

**OBJECT LESSONS:
HEREDITARY RIGHTS AND OWNERSHIP IN A NORTHWEST COAST MUSEUM**

by

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ABSTRACT

Using as a case example an ownership dispute over a Gitksan origin story depicted on the carved doors of University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology (MOA), this thesis contributes to an understanding of the ways in which hereditary prerogatives are being exercised in new contexts on the Northwest Coast and the political ramifications this entails for both museums and traditional systems of ownership. Drawing on interviews, archival materials, and published sources, this thesis details the ongoing history of the 'Ksan doors, from their commissioning in the early-1970s, as both an architectural feature of MOA and an example of contemporary Northwest Coast art, to their emergence as the focal point of an ownership dispute twenty years later that was escalated, if not precipitated, by a 1991 interpretive-dance performance of the origin story that they depict that involved Hereditary Chief Kenneth B. Harris. The claims and actions of Chief Harris and a Gitksan woman named Dolly Watts (whom many identify as the source of the dispute) are considered both ethnographically and historically, with a final emphasis on how MOA has in this case become a forum around and through which cultural meanings and identities are being asserted.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
Dedication	iii
Introduction – SETTING THE STAGE	1
Section One – THE GENESIS OF THE DOORS	8
Section Two – THE STORIES	16
Section Three – A TALE OF TWO HOUSES	21
Conclusion – AN END TO THE DISPUTE?	34
REFERENCES CITED	42

For Marjorie.

SETTING THE STAGE

The Museum of Anthropology is committed to respecting the values and spiritual beliefs of the cultures represented in its collections. We know that our collections contain items which are important to originating communities. The museum recognizes that those objects may have a non-material side embodying cultural rights, values, knowledge, and ideas which are not owned or possessed by the museum, but are retained by the originating communities.

—statement from *Management of culturally sensitive materials in MOA's collections* (unpublished, February 1997).

The Museum of Anthropology is desperate to maintain good relations with those it calls its First Nations "partners." That's a challenging task, since museums around the world have earned reputations as inherently sinister places for aboriginal people: warehouses of colonial booty piled high with stolen family treasures. No wonder the MOA has such a hard time getting native staff.

—Charles Montgomery, writing in *Vancouver* magazine (January/February 1999:39).

Early last year, an article was published in *Vancouver* magazine that sensationalised an ownership dispute involving the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology (MOA). The appearance of this article did not pass unnoticed by museum staff, partly due to the wide circulation of this glossy lifestyle magazine (which is delivered free in many Vancouver neighbourhoods), but mostly due to the extreme and generally misinformed point of view that it articulated. The two passages excerpted above could, from a broader perspective, be taken to represent a more general gap between what museum employees pragmatically understand to be the responsibilities and limitations of their work, and how museums, as institutions, are viewed by the visiting public from the gallery floors and in the pages of magazines. As MOA's communications manager, Jennifer Webb, commented over a year after the publication of this article: "It was overwritten to the point where at least people could have a sense of

humour about it, but underlying it was a real kind of obtuseness on the part of the reporter that made me nervous, because if he was coming in and not getting it, then what was the average visitor thinking?" Although bad press comes and goes, I get the sense that this article had a more lasting impression because its criticisms, however conspiratorial in tone, targeted the sincerity of the most fundamental aspects of MOA's institutional self-image—namely the museum's commitment to forging meaningful relationships with First Nations people.

The main focus of the Montgomery article was an ongoing dispute (that is probably better described, for numerous reasons, as a misunderstanding) concerning the ownership of an origin story depicted on a set of red-cedar doors at the entrance to the Museum of Anthropology. These doors were commissioned from a team of four Gitksan carvers over twenty-five years ago, and were installed as part of the newly completed Arthur Erickson building in 1976. The general understanding at the time was that the carvers chose the theme of the ancestral figure Skawah because, as was to be the case with Bill Reid's *Raven and the First Men* later on, it was a common origin story and therefore made a nice encompassing statement. While the museum was given a version of the story that could be used in speaking about the images carved into its new front doors, a dispute has developed over the course of this past decade concerning which Gitksan families have hereditary rights to this story and, as a consequence, whether the story obtained by the museum is valid and should be related on public tours.

To many concerned, however, the dispute is rather one-sided. Its origin can be traced to a Gitksan woman named Dolly Watts, who owns a Vancouver-based restaurant and catering business. Her position is stated in the *Vancouver* magazine article rather

succinctly: "The story belongs to our house. The mother on the doors is not the mother of all the Gitksan people. She's the mother of our clan alone, the Ghu'sen house....We own that story. Period" (Montgomery 1999:40). The article goes on to quote Doreen Jensen, a Gitksan cultural expert and a sister of one of the carvers, who stated that she and other families of the Fireweed clan do not agree with Dolly's understanding of the ownership of this story. Jensen maintains that the story belongs to all the houses of the Fireweed people, not just that to which Dolly belongs. While ordinarily such a claim would be settled in the context of a feast or potlatch—a process of validation through which all hereditary claims are publicly witnessed and recognised by the high-ranking chiefs of other houses and clans—this is not an option for many native people living in urban centres far removed from their home communities.¹ As Margaret Anderson and Marjorie Halpin (2000:20) have observed in this connection: "Since the management of this complex system of rights and privileges depends on its presentation to and validation by an informed public at feasts, the wide dispersal of people to urban centres makes it difficult for claims, often asserted outside the context of the feast system, to be addressed and corrected by elders."

What has been most frustrating for the museum is that it has been implicated in this dispute, although it is powerless to resolve it; this is clearly the mandate of those Gitksan families involved. What has puzzled many familiar with MOA's history and policies, is the negative way in which the article depicts the museum and its intentions. Instead of focussing on how this dispute is being resolved by Dolly Watts in her home community, journalist Charles Montgomery was clearly using the opportunity to

¹ For various treatments of Gitksan and Tsimshian feasts see Adams 1973; Miller 1984; Seguin 1984, 1985; and Vaughan 1984.

sensationalise her dispute with the Museum of Anthropology over the alleged (mis)use of this story on public tours. According to museum staff and documentation, however, details of the story have not been a part of public tours since at least 1992. Dolly Watts, on the other hand, maintains that this policy shift did not occur until some years later, only *after* she began publicly confronting gallery guides outside the museum in 1994, the year she began selling food at the very front doors in question. At this time, there was some confusion at MOA over what she was now asking the museum to do. Assuming that there had been some misunderstanding of what was being said on the tours, it was decided that the gallery guides would refrain not only from referring to details of the story, but also from identifying the ancestor figure by name. Because of the proximity of Dolly Watts to the front doors at this time (as an extension of her catering business, she had earlier been granted permission to set up a food stand outside the museum), the gallery guides were advised against mentioning the Gitksan ownership dispute at all, largely to avoid unnecessary confrontations in front of museum visitors. To date this dispute has not been resolved.

What follows is an examination of the broader cultural life—the ongoing story (Cruikshank 1992)—of one particular museum installation; of how these objects and the story they represent are understood differently by different people, and the process by which one particular Northwest Coast museum and its collections has become a forum through which cultural meanings are being negotiated and contested. In approaching this subject I asked one key research question: How do different cultural notions of ownership influence our understanding of these events and the objects—the 'Ksan Doors—around which they are unfolding? This question resulted in two lines of inquiry:

one concerning the role of the museum as a new forum in which hereditary claims are being exercised, and the second concerning why the 'Ksan Doors have, as objects, been the locus of an unusual amount of cultural activity. As my research developed and expanded, I focussed less on ownership *per se* and more on the ancestral histories and affiliations of Gitksan houses, which are the foundations of hereditary privileges. In particular, I looked at the historical and mythological relations between the houses of Gurhsan (*Ghu'sen*; *Gwaxsan*) and Harhpegwawtu (*Hagbegwatku*; *Hoxpegwatkw*)² in order to get a better understanding of the claims being set forth by Dolly Watts and Chief Kenneth Harris, both of whom have made particular claims to the Skawah story that have directly involved the Museum of Anthropology. These lines of inquiry, though seemingly diverse, all ultimately relate back to the ways in which Northwest Coast traditions of hereditary ownership are being asserted and reinvented within new contexts, including museums and mainstream media.

