, fort sites, 1500 BCE; Tidal Pulse Fishing, 1000 BCE

- **Tlingit Presence**:
  Language – 6,000 years, separation from Proto-Dene
  Thorne Bay Spruce root basket – 5,600 BCE
Salmon As People Complex:

Basic Mythic Charter

First Salmon Ceremony

Welcoming

Ritual Handling

Ritual Processing and Consumption

Return of Bones to Water

Source: Gunther 1925, 1928
An Existence Scape of Willful Interdependent Beings

• RELATIONAL COSMOLOGY AND ONTOLOGY
  Raven Stories – Transformation

• RELATIONAL EPISTEMOLOGY
  Acquisition of Knowledge from Interaction – Careful Attentiveness

• RELATIONAL PHENOMENOLOGY
  Interactive Engagement – Experiential Acuity – Reflection and Reflexivity

• RELATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY
  Interdependent Necessity – Appropriate Action by All Required
KEY THEMES AND CONCEPTS OF THE Tlingit existence scape

- **Cosmology** – Tlingit understandings of the nature of existence: entities, processes, interactions, time and space
- **Cosmological cycling** – living spirits (entities) cycle between domains of life and death subject to appropriate treatment
- **Connections** – between domains of existence and spiritual forms in domain of life and not life (death – but spiritual continuity)
- **Interdependence** – not only connected but mutually dependent for existence on behavior of other entities
- **Relations** – interaction is foundational and unavoidable, respectful engagement is essential for existence - balance
- **Obligations** – what entities must do to allow existence to continue; how respect is demonstrated and rituals conducted
- **Tlingit beliefs, behaviors and ritual practices are built on these basic principles – relational sustainability**
Yeil’s Transformations
HAA AANI: TLINGIT DEEP TIME

Possible Sea Levels

TLINGIT Flood?
HAA AANI: Yeil's (Raven) Creation

RAVEN – Trickster/Transformer

- Obtained and released sun, moon and stars – resulted in inability for animals, fish to remove skins and appear as persons
- Obtained freshwater for all beings from Deikeenooow (Far Out Fort)
- Hauled in tank from ocean which held fish and released them all so became available
- Tricked king salmon into jumping onto beach near L’tua (Lituya) Bay
- Convinced owl to get fire from the “fireball” in the ocean
- Tricked old woman into creating tide
SHAANDA (Fish Egg Island): Original location of petroglyph
YEIL’S LESSONS

• Movement between domains of existence occurs
• Movement between forms of existence occurs
• Implicit message – things may not be as they appear
• Implicit message – there maybe deeper meanings than are apparent
• Implicit message – be observant, attentive, open to new knowledge
• Implicit message – unbridled expression of desire can be a problem
• Implicit messages made explicit by Tlingit in stories and formal instruction
Salmon Boy – Tlingit Mythic Charter

- **Aakwatatson** – “Alive in the Eddy”
- Establishes specifics of relationship with salmon
- Boy disrespects “Moldy” dried salmon strip
- Runs from house and falls in water while wearing copper necklace – saved by salmon people
- Taken by them to their home offshore
- Here he sees they are people when take off skins (as established by Yeil’s transformations)
- Taught how to treat them respectfully by salmon chief
- After a year travel back to home stream in canoe – boy told to stand up/jumps out of water and sees mother and father
- Gives self to father – mother cuts gills and discovers copper necklace
- Ask shaman what to do – salmon put up over night and transforms back to boy
- Teaches people what he has learned from salmon people
- Tlingit elders over 60 all provided this story in response to the query – what were you taught about salmon as a child?
LINGIT RELATIONAL COSMOLOGY: AAKW’TAATSEEN MYTHIC CHARTER

Tlingit youth saved from drowning by Salmon People

Head of Salmon People teaches Tlingit youth correct behavior

Source: Peck, Tides People, 1975
RELATIONAL COSMOLOGY AND ONTOLOGY IN TLINGIT EXISTENCE SCAPES:
AAKW'TAATSEEN MYTHIC CHARTER

- THREE CORE PRINCIPLES
- COSMOLOGICAL CYCLING - RETURN
- NON-HUMAN BEING HAS AN ESSENTIAL SPIRIT OR "PERSON" THAT IS THE SAME AS HUMAN
- AY WUNEI (RESPECT) – EXISTENCE DEPENDS ON RECIPROCAL RESPECTFUL RELATIONS
- RITUAL RELATIONS – INCLUDING RETURN OF SALMON BONES TO WATER ARE CRITICAL
RESPECT:
Tlingit concept and practices derived from mythic charter