What must be grasped from the outset is how vital crests are to the identity of Gitksan houses,³ for they are the visual record of the experiences of house ancestors in ancient times, as evoked through song and recorded in bodies of oral tradition referred to as *adaox*, the family-owned histories relating the origins and migrations of the houses: "The formal telling of the oral histories in the Feast, together with the display of crests and the performance of the songs, witnessed and confirmed by the Chiefs of the other Houses, constitute not only the official history of the House, but also the evidence of its title to its territory and the legitimacy of its authority over it" (Gisday Wa and Delgam Uukw 1992:25-26). Rather than consisting of discrete episodes, these origin stories and

² Spellings for Gitksan titles here follow Barbeau (1929). See also Halpin and Anderson (2000:228-229) for alternative orthographic renderings of the names Gurhsan and Harhpegwawtu.

histories often overlap and intersect to the point where it is difficult to say where one ends and another begins: “The ancient history recounted in the *adaox* is generally shared by a number of related Houses that have in common some, but not all, of their names, crests, and dirges—specifically, those drawn from the events of the shared portion of the *adaox*” (Anderson and Halpin 2000:15). As should become evident in the course of this discussion, the integrated nature of these traditions has resulted in a complex system of hereditary ownership that is inseparable from these family histories.⁴

For this reason, I think it is important to point out that rather than stemming from a lack of collaboration with First Nations people (as was the suggestion of the *Vancouver* magazine journalist quoted above), the fact that MOA has been implicated in this dispute, and despite its best intentions, can well be viewed as a *consequence* of this museum's more individualised approach to forming relationships with First Nations people. Given traditional Northwest Coast systems of hereditary ownership, whereby non-material things like origin stories are considered the property of specific family lineages, and given MOA's focus on contemporary Northwest Coast artists and their work, this approach has developed somewhat organically and has made good sense, although it has led to certain unanticipated developments. As a residual effect, it seems, this approach has brought the museum, however vicariously, into these systems of ownership as a new forum in which certain hereditary claims can be, and *have been*, publicly expressed and validated in ways that may be novel to their originating contexts, but that are no less powerful as acts of cultural representation. That MOA is not a feast house, and that the audience is primarily made up of outsiders, is not what is important. These factors, rather

³ See also Garfield 1939, Duff 1959, and Halpin 1984b.

than detracting from the power of hereditary claims, could very well compound their political significance as all museum representations are over-determined by virtue of their selectivity.

Furthermore, as the hereditary ownership of non-material property, such as an origin story, flows not from authorship or the possession of written texts, but from the "idea" of the story as it exists intersubjectively (Harrison 1992), this understanding of ownership has very real cultural implications for certain classes of Northwest Coast objects. The 'Ksan Doors, from this perspective, are not merely a representation of an origin story, but are a *manifestation* of this hereditary privilege; in a sense, they *are* the story, and according to Gitksan systems of ownership they remain, as expressions of a hereditary right, the property of a given individual or family group. In the case of the 'Ksan Doors, however, this ownership is not a given, at least according to certain Gitksan individuals. That the 'Ksan Doors have become central to this ownership dispute should not be surprising; because of their prominent position as the public face of MOA, and because they are the only carving of this story that presents the figures in tableaux form—as a scene from that story—they are unique among Northwest Coast objects. Not only this, but they have also been the impetus for a public performance of the origin story in the Great Hall of the museum in 1991. As will be discussed below, it was around this time, and perhaps because of the hereditary claim involved in this performance, that a dispute over the ownership of this story arose, and the 'Ksan Doors became its focal point.

⁴ For more general accounts of Tsimshian history and culture see Halpin and Seguin 1990 and Inglis et. al. 1990.

THE GENESIS OF THE DOORS

The legend tells of the joining of heaven and earth, or the divine and human, in the creation of the first Gitksan people. Skawah, an earth woman, and her grandmother are the only survivors of their village. Alone in the forest the two women need a marriage alliance with a male in order to establish the social order. The old grandmother shouts into the silence: "Who will marry my granddaughter, Skawah?" Various animals answer her call, but all are rejected as not having the right power. Finally, a handsome young man, shining with celestial radiance, appears and takes Skawah to the heavenly home of his father, the Sun. The children born to them return to earth to become the ancestors of the Gitksan.

—story synopsis from the pamphlet *The 'Ksan Doors, Museum of Anthropology*
(unpublished 1976)

The Museum of Anthropology has become—by virtue of its location, collections, and history of working with First Nations artists—a significant actor in the cultural milieu(s) of the Northwest Coast of British Columbia (Ames 1981). While collaboration and consultation at MOA have sometimes been conducted through band councils and other officially-sanctioned First Nations representatives (Holm and Pokotylo 1997), many of the core relationships that it has established over the past fifty years have been pursued with individual community members, and on a more informal and personal basis (Hawthorn 1993). This individualised rather than institutionalised approach is by no means undesirable, nor should its evolution over the years be viewed as wholly accidental; because traditional systems of ownership among many Northwest Coast First Nations flow out of the hereditary rights of particular family lineages, any specific expression or representation of these privileges is the concern of a given family group and not necessarily that of the community as a whole. Because songs, stories, and names are also considered the property of specific families and individuals on the Northwest

Coast, museum staff have developed a heightened sensitivity to the importance of observing and responding appropriately to the protocols governing the ownership and use of hereditary rights.

Such an approach to collaboration is not only culturally respectful, but it is also in keeping with the loosely structured and improvisational style of the museum (Krug 1997), where staff members are not expected to speak with a unified institutional voice, but are given the freedom and mandate to develop these kinds of relationships on their own initiative. This tradition of collaboration has been largely defined by the museum's emphasis—particularly since 1976, though as early as 1948—on the aesthetic qualities of Northwest Coast objects and the works of contemporary First Nations artists. Rather than presenting an "expert" and ostensibly coherent narrative about Northwest Coast cultures MOA has, since its re-invention twenty-three years ago, favoured a more fragmented approach to representation—one that resists presenting a unified and authoritative voice, either as an institution or in facilitating the perspectives and cultural activities of First Nations people (Halpin 1983). This approach was made manifest in the design of the Great Hall, where visitors were, for the first time in a Canadian museum, confronted with the monumentality of Northwest Coast totems without the intervention of heavily interpretive labelling. This aesthetic meeting between visitor and object aimed simultaneously to subvert contextualist modes of interpretation—in which objects are understood as the artifacts of often dead cultures—and to provide a visual framework through which visitors could appreciate those contemporary examples of Northwest Coast art also featured in the museum's collections. Of these contemporary objects, and as works of Northwest Coast art incorporated into the very architecture of the museum,

the 'Ksan doors have become an important hallmark of MOA's public face. It should be understood, however, that their genesis was a complex process that involved numerous individuals. This is their story.

In early July of 1974, the University of British Columbia's Superintendent of New Construction, Franz Conrads, sent out a call for submissions to Haida artists Bill Reid and Robert Davidson, Kwakiutl artist Henry Hunt, Nimpkish artist Douglas Cranmer, Nuu-chah-nulth artist Ron Hamilton, and the carvers of the 'Ksan Indian Village and Craft Museum at Hazelton, B.C., a community initiative opened in August, 1970. The letter read, in part: "The Museum of Anthropology wishes to commission a master carver to prepare carved panels for the main doors, side panels, and facing screen of its new building now under construction....The carving should be of a Northwest Coast design, traditional or contemporary, and in the natural colour of the wood."⁵ While it is not clear from the archival sources housed at MOA how many of these artists responded with proposals (there is only a very general letter from Robert Davidson), the proposal sent by project manager Neil J. Sterritt on behalf of 'Ksan is preserved, although the whereabouts of the model that accompanied this proposal is presently unknown.

From the outset, the Skawah origin story was part of the conception of the doors, although they were originally also going to include images from a second story, as is noted in the proposal sent by Neil Sterritt: "This presentation is in Northwest Coast design and symbolizes the 'Skawah' and 'Painted Goat of Stekyawden' legends (from Downfall of Temlaham)." The reference here is to a book, first published in 1928, in which the anthropologist Marius Barbeau fashioned, in quasi-Biblical prose, composites

⁵ This and other pieces of correspondence referred to in the following section are stored in MOA's archives, Audrey Hawthorn Files, Box 8, folders 8-13 and 8-13a, 'Ksan Doors (1974-1976).

of stories and histories that he and a native ethnographer named William Beynon recorded during the previous two decades on behalf of the National Museum of Canada (see Barbeau 1973:164-237). These myths were, in an interesting turn, later dramatised in dance performances at the National Museum in Ottawa by Gitksan community members as part of the 1972 exhibition of 'Ksan art, *Breath of our Grandfathers*. In the catalogue published for this exhibition, a series of masks identified as relating to the "Skaw'a legend" are pictured, including representations of the sun, a young woman, and a grandmother (National Museum of Man 1972:54-59); a photograph of a single-horned mountain-goat mask from the "Painted Goat of Stekyawden" story appears on the cover. Among the carvers of these masks were Walter Harris, Vernon Stephens, and Art Sterritt, who were the artists originally involved in the 'Ksan door project, to be joined later on by Earl Muldoe.

Although the content had been thematically decided in 1974, several changes to the original proposal were considered. In a memorandum sent to Michael Ames, for example, Marjorie Halpin suggested that, because of the strength of his design, Vernon Stephens be asked to carve the outside of the doors, and that a Kwakiutl and a Haida carver be commissioned to complete the inside surfaces of the doors and to make the proposed screen; "so that eventually the whole door statement is one that reflects the three major carving traditions of the contemporary Northwest Coast in B.C." The following day, on November 15, Franz Conrads sent a letter to 'Ksan project director Neil J. Sterritt asking that the cost of the proposal be broken down into its various components in the event that sufficient funding was not obtained. Perhaps in response to Halpin's suggestion, he asked specifically for a breakdown of that portion of the doors

designed by Vernon Stephens, and forwarded the request that they be carved in high-relief rather than painted, as per the original call for proposals.

In late December, Michael Ames sent a letter to Neil Sterritt informing him that the revised proposal would be accepted, funds permitting, and in early February of the next year it was confirmed that the university could commit to having the complete doors carved, but that the screen would have to be deferred or abandoned altogether. In mid-March, Neil Sterritt met with Michael Ames, Franz Conrads, and Jim Bogyo of Rayonier Canada—a major contributor to the project—at the architectural offices of Arthur Erickson. According to a memorandum from Franz Conrads later that month, Michael Ames requested at this meeting that Neil Sterritt supply a version of the story being carved on the doors, a copy of which is stapled to the aforementioned memorandum.

Although the stories contained in *Downfall at Temlaham* were mentioned in the original proposal as an inspiration for the doors, the story provided by Neil Sterritt bears little stylistic resemblance to the version published in this text, being also considerably shorter and including segments that appear in none of the other published versions that I have located. While the story was obtained from Neil Sterritt, it would not be justified to assume that he wrote it; similarly, because other individuals evidently contributed to aspects of the project, it would not be justified to assume that it was necessarily one of the artists that wrote the story. Another memorandum, from September of 1975, mentions that Polly Sargent, then secretary for the Performing Arts of 'Ksan, indicated in a letter sent to the museum that the wording in the Skawah story may be incorrect in two places: "Instead of 'Who will marry my granddaughter Skawah' it should be translated as 'Who will marry the granddaughter of Skawah.'" It is possible that this version was

recorded as part of a 'Ksan initiated oral history project that was launched in 1971, that involved the recording of narratives which were then translated, typed, and cross-referenced for community use (MacDonald 1972:9). While the story sent to the museum was in type-written form, it is a mechanically-reproduced copy with some (notable) revisions written in pen, which could indicate that it was pulled from the oral archive at 'Ksan.⁶

In discussing the doors with Michael Ames this year, he mentioned that the idea of the carvings representing the four clans, along with the fact that each carver was from one of those clans, contributed to the appeal of the doors: "We thought that was kind of appropriate, rather than choosing one and having the other clans upset about it. We thought that was a good move on their part." While Vernon Stephens (Wolf), Art Sterritt (Eagle), Earl Muldoe (Frog/Raven), and Walter Harris (Fireweed/Killer Whale), are representative of the four Gitksan clans, it is of note that the story claims to relate the origin of only three, those of the Wolf, Frog, and (Killer) Whale, the last of these being the coastal Tsimshian equivalent of Fireweed, to which it was later changed in a revised copy of the story.⁷ While it has been generally assumed that the doors represent the founding of all four clans, closer inspection reveals that they do not; in the original pamphlet published for the new doors, a description of the panel depicting the clan crests

⁶ It has been generally assumed that the source of the story was Walter Harris, presumably because he designed and carved that portion of the door depicting Skawah. The revisions are notable because, in this version of the story, Skawah is described as the "earth mother of the Wolf tribe, the Frog tribe, and the Whale tribe," three of the Gitksan clans. Whoever "corrected" this version, scribbled out the Killer Whale clan and substituted that of the Fireweed. Although these are considered equivalents in the Tsimshian clan system, Walter Harris' membership in the Fireweed clan is under the Killer Whale crest. Unfortunately, neither Walter Harris nor his sister Doreen Jensen replied to letters requesting clarification on this matter.

⁷ In a footnote, Viola E. Garfield (1939:173) points out that there has been some confusion over whether this clan is named for the blackfish or the killerwhale, as there is no distinction between the two in the Tsimshian language. Informants consulted during her fieldwork insisted that the crest referred to the blackfish, which has a blunt face and is completely black, unlike the killerwhale, but shares a prominent dorsal fin.

lists "Whale, Fireweed, Wolf, and Frog," which is numerically four but, as has been indicated, represents only three clans, leaving the Eagle out altogether.

The complete text of the story was never published by the museum, however, and the synopsis (excerpted above) that was incorporated into a pamphlet explaining the history and cultural significance of the 'Ksan doors merely stated that the sky-children, as they are sometimes known, "became the ancestors of the Gitksan." Fifteen years later, however, the Skawah story was once again made manifest at the museum, this time in the form of a site-specific dance performance in the Great Hall that was part of a series of collaborative events involving the Karen Jamieson Dance Company, Hereditary Chief Kenneth Harris, Gitksan cultural historian, artist, and political activist Doreen Jensen, and a group of guest performers from various First Nations. This performance was directly associated with the 'Ksan Doors, which appeared on the cover of the program notes and were explained inside. Once again, a claim to the origin story was forwarded, though this time it seemed to be a claim of exclusive ownership made by Hereditary Chief Kenneth Harris. And, once again, an account of the Skawah origin story was published by the museum, this time in the program notes accompanying the performance, called *Gawa Gyani*—a Gitksan term referring to a traditional law (*ayuuk*) requiring the resolution of conflicts through peaceful means.

Unlike the earlier version given to MOA by 'Ksan, in this account it is claimed that the story is specifically about the founding of the Fireweed, or *gisgahast* (*gisgahæst*; *gisgahest*), clan and the introduction of a matrilineal system of descent. Not only is the *gisgahast* clan given pre-eminence in this version of events, but Chief Ken Harris makes the further claim that his family group are in fact the *original* descendants of this

ancestral figure, and therefore represent the *first* house of the Gitksan people. It is upon this basis that he seemed to be making an exclusive claim of ownership, although this is somewhat ambiguous in the program notes. Documents obtained through the Museum of Anthropology suggest that it was because of this performance that a dispute over the ownership of the Skawah story intensified and was brought to the attention of museum staff. In response, gallery guides were instructed to refrain from relating any details of the story, and to discuss instead how stories, along with names, songs, and dances, are considered the property of specific families on the Northwest Coast. In an ironic shift, the 'Ksan Doors became the location where it was explained why the museum does not relate any stories without specific—and uncontested—permission. Until the ownership dispute was resolved, it was decided, the museum would remain silent.