- Mythic charter – “Respect” is crucial, Disrespect is precipitating event in myth
- Salmon – Are People and are to be understood as people
- Sentient
- Attentive
- Dignity
- Volitional
- Power
RESPECT:
Demonstrating Respect

- Acknowledgement and Affirmation – Joe Hotch, Tlingit Elder: “... when they’re jumping, we are supposed to say ‘Ey Ho’; you see a fish jump, ‘Ey Ho’ [then] they know they’re being appreciated so they keep jumping. And I guess our people say it so they can know which way it’s going. Just keep saying ‘Ey Ho’, and that’s the way they want to be talked to; the fish want to be appreciated.”

- Source – Thornton 2012:50
Salmon People Arriving!
Gift of Beauty: Carved stake located on intertidal salmon weir – above water, see below for positioning
**AAKW’TAATSEEN Mythic Charter: Basis for ENGAGEMENT**

**CONCEPTS**
- Salmon as Persons
- Sentient, Volitional
- Attentive to human acts
- Dignified - require respect
- Return depends on respect and ritual

**BEHAVIORS**
- Handle with care
- Kill so spirit can travel to spawning grounds
- Take only what is needed
- Utilize all – no waste
- Never speak badly
- Do not play with fish
- Share with others
AAKW’TAATSEEN Mythic Charter: Ritual Action for Return

- Heinya Tlingit reported going to stream mouth in regalia to sing and greet salmon when they first arrived – just as they met invited guests to Potlatch.

- In Klawock, a first salmon feast and ritual were held upon the arrival of the sockeye.

- Entire community invited and the host clan harvested fish, roasted them in pit and fed everybody.

- Clan leader collected salmon bones after consumption and returned them to the estuary where the stream flowed out.

- He sang to them to travel safely to their homes and return as the bones drifted down.

- These are the ritually prescribed actions to insure the rebirth of the salmon and hopefully their return.
ABDUCTIVE REASONING: CREATING THE TLINGIT EXISTENCE SCAPE

- Differs from deduction and induction
- Is the form of everyday embodied knowledge creation
- Makes comparisons of elements and when determines similar, makes further inferences for action.
- Thus if salmon are people – we treat them as we treat people we value so that they will return as our relatives return
- Treatment of valued human others becomes inferential basis for treatment toward salmon
A D B U C T I V E  R E A S O N I N G :  
C R E A T I N G  T H E  T L I N G I T  E X I S T E N C E  S C A P E

• "IT IS THE ONLY LOGICAL OPERATION WHICH INTRODUCES ANY NEW IDEA; FOR INDUCTION DOES NOTHING BUT DETERMINE A VALUE, AND DEDUCTION MERELY EVOLVES THE NECESSARY CONSEQUENCES OF A PURE HYPOTHESIS. DEDUCTION PROVES THAT SOMETHING MUST BE; INDUCTION SHOWS THAT SOMETHING ACTUALLY IS OPERATIVE; ABDUCTION MERELY SUGGESTS THAT SOMETHING MAY BE." CHARLES PEIRCE

• "TLINGIT BELIEF IS MORE THAN SUGGESTION – FOUNDATION OF CERTAINTY IS MYTHIC CHARTER PRODUCES CONTINUOUS EXAMINATION IN LIGHT OF EMBODIED EMOTIONS AND EXTENSION OF THOSE TO SALMON.

• "ABDUCTION MAY THUS BE CONCEIVED OF AS A PRINCIPLE THAT ALLOWS US TO RECONSTRUCT HOW CONCEPTUAL ORDER IS ACHIEVED THROUGH THE IMPOSITION OF A HYPOTHESIS (IN THE FORM OF A MINIMAL THEORY, AN IDEA, A RULE OR A ... HYPOTHESIS) – WHICH INAUGURATES CONSTRUCTIVIST THINKING. HERE I CAN ONLY HINT AT THE GREAT VARIABILITY OF THIS SCHEMA; IT ENABLES US TO BRIDGE THE TRADITIONAL GAP BETWEEN THE ARTS AND THE SCIENCES BECAUSE IT CAN BE USED AS A MODEL BOTH OF EXPLANATION AND OF UNDERSTANDING." RUDOLF FISCHER
Abductive Reasoning: Creating the Tlingit Existence Scape