While those aspects of this story relating to Dolly Watts are relatively familiar to MOA staff, those involving Kenneth Harris are not, perhaps because there has been no lasting legacy of the *Gawa Gyani* performance other than the ownership dispute. On a sunny afternoon in May of this year, I met with Chief Kenneth Harris at the Museum of Anthropology in order to get a better understanding of his claim of ownership. A gentle and generous man in his early seventies, Chief Harris indicated in this conversation that the story is about the origins of the first house of the Fireweed clan, the *dagmhast*, and the introduction of a new cultural system which later developed into that of the Gitksan people. While it was, in this respect, an origin story “common” to the Gitksan, he explained, only a few hereditary titles can directly trace their provenance to the sky-children themselves. The hereditary title Harhpegwawtu,⁸ which is presently held by

⁸ pronounced something like Haar-peg-waa-tu, with a more guttural ‘g’ at the end of the first syllable, and greater emphasis placed on the first and third syllables.

Chief Harris, is one of these; it is, according to Harris, the earthly name of Ligiyeun, who was the left-handed son among the sky-children and the first chief of Temlaham. An account of the stories belonging to this title, he noted, can be read in *Visitors Who Never Left* (Harris 1974). Originally recorded on audio tape by Chief Harris in 1948, the collection of stories translated in this book were narrated by his maternal uncle, a Gitksan man from the village of Gitsegukla, on the upper Skeena River in northern British Columbia, whose Christian name was Arthur McDames, but who was also known as Harhpegwawtu. We agreed to meet again at a later date, and in the meantime I did some reading.

THE STORIES

So they moved. They were transported in a mysterious way to their new townsite called *Damelahamid*, and they settled. And they built their house according to the specifications that were given to them. And they planted the *gilhast* in front of their house. Overnight, it grew and the next day they looked at it and it pierced the sky. This was the *gilhast* and the beginning of a new clan, the *Gisgahast*.

—from Arthur McDames account of the Skawah story
in *Visitors Who Never Left* (Harris 1974:23)

The story of Skawah has had numerous written incarnations over the past century, and has been interpreted over the years in equally numerous ways: Whereas Franz Boas used this story, along with volumes of others, in his attempt to demonstrate cultural diffusion, William Duncan took it as evidence that the Tsimshian had knowledge of “the White Christ” before the arrival of the white man; whereas the ‘Ksan carvers turned it into a pan-Gitksan origin story, Ken Harris tells us that it is about the founding of the first house of the Fireweed clan—that of Ligiyeun, otherwise known as Harhpegwawtu—and

that it was only through the rules of exogamous marriage and matrilineal descent that the story came to “belong” to others. Including the pamphlet that was prepared for the *Gawa Gyani* performance at MOA in 1992, I have been able to locate (with some effort) thirteen published versions, plus an extended content analysis of several of these texts prepared by Franz Boas and published in his *Tsimshian Mythology* (Boas 1916:847-85).⁹ In addition to the unpublished version contained in MOA’s archives, Marius Barbeau (1928[1973]:249-250) lists ten informant sources from his fieldwork with William Beynon between 1914 and 1925, and two more from the notes of Diamond Jenness. Disregarding the composite version found in Miller (1997:57-61; based on older published sources discussed here) along with the *Gawa Gyani* version (based on Harris 1974:3-23), and excluding the interesting though problematic version told by William Duncan to John Arctander (1908:109-112) along with the anomalous and rather brief Tlingit versions recorded by Swanton (1909:124-126, 295-296), we are left with seven versions that, although differing in some respects, maintain the same basic structure and conserve certain key details that are of relevance to the present discussion (Boas 1895/1975:281-284/466-473; Boas 1902:221-225; Swanton 1905:159-172, 341-347; Boas 1912:221-225; Barbeau [1928]1973:167-220; Harris 1974:3-23; Cove and MacDonald 1987:262-265).

The Skawah story begins with an episode involving a hunter’s wife whose infidelity with the chief’s son from a neighbouring village, as revealed by the hunter’s bad luck (or, in some versions, his death), results in the murder of her princely lover and a consequent battle between the two villages, during which all but two inhabitants of the

⁹ Boas (1916) also lists a Haida version recorded in the Masset dialect by J. R. Swanton (1908:728-731) that I have not been able to locate, although from notes included in Boas’ analysis it seems to deviate

unfaithful wife's village are killed. These two, whose relationship is variously described as mother-daughter and grandmother-granddaughter, survive according to the different versions because they either had the foresight to hide or, as is more thematically pleasing, because they were in ritual seclusion after the girl's first menses, the point at which she becomes marriageable. The (grand)mother's cry, "Who will marry my (grand)daughter," begins the second episode, in which the woman and the girl, both of whom are named Skawah depending on the version, are approached by various animal suitors, who are represented on one of the panels of the 'Ksan doors. As the animals respond to the (grand)mother's cry, each is asked to demonstrate how it plans to protect its future wife; all are eventually rejected. After calling out one more time, a radiant being appears who has the power to turn the earth over and is, therefore, accepted as a suitable husband. The girl is then carried up to the radiant being's paternal house in the sky (depicted on another panel of the 'Ksan doors) where she gives birth to several children, who are educated in the arts of war and sent back to earth to avenge the murder of their mother's people. A final episode finds the sky-children gambling with their enemies. After killing the chief and obliterating the enemy village, the sky-children eventually settle at a place called Temlaham, sometimes translated as "prairie town," where they and their descendants have adventures before being forced to migrate to other regions by a great flood after a taboo is broken.

Although the stories differ in certain details, there is a remarkable continuity in structure, with the three basic episodes outlined above elaborated to a greater or lesser degree in each version. Also more important than differences, at least from my present standpoint, is the degree to which certain key details have been conserved. After the

significantly from the six versions identified above.

murdered prince is missed in the opposite village, for example, a slave is invariably sent to investigate his whereabouts on the pretence of needing fire; in all versions, as the slave is about to exit the house of the unfaithful woman, blood falls on his/her foot and, looking up, he/she discovers the head of the prince hanging above the door. Another conserved element is a variety of "just-so" story that explains the noises made by trees as they are blown by the wind; when the (grand)mother and (grand)daughter are being carried up into the skies by the radiant being, the (grand)mother cannot resist the temptation to open her eyes, causing them to fall back to earth. The sky being, presumably out of frustration, stuffs her into the cavity of a tree and this, it is explained, is why you hear her howling in the forest to this day.

While these elements are dramatically important to the narrative, the most significant conserved details are those associated with the sky-children who went on to establish the first houses of the Fireweed clan, for these suggest what elements of the story might be considered most important. The most prominent child in all versions is the one known as Ligiyeun, or "left-handed," who is listed among the sky-children as either the oldest or the youngest, the inversion being consistent. In all versions, he is given a small club or wedge that has the power to kill with just a tap, and sometimes the additional power to turn the earth over. It is with this weapon that Ligiyeun kills the head-chief of the enemy village during a gambling match after the size of the club is ridiculed. While the number and names of the other sky-children are different in all versions, the left-handed child is consistently identified. In addition, Ligiyeun is almost always associated with a crest called *larh'om*, translated variously as bird-of-the-skies, bird-on-high, thunderbird, sky-above, and sky-vault. Along with the sun, the stars, and

the rainbow, this is consistently included as one of the crests depicted on the housefronts given to the sky-children by their father, the radiant being. As will be discussed in the next section, these crests appear on older totem poles owned by the houses of Gurhsan and Harhpegwawtu at Gitsegukla, providing important indications of the historical relation between these two houses.

What is most peculiar, for reasons also described below, is the absence of these housefront crests in the stories given to Chief Kenneth Harris by Arthur McDames. In their stead, a box containing a miniature totem pole with nothing on it—the *gilhæst*, or single-fireweed—is given to the sky-children. When they arrive in Temlaham, they “plant” the *gilhæst* pole, which grows overnight to pierce the sky, marking the beginning of the *gisgahæst*, or the people-of-the-fireweed. The McDames stories are also the only ones that specifically mention the origin of the title Gurhsan, who is described as Harhpegwawtu’s only brother and as the younger of the two. His name is derived from a box containing gambling sticks that he was given before his descent to earth; originally named Akagee, he later came to be known as “gambler,” or Gurhsan, just as Ligiyeun is later known by a name that refers to a sun-obscuring fog that descends when he fights, which is the meaning of Harhpegwawtu.¹⁰

¹⁰ Anderson and Halpin (2000:228-229) give the translations of these titles as “gambler” and “the sun disappears once in a while.” Frances M. P. Robinson, who assisted Kenneth Harris with his book, incorrectly translates Harhpegwawtu as “First Born” (Harris 1974:137), which is who the son was in order of birth and not the meaning of the title itself, according to Harris (1974:127), who states quite clearly in

A TALE OF TWO HOUSES

I have learned a great deal from you chief and my only wish is that you will be long spared with us to advise us and tell us what to do in this age of indifference and lack of interest in matters concerning our forefathers, which now very few of the younger generations are interesting themselves in. So we hope to have you with us to guide us. Regarding the crest you have shown us and the history of it, we will from now on know just what it represents. It is well for the newer generations to know that none of the symbols that one sees deployed may be used by anyone excepting the owner and each symbol has special meaning and history.

—speech by Harhpegwawtu (Arthur McDames) at a potlatch in 1945
(Anderson and Halpin 2000:147)

The beginning of this year saw the publication of a group of notebooks by William Beynon, in which he documented a series of 1945 potlatches held in the village of Gitsegukla, on the upper Skeena River. Not only did he attend these ceremonies as an ethnographer, but he also participated in them as an invited guest and chief. The speech excerpted above was made in the context of a pole-raising feast; a group of crests depicted on the pole in question were the object of a dispute not unlike that presently surrounding the story depicted on the 'Ksan doors. In this case, the head of a dissenting house was claiming that these crests were the exclusive property of another title that was not then held by anyone, and he demanded that the offending images be chopped off (Anderson and Halpin 2000:65-66). After an insulting incident, in which members of the dissenting house suggested in song that the wealth of others was being stolen (Anderson and Halpin 2000:77), and a subsequent decision to boycott the pole-raising feast (Anderson and Halpin 2000:129), the potlatching chief explained that he had a privilege to use these crests, although they also belonged to another title. The title was named for a

the conclusion: "*Liggeyoan*, who was the oldest of the three children, became known as *Hagbegwatku*

legendary warrior once married to a woman of the house of Harhpegwawtu, who acquired these and other rights in the course of his adventures long ago. According to the story told by the potlatching chief, this warrior established numerous houses and lineages in different villages, one of which was located at Gitsegukla. After fighting a battle at Kitimat with several of his nephews, one of them returned to Gitsegukla to revive that branch of his uncle's house, bringing with him crests and names that belonged to his uncle but which he had been given a privilege to use (Anderson and Halpin 2000:138-139). This nephew, it was explained, was the ancestor of the potlatching chief, and that is why his pole depicts these crests in common.

In response to this account, high-ranking chiefs from the other main clans spoke, affirming that this was what they had also heard from this man's uncle at a previous feast, and that he was not taking anything that did not belong to him. One particularly senior chief concluded: "You may now sleep and feel rested that you may now take your place among your fellow chiefs and only thoughtless people may or will say anything, as they do not know what they talk of, in the same manner that winds spring up and do damage, not knowing why it does so, such is the manner and way of careless speakers, they are like a bad wind that damages rather than does good" (Anderson and Halpin 2000:141). Another chief added: "You are not interfering with the rights of anybody else, nor are you taking anything that does not belong to you. It is so easy in these days to make false traditions and myths, as in this many of our young people have even neglected to assume their own names and know nothing themselves" (Anderson and Halpin 2000:141-142). And so the matter was settled in the traditional manner, through the act of public witnessing, remembrance, and validation—the core functions of the feast system.

because of the method they used to avoid fighting by becoming obscured in the fog."

At a time when interest in traditional matters was threatened by other factors, Arthur McDames seems to have taken a central role in ensuring their continuation. Not only did he carve one of the poles raised in the 1945 potlatches and recondition another, but Harhpegwawtu was also asked by the Gitsegukla families hosting the ceremonies to, in his own words, “be the manager of everything as to how it should go on” (Anderson and Halpin 2000:79). Perhaps because of this role, the ceremonies were held in a feast hall that belonged to Harhpegwawtu and was named for one of his crests, that of “whirlpool” (Anderson and Halpin 2000:153), the origin of which can be found in a published collection of stories from among the field notes of William Beynon and Marius Barbeau (Cove and MacDonald 1987:259-261). According to Barbeau’s *Totem Poles of the Gitksan*, originally published in 1929, out of the fourteen poles of the Fireweed clan standing at Gitsegukla in the late 1920s, five of these belonged to the house of Harhpegwawtu—more than any other in the village—with two erected as recently as 1925 and 1926 (Barbeau 1929:190-191). Despite Barbeau’s introductory claim that totem poles were a thing of the past and were no longer being made, Harhpegwawtu was also identified as the carver of three poles standing at that time, one sometime around 1900 and the other two in 1920 (ibid:184). By the 1950s Harhpegwawtu was noted by Wilson Duff (1952:27) as the only carver actively working among the Gitksan.

As is exemplified by Arthur McDames’ speech excerpted earlier, evident throughout the ceremonies recorded in Beynon’s notebooks is a concern, expressed on numerous occasions by senior members of the community, that the rights and privileges of the houses were not being passed down properly, and that misunderstandings had developed concerning the reasons why different houses share common crest images and

stories. In a separate potlatch from that just described, a chief who held a title of Temlaham origin and who had overstated his ownership of particular crests, was gently reminded by a higher-ranking chief from another clan that these crests were also shared by related coastal houses: "You did not mention that those on the Coast that are using the same crests and names and traditions are but using yours and while they are not doing any wrong, they are but the descendants of your group" (Anderson and Halpin 2000:174). As Margaret Anderson and Marjorie Halpin (2000:19) point out in the introduction to Beynon's notebooks, many houses belonging to the Gisgahast/Gispudwuda (Fireweed/Killer Whale) clan among the Gitksan, Nisga'a, and the Coast and Southern Tsimshian, share as part of their ancient history—or *adaox*—stories originating at Temlaham, most notably that of Skawah. This shared ancient history is embodied in the crests displayed on housefront paintings, on totem poles, and on button blankets, among other ceremonial regalia, and is an important way of tracing common kinship with other houses in sometimes distant territories. In a letter that was sent to Dolly Watts (and copied to the director of the Museum of Anthropology) this past year, a group of Nisga'a families have challenged her claim of exclusive ownership on this basis.

While human fallibility can partially account for the misunderstandings that have intensified over the course of this century, one must also consider the role of human agency and interest in the modification of these traditions over time, coupled with the impact of external factors, such as the effect of radical population decline throughout the nineteenth century and equally radical social transformations throughout the twentieth century. According to Wayne Suttles and Aldona C. Jonaitis (1990:81), Franz Boas came to reject the assumption that mythology is an integrated system, with hidden meanings

that can be discovered through analysis because, as he observed throughout the Northwest Coast, "people were constantly borrowing and embellishing myths to support claims of status, a practice that made a stable system of myths impossible." It should be noted that by the time the earliest ethnographies were written and stories collected, outbreaks of smallpox, measles, influenza, and other high-mortality and density-dependent infectious diseases had been devastating native communities for over a hundred years, sometimes in advance of direct European contact.¹¹ Given the physical toll exacted by epidemics, along with the social changes brought on by religious conversion and shifts in economic activity (Campbell 1984; McDonald 1984; Cole and Darling 1990), it is not surprising that native cultures on the coast were believed to be rapidly disappearing in the final decades of the nineteenth century,¹² and that changes did occur to traditions throughout the Northwest Coast. While it is impossible to assess how these factors specifically affected the traditions and composition of Gitksan houses, Helen Codere's (1950) hypothesis that the availability of heritable statuses and confusion over their succession contributed to the frequency and intensity of Kwakiutl potlatching is suggestive, although controversial (Boyd 1990:147).