- Engagements with Salmon are based on various explorations of what respectful behavior and thought consists of:
- 1) Knowledge and emotion of how other valued humans are treated – the koo'ex
- 2) Consideration of own emotion and projection
- 3) Attention to ixt (shaman) teaching
- 4) Attending to behavior of salmon and interpretation of it
- 5) Reflexivity – Examining own behavior in regard to salmon
- Continuous iteration iteration and adjustment based on variations on these principles
Salmon Boy story supplies additional information beyond charter —

Sitka version depicted here provides information on local environment, i.e., embedded knowledge redundancy

Source: Thornton 2012
Intertidal Weirs and Traps for Harvesting Salmon

- Archeological research on pre-contact intertidal fishing structures – West coast of Prince of Wales archipelago
- Found in estuarine areas of most streams and along shoreline at certain locations
- Stone structures on outer islands – rocky intertidal areas
- Wood structures on Prince of Wales streams – muddy intertidal zones
- Date to 3500 BCE – innovations evident over time
- Examples: Little salt lake, Klawock River
Tuxh’a aah’w
(Little Salt Lake):
Aerial photo with
wood fish weir and
trap site locations


**Tuxh’A aah’w (Little Salt Lake): Klawock Elders at Site**

Tlingit Elders point to wood stakes aligned in Little Salt Lake estuary
LITTLE SALT LAKE:
WOOD STAKE REMNANTS FLUSH WITH SURFACE
BURIED SECTION CARVED INTO POINT FOR INSERTION
TUXH’A AAH’W (LITTLE SALT LAKE): ARCHEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Wood stakes buried in the intertidal estuary mud form a meter wide wall termed a pavement.

“Pavement” consists of over 1500 carved wooden stakes.
Little Salt Lake – Main feature showing location of all three components

Segment shown in previous slide
Klawock - Community, Lagoon, Estuary - 1929
KLAWOCK LAGOON:

ANCIENT SEMI-CIRCULAR WOOD STAKE FISH TRAPS

CANAL CONNECTING INTERTIDAL POOLS
Klawock Lagoon/Estuary: Intertidal Fish Trap Locations

Intertidal V-shaped wood stake fish traps

Intertidal semi-circular wood stake fish traps
KLAWOCK ESTUARY: V-shaped traps
PORTILLO CHANNEL:

BI-LOBED SEMI-CIRCULAR INTERTIDAL STONE FISH TRAPS LOCATED AT HALF TIDE

SAN CLEMENTE INTERTIDAL STONE TRAPS
SAN CLEMENTE INTERTIDAL STONE FISH TRAPS – ON BEACH
Hinyaa Tlingit
San Clemente Stone Fish Traps
Theodore Roberts
LULU ISLAND:

**Semi-circular Intertidal Stone Fish Trap at Half Tide at Low Point**

Gap in stone wall
EXAMPLES OF INTERTIDAL STONE FISHING STRUCTURES

Trap arcs range 5–90 meters long, and .7–1.0 meters high.

Intertidal Stone Fishing Structures:
West Coast of Prince of Wales Archipelago,
Southeast Alaska
TIDAL PULSE FISHING: TIDAL STAGE OPERATION

**FOREST**

- **High water: flood**
  - **Stage II**
    - **Incoming – flood tide**: Salmon pass freely over fish trap structures and ascend streams to spawning grounds.
  - **Outgoing – ebb tide**: Salmon pass freely over fish trap structures at initial stage of ebb but become trapped toward half-tide.

- **Half-tide: flood**
  - **Stage I**
    - Salmon are below fish trap structures initially and later can go around and over them freely during flood tide.

- **Low water: flood**
  - **Stage IV**
    - Salmon are trapped behind the trap walls as the tide falls. Initially traps hold water but dry up eventually.

**OCEAN**

- **High water: ebb**
  - **Stage III**
  - **Half-tide: ebb**
  - **Low water: ebb**
Tidal Pulse Fishing: Basic Principles

- Semi-circular stone walls built at mid-tidal stage level – V stake traps use same principle
- Structures completely covered at high tide allowing ascending salmon to travel upstream
- Where stone weirs cross estuary, they do not obstruct salmon movement at high tide
- Fish captured behind walls only on falling tide
- Catch fish for approximately 25% of tidal range
LITTLE SALT LAKE:  
ESTUARINE SITE OF  
INTERTIDAL WOOD STAKE  
WEIRS AND TRAPS  