¹¹ Writing on the demographic history of the Northwest Coast, Robert T. Boyd (1990:137-141) lists smallpox epidemics in 1775, 1801, possibly 1824-25, 1836-38, 1853, and 1862-63. While mortality rates were not recorded for the 1775 and 1801 epidemics (a conservative figure for initial smallpox outbreaks in previously unexposed populations being 30 percent mortality), census records taken later in the century indicate a staggering death rate, particularly after the smallpox outbreak of 1862, which was introduced to Victoria by a ship from San Francisco, then transmitted up the coast after a temporary settlement of natives—Haidas, Tsimshians, Kwakiutls, and Tlingits among them—were evicted by the government and sent back to their home communities (Boyd 1990:142). Between the 1840s and the 1880s, the Haida people suffered an unprecedented population loss of over 80 percent; by 1885, Tsimshian-speaking groups had suffered a decline of nearly 50 percent (Halpin and Seguin 1990:282; Duff 1964:39).

¹² According to E.S. Lohse and Frances Sundt (1990:89), it was for this reason that Spencer Baird, the Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, advocated in the 1870s a more professional and systematic approach to collecting artifacts that included documentation of cultural context: "Baird's insistence on representative specimens rather than curios, and their display in carefully planned exhibits, marks the beginning of professional anthropological research that was to prompt the large-scale systematic collections of the late nineteenth century."

Whereas the *adaox* histories commonly describe the early formation of houses and changes in their constitution as people migrated to different areas in ancient times, it does seem that a more recent and largely forgotten transformation of the house system began sometime in the second half of the nineteenth-century, with the result that what were previously considered sub-divisions of various prestigious houses became increasingly independent, emerging in the early part of this century as houses in their own right. William Beynon mentions on two occasions (Anderson and Halpin 2000:152,167), for example, that the houses of Gurhsan, Tsa-ols, and Hanamuk were, until fairly recently, considered subdivisions of the same house under the leadership of Gurhsan, and that at one time they would have held their feasts jointly. Beynon considered the fact that the 1945 potlatches were held separately to be precedent-setting and, he observed, “it would seem as each were now an independent House rather than members of the same group” (Anderson and Halpin 2000:152). In a speech delivered at his pole-raising feast, Gurhsan (then Peter Mark) also mentioned that it was his understanding that when the people left Temlaham it was Gurhsan, the ‘gambler’ of the sky-born children, who was one of their leaders: “When the Gwaxsán house was first built at Gidzaguk’la I have been told Gwaxsán had the rear and T’sa’wels and Han’amux had each side of the house, but of late years they have had separate houses but are related to each other” (Anderson and Halpin 2000:187). In a follow-up interview with Chief Kenneth Harris, he also indicated that the old system, whereby the houses of lesser-chiefs were understood to be subdivisions of larger umbrella houses, had been lost: “What I’m seeing now is that every house—they all have houses, yes—but every house seems to be claiming that they have a *sm’ooygit* chief, which is not necessarily true because the term

sm'ooygit chief only applies to the collective houses under the one of those.” While it is true that Hanamuk has a house, for example, its independence has increased to such an extent over the course of this century that, during the Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en sovereignty case, the present Hanamuk (Joan Ryan) represented her position as a house chief as “the highest title that the Gitksan nation can bestow upon you” (Monet and Skanu'u 1991:84).

In that same interview, Chief Harris explained that according to the *adaox* tradition passed on to him from Arthur McDames, Harhpegwawtu and Gurhsan are actually brothers—two of the sky-children, originally named Ligiyeun and Akagee respectively, who avenged the murder of their mother's people—and that they were at one time part of the same original house at Temlaham under the leadership of Harhpegwawtu, the eldest of the two. At some unspecified time in this history, Gurhsan had a disagreement with Harhpegwawtu and walked out of the house of his brother in order to form one of his own: “When they moved after the flood, Gurhsan, I think he rebelled, I hate to call it rebellion, but he left the house of *dagmhast*.” The brothers later reconciled and from then on maintained their separate houses side-by-side under the matrilineal guidance of Tsæmehamid,¹³ the daughter among the sky-children known as “the healer” and the matriarch of the *dagmhast*. This traditional relationship between the two houses was, according to Harhpegwawtu, reflected until fairly recently in the seating arrangements of the feast house, where Harhpegwawtu would sit at the centre, Gurhsan to his immediate left, and the lesser chiefs belonging to these two houses extending outward on both sides in a wing formation, one of whom he identified as Ksrarom-larhæ, who sat

¹³ This title was at one time held by Ken Harris' grandmother, Agnus McDames. Ken Harris clarified that although the other house titles are all masculine, they can be held by either a man or a woman. This title is an exception in that it is feminine and can only be held by a woman: “Tsæmedhamid is the matriarch of

to the immediate right of Harhpegwawtu. For this reason, Chief Harris added, "When I start talking I usually say, 'In the beginning we were a family,' and the three children that came from heaven is the family."

That the houses of Gurhsan and Harhpegwawtu are closely related can, in fact, be demonstrated through an analysis of associated families and crests as described in Marius Barbeau's *Totem Poles of the Gitksan* (1929), an inventory of over a hundred totem poles on the upper Skeena river and the houses to which they belong, based on four seasons of field research from 1920-1926 carried out on behalf of the National Museum of Canada. That this is possible is remarkable given that Barbeau himself resisted these connections. Of the house of Gurhsan, Barbeau (1929:79) has the following to say:

The family of Gurhsan is one of the most ancient in Gitsegyukla. It originated at Temlaham, according to the tradition, and claims as an ancestress the orphan-maiden Skawah, who was taken up to the sky by Sunbeams as his human bride. It is among the few families that settled at Gitsegyukla after the downfall of Temlaham and forms part of what may be termed the Sky clan of the Fireweed phratry, a remarkable and widely known clan on the North West Coast. Gurhsan ranks among its most authentic representatives, retaining as he does to this day, some of its original privileges.

Listed first among the legendary kinsmen claimed by the title-holder of Gurhsan (then known as Dan Gurhsan or, in anglicised form, as Dan Cookson) is Harhpegwawtu, followed by Gitludahl and Aret of Kisapayks, and Nees-tarhawk of Kitsalas (among others). Despite his appearance first on this list, Barbeau (1929:91) comments in relation to Harhpegwawtu and the sub-house headed by Ksrarom-larhæ (who, it will be remembered, Chief Harris indicated as the chief that would traditionally sit to his immediate right), that they seem to not belong to the sky-clan of the Fireweed people, forming a group that is distinct from that of Gurhsan and Gurhsan's relatives at

the *dagmhaast* and that's the only matriarch. There's only one matriarch in each can, and the other people,

Kispayaks—although he adds that Temlaham is claimed as their birthplace and that Skawah is considered by some to be a remote ancestor. While Barbeau (1929:92) expresses doubt as to the validity of this latter claim, he includes a footnote on the very same page in which he states that “Dan Gurhsan believed that Harhpegwawtu and his own ancestor Gurhsan formed part of the same household at Temlaham.”

Throughout totem poles of the Gitksan, Barbeau fails to perceive, in a manner of speaking, the tree for its many branches. Barbeau's fixation on the more overtly celestial emblems of the Fireweed clan clearly blinded him to the relationships between the two houses and those of other affiliated families. While the crest images depicted on the totem poles of Harhpegwawtu and Gurhsan are indeed different, they are connected through the origin stories relating to Skawah and, in a more circuitous fashion, through the crests depicted on the poles of affiliated houses (Barbeau 1929:79-108). So while Barbeau maintains that the houses of Harhpegwawtu and Ksrarom-larhæ are not related to that of Gurhsan, for example, he goes on to describe the relatives of Gurhsan living at Kispayaks as being of Temlaham origin and, furthermore, as tracing their ancestry to Ligiyuen, who was considered the first head of their family (Barbeau 1929:87-88). Other houses related to Gurhsan are identified as subdivisions of the house of Harhpegwawtu (Barbeau 1929:92).

The crest images depicted on the poles of these Fireweed groups clarify these complex connections. Barbeau describes a total of nineteen poles standing in Gitsegukla at this time, five of which are identified as belonging to the house of Harhpegwawtu (Barbeau 1929:94-97), three located in the old village and two in the new, and two belonging to the house of Gurhsan (Barbeau 1929:79-81). The two poles of Gurhsan are:

all the other clans, have this wing formation and they all have wing chiefs, but that's for the clan.”

“The Owl” pole, raised around 1910 in commemoration of a former Tsa-ols, which includes four representations of a supernatural owl (*gutkwee-murhs*) encountered by the house’s ancestors, and was among the poles re-erected in 1945 (Anderson and Halpin 2000:151-162); and the Pole-of-the-Moon, erected sometime between 1895 and 1890 in commemoration of three deceased family members, which includes representations of the single-horned mountain goat (*mateeh*), an owl, Ligiyeun (again noted as one of Skawah’s sky-born sons and an ancestor of the clan), and representations of the moon on the front and the back of the pole that incorporate images of Skawah holding what is identified as an earthquake charm (*tsa-urh*).¹⁴ In relation to this interpretation of the Skawah myth, Barbeau (1929:81) notes that “it is the only one of its kind that has come under our observation,” and he points out in a footnote that rainbow-like marks on Skawah’s cheeks may be an allusion to the rainbow crest (Barbeau 1929:80). The two poles belonging to Hanamuk (then Fanny Johnson) are closely related to those of Gurhsan, incorporating (among other crests) images of the sun, stars, and the rainbow (Barbeau 1929:81-84). The poles of the related houses of Gitludahl and Wawsemelarhæ of Kispayaks both incorporate the owl crest, the former also depicting an image of a grizzly bear with a sun around its neck (*medeegem-gyamk*), and the latter counting among its crests a representation of rainbow-like sun-dogs, both of which are in keeping with the celestial heritage of the sky-children (Barbeau 1929:84-87).

Among the most important crests depicted on the poles of Harhpegwawtu is that named *larh’om*, which Barbeau translates as ‘bird-of-the-skies’ and ‘bird-of-the-air,’ and describes as “part of the set of crests which the sons of Skawah brought down from the

¹⁴ In the composite of *Downfall of Temlaham* (Barbeau [1928]1973), Skawah herself is the one who uses this earthquake box to upset the enemy village, although in other versions this is either a collective act or

Sky, when they established their abode at Temlaham” (Barbeau 1929:96). In relation to this crest, Barbeau adds the following important note: “In an account, it is given as the house-front painting of Ligi-yuwen, the fourth of the sky-born brothers.” Of the five poles of Harhpegwawtu, two of these—one dated from around 1885 and one raised by Arthur McDames in 1925—incorporate depictions of *larh'om*. Among the other crests displayed are representations of the grouse and the blackfish (or killer whale), both of which suggest coastal origins (see Boas 1902:229-231; Harris 1974:81-100), along with a figure referred to as ‘decayed-corpse’ or ‘the moth’ crest (*lawrom-balerh*), and eleven small figures of dead people called ‘many-small-people’ or ‘many-skulls’ (*gobegyeyet* or *wilwilgyeyet*). While variations on the grouse and blackfish crests appear on the poles of Wawsem-larhæ and Kweeyaihl respectively, the *lawrom-balerh* crest is also found among those belonging to Leelebeks (Barbeau 1929:97-98) and Ksrarom-larhæ (Barbeau 1929:91-94), who also claims the grouse in common with Harhpegwawtu. The ‘many-skulls’ crest was also identified on a fallen pole belonging to the house of Weegyeyet, a member of the Eagle clan who was adopted by Harhpegwawtu in ancient times (Barbeau 1929:194-195) and is ‘the visitor who never left’ of Chief Kenneth Harris’ book (Harris 1974:127-131).¹⁵ In light of the preceding analysis of the Skawah story, the fact that the *larh'om* crest is found exclusively on poles belonging to Harhpegwawtu is significant.¹⁶

One of the most astonishing errors in *Totem Poles of the Gitksan* is Barbeau’s omission of Harhpegwawtu in the synopsis of the Gitksan Fireweed clan (Barbeau

one carried out by the other brother of Ligi-yuwen.

¹⁵ In a version of the Skawah story told by Chief Mountain at the mouth of the Nass river in Kincolith (Boas 1902:221-225), the house of the *larh'om* crest is described as also having doorways ornamented with skulls.

¹⁶ Barbeau (1929:87, 89) incorrectly speculates that two other supernatural birds, *htsi-tiya'ituh* of Wawsem-larhæ and *rskaimsem* of Kweeyaihl, are forms of *larh'om* although these have totally separate traditions.

1929:154-155). Given that this clan has been named the Fireweed, a point which Barbeau never satisfactorily explains, one might reasonably assume that this would be a relatively common crest. But it is not. In Barbeau's (1929:169-170) own reckoning, out of a total of 525 figures or crests on 109 Gitksan totem poles, the fireweed (*hæst*) occurs a mere four times, twice in association with Harhpegwawtu, once in association with his most closely related house, that of Ksrarom-larhæ, and once in association with the house of Beenee at Hagwelget, which belongs not to the Gitksan proper but to the neighboring Carrier nation. The two poles of Harhpegwawtu that refer to this crest are both versions of the *gilhæst*, meaning 'single-fireweed,' and are completely blank as they are meant to represent mammoth fireweed shoots. The older of these poles was erected in the old village of Gitsegukla shortly after the 1871 fire, whereas the newer single-fireweed pole was raised early in 1926, both as memorials to other members of Harhpegwawtu's house. In speaking of the origin of this crest, Barbeau (1929:95) seems to confuse the fireweed (*hæst*) with the 'mountain-fern' ('*wee 'arh*) crest as he refers back to a discussion of the origin of this latter crest in explaining the origin of the former (Barbeau 1929:86). Barbeau (1929:95) then states: "According to another opinion, less orthodox, this crest originated after the deluge, when the people had deserted Temlaham. An ancestor named Yæl cleared the land of tall trees at Kisrawks (People-of-the-Balsam-trees), on Skeena river, below Kitwanga. They, therefore, named the house, which they built up at this place, Graded-house-of-the-Fireweed (*Darem-hæst*); and they adopted the Fireweed as one of their emblems." In an accompanying footnote, Barbeau indicates that this "unorthodox view" is also shared by the coastal Tsimshian at Port Simpson who gave a similar explanation, stating that their Gitksan relations use the Fireweed as one of their

coat-of-arms because the fireweed is characteristic of their country in the summer. As it turns out, this was also the view shared by Arthur McDames who, despite his significant involvement in perpetuating the traditions of his people, is not once listed as an informant in *Totem Poles of the Gitksan*, not even in relation to the crests of his own house.

The implications of this analysis are intriguing, particularly when one considers that the stories predating those of Arthur McDames include details that are not found in his version but that corroborate the claim that the house of Harhpegwawtu represents that of Ligiyeun, who may or may not be the oldest of the sky-children, but who is nevertheless the central figure in all versions of the Skawah story that I have located. His association with the *larh'om* crest, absent in the McDames stories, is of interest because of the appearance of this crest on two poles (c. 1885 and 1925) belonging to the title Harhpegwawtu, of which Kenneth Harris seemed to be unaware. As we have seen, Ligiyeun was further identified as an ancestral figure on a pole belonging to Gurhsan, and was identified by related families in Kispayaks as the first head of their house when they lived at Temlaham. As far as both documentary and oral sources are concerned, there is compelling evidence that the houses of Gurhsan and Harhpegwawtu were at one time—and perhaps more recently than is believed—part of the same house; this much has been said in direct statements made by previous holders of these titles. And this is what brings us back to the 'Ksan doors. As the *adaox* most closely related to these titles, these houses do have a unique and perhaps even preeminent relationship to the Skawah story—in other words, a degree of ownership that may not necessarily be claimed by other Fireweed families. How this ultimately effects our understanding of the dispute concerning the 'Ksan doors is taken up in the next, and concluding, section.