TLINGIT R&D CENTER  

ZONE A – 2100BCE, SMALL INVESTMENTS FOR INSTREAM HARVEST, TIDE NOT A FACTOR  

ZONE B1 – 1450BCE, HUGE INVESTMENT FIXED, FLOOD TIDE HARVESTING  

ZONE C – 900BCE, HUGE INVESTMENT FIXED, EBB TIDE TIDAL PULSE HARVEST  

ZONE B2 AND D – 500BCE, REDUCED INVESTMENT MOBILE, EBB TIDE, TIDAL PULSE
SUMMARY

- Prior to 1000 BCE – Intertidal wood stake weirs funneled salmon to holding areas and traps in the upper tidal range
- Mass harvesting was primarily done on incoming tide
- Between 1500 and 1000 BCE a shift occurred to tidal pulse fishing
- Mass harvesting was done on the ebb in the mid tidal range after 1000 BCE
Implications

- What caused the shift?
- Timing of occurrence
- Rise in human population need to incorporate smaller less productive systems
- Sea mammal collapse
- Salmon drop in primary streams due to overharvest or climate
- Accumulation of knowledge and application of mythic charter – recognition of need for escapement or for salmon to reach their homes
ISH: A multidimensional relational concept woven through Tlingit cultural practice

- A deep pool where salmon congregate
- A site index for determining When to harvest
- During return – a place of rest and recovery for salmon
- A harvesting location
- A spawning location
- A site of modification
- A location in the existence scape of philosophical contemplation and reflexive encounter – for salmon people, for human people
- “Alive in the eddy”
Figure 38 Ish – A Tlingit Relational Concept
**Huna Tlingit**

Gaff hook in action catching salmon

**An ish in Neva River** where coho and sockeye salmon congregate
NEVA RIVER:

“STREAMSCAPING”

INSTREAM POOL AND FALLS – MADE BY MOVING STONES

“ISH” – SALMON POOL CREATED BY HUMAN ACTION
Imagistic Redundancy

- Ish images are found in various locations in Tlingit objects known as art.
- Aesthetic quality (beauty) is valued – demonstrating it to others is a gift.
- Gifts are to be reciprocated – implicit obligation.
- Examples – Appears on Staff in U Penn Museum as three nested ovoids.
- Totem pole – claim to Sarkar Stream as clan crest.
- Blanket – claim to Chilkoot Lake area.
- House front – claim to Basket Bay as image.
- Finally – Ish’s have names, like people!
ISH IMAGE ON
KOOTEYA IN
KLAWSOCK
TOTEM PARK:

POLE INDICATES
OWNERSHIP OF
MAJOR SOCKEYE
SALMON SYSTEM

BEAR IS A MAJOR
CREST OF THE CLAN

ISH DEPICTED AS
DISH WITH THREE
SALMON, 1939
LUK'AK'ADI
NAXEIN:

SOCKEYE
CREST BLANKET

DEPICTION OF
ISH, CIRCLE
WITH SALMON
IN CENTER
LUK'AK’ADI NAXEIN:

SOCKEYE CREST
BLANKET WORN BY
CLAN LEADER

DANCES WITH IT ON
CEREMONIAL
OCCASIONS

BROUGHT OUT AND
STORY ASSOCIATED WITH
BLANKET TOLD ONLY AT
KOO’EX (POTLATCH)
Arch House of Basket Bay Decitan in Angoon –

Ish at center of image surrounded by sockeye salmon heading to it
Commentary by revered Elder Walter Soboleff on *Ish* during Tlingit Traditional Scholars discussion:

There were those who were knowledgeable about all kinds of subjects. This thing named *Ish* - it was almost as if it were human and it was spoken to in that way, this *Ish*. This is how they valued this resource. It was as if their life depended on it so they treated it with respect. Because they got their food from this place is why they would speak to it. There was pride, there was honor (given to the *Ish*) so no one was to say anything foolish about it or to it. If it was said that we could laugh at it, it was not so. We were told not to talk to it in a foolish way but to respect it. This is what the white man calls taboo. When you do this there is a discipline, a law that will correct you. It will be like it falls on you; this is the way this is. All that is seen around us is said to be alive around us is what it is called. The Lingit people have known this to be true from time immemorial."
RELATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY: THE PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS FOR THE LOGIC OF ENGAGEMENT PRACTICED BY TLINGIT

“...the true method of philosophical construction is to frame a scheme of ideas, the best that one can, and unflinchingly explore the interpretation of experience in terms of that scheme.”


“*You have to understand that we treat salmon like we would like to be treated.*”

Response by 82-year old Huna Tlingit elder James Samuel Osborne to my query, “What were you taught as a boy about salmon?” August 2003