AN END TO THE DISPUTE?

There's a hell of a story behind the heavy cedar doors at the entrance to UBC's Museum of Anthropology. The Museum's guides used to relate it to groups of wide-eyed APEC types long before pepper spray drifted through the totems on Point Grey. They would lead tourists to the carved doors and recount the grand epic depicted in the cedar: a rainforest Genesis straight from the swirling mists of the Northern Coast Range. It was the kind of story you wanted to hear over and over.

—Charles Montgomery, writing in *Vancouver* magazine
(January/February 1999:39).

In speaking about her fieldwork among the Toraja of Upper Sulawesi, Kathleen M. Adams (1995:143) has observed: "Today, politically savvy Torajans recognize anthropology and tourism's potential for validating and amplifying particular versions of culture." Not unlike cultures of the Northwest Coast, Torajan society is traditionally divided into three classes: nobles, commoners, and slaves. The status of nobles is determined largely by hereditary rank, established through mythological lineages and represented on the carved facades of their ancestral homes. From both the representations of tourists and anthropologists, the Torajans have become veritable celebrities, valorized as 'heavenly kings' and 'warriors,' making them one of the main attractions in Indonesia. Contemporary Torajans are both ethnically self-conscious and, in Adams' (1995:145) terminology, "avid consumers, manipulators, and critics of the ethnographic and touristic images of their culture."

Nobles and commoners alike are involved in the tourist trade, although their versions of Torajan culture differ significantly. In their explanations of ancestral house facades, for example, younger non-noble guides typically downplay or ignore their function as markers of social status and privilege, emphasising instead their aesthetic

qualities as abstract carvings and how they exemplify the Torajan veneration of nature. "Almost all the elites I knew," Adams (1995:146) comments, "voiced concerns that they were no longer as esteemed as they had once been." Tourism, coupled with factors associated with colonialism and their minority status as Christians, has flattened traditional rank distinctions, an erosion of status that evidently created anxiety among the elites that Adams interviewed and directed much of their social and political activity.

In a passage strangely reminiscent of my own experience with Chief Harris, and as an illustration of how outsiders are being co-opted for local power contests, Adams tells a story about an interview with a Torajan man of noble lineage who took the initiative of sketching a kinship chart in her notebook while she was busy retrieving a list of questions. "This is where we start," the man said, "get out your tape recorder, this is what's important." The chart, which was worthy of an anthropology textbook (save for his reversal of male and female symbols), traced back his heavenly lineage for some twenty-five generations to ancestral gods who had descended on a mountain peak nearby. "Over the next few weeks," Adams (1995:147) comments, "Ne' Duma recounted with verve the deeds of his deified ancestors, offering me a fundamental, albeit implicit, lesson on his ancestral claims to authority." This man and his aristocratic friends, she came to realize, were using her as a vehicle through which to assert the traditional prestige of their families, which is something that other anthropologists had done by publishing books centred around other Torajan elites. This same man later expanded his authority-building project by opening a museum that existed, it seemed, for the sole purpose of edifying his family lineage.

The indigenous use of anthropological representations and museum-styled institutions in validating and amplifying particular versions of culture is not only resonated in the events and history surrounding the 'Ksan doors, but is also resonated elsewhere on the Northwest Coast, such as in the "dynastic triumphalism" of the U'mista Cultural Centre at Alert Bay as described by Barbara Saunders (1997:146). I agree with Charles Montgomery that there is a hell of a story behind the 'Ksan doors, but I would add that he was apparently incapable of grasping its complexity. Over the past two decades a significant shift has occurred in relations between museums and indigenous peoples in Canada (Ames 1987; Janes 1994), largely due to the recognition of rights associated with cultural and intellectual property (Nicks 1992; Hill and Nicks 1992) and the necessity of involving originating cultures as collaborators (Warry 1990; Masco 1996), curators (Tanner-Kaplash 1995; Martin and Wood 1998), and co-managers of museum collections and representations (Notzke 1996). As Susan S. Bean (1994:886) has noted: "Museums, having originated in the West and proliferated with colonial expansion, are now gaining recognition as an evolving transnational form through which social identities are constructed, united, distinguished, related, and resisted in a global arena." As we have seen in relation to the 'Ksan doors, this "revitalizing repossession of the past" (Ames 1992:86) is not always limited to objects of the past.

While the way that indigenous people speak about objects is often radically different from how museum people understand them (Cruikshank 1995), sometimes to the point of utter incompatibility (Bolton 1997), First Nations people have also played a significant role in shaping the nature of anthropology in British Columbia and are often quite familiar with representations of their own people (Kew 1993). As Berman

(1997:19) has pointed out: "Museum objects themselves have come to symbolise the cumulative historical effects of cultural appropriation, and have therefore become crucial to assertions of cultural identity in debates over cultural and intellectual property." While much has been written about cultural appropriation, much less has been written about how native people are reclaiming colonised spaces. Whereas in the past native objects were transformed from ceremonial objects into curios (MacDonald 1990), ethnological specimens (Cole 1985), and eventually works of art (Chalmers 1995), in this case we can see a reversal of sorts going on; the 'Ksan doors, which were objects created for primarily aesthetic (and financial) reasons are being (re)claimed as objects of enduring cultural significance. The multifaceted history of the 'Ksan doors and the story they manifest exemplify the ambiguous boundaries of native art (to borrow a phrase from Duffek 1983:109).

As was discussed in the introduction, over the course of its career, including in its most early years, MOA has taken a more individualised approach to collaboration with First Nations people. Given its emphasis, particularly since 1976, on the artistic aspects of Northwest Coast material culture, this has often involved working with particular artists, whether in co-curating exhibits of their works, or in commissioning pieces from them. This is a very different sort of collaboration than community-level approaches, where institutions—often *as* institutions—work with band councils or other appointed members who are somehow representative of a community or empowered to act on behalf of others. In these situations, an individual concern would be directed toward that person or those persons charged with representing community interests. Within the context of Northwest Coast traditions of ownership, an individualised style of

collaboration, while culturally appropriate, can result in controversies between community members being acted out within and around the museum itself. This is why the ethnographic dimensions of this situation are crucial, and particularly the ways in which traditions of ownership are being reinvented within new contexts, such as museums.

As was also discussed, the status of a given family or individual among many Northwest Coast groups, including the Gitksan, is largely determined by hereditary privileges, which may entail control over a certain territory and its resources, a chiefly title, a name, or a story. It is imperative that these privileges be publicly proclaimed and witnessed in order to validate and maintain their legitimacy within the community. In the case of stories, which are transmitted orally over generations, ownership is not established by authorship or the possession of a written text. Establishing the ownership of a story must be done through its performance or material expression; therefore, any such performance or expression implies a claim of ownership. The maintenance of these privileges must occur in perpetuity or they are lost.

As Chief Kenneth Harris stated in the program notes that accompanied the 1991 performance of the Skawah story: "It is important that families who own the dances and stories present them to retain their authenticity." Although such claims would traditionally be witnessed and validated within the context of a potlatch or feast, in cases where First Nations people are living outside their communities of origin, it would be expected that new forums for the expression of these rights might be utilised. Given the cultural space occupied by the museum, as a venue for the representation not only of past but also of contemporary First Nations cultures, it is not surprising that people living

outside their home communities might view the museum as an authenticating context. Chief Kenneth Harris, in sanctioning the performance of the Skawah story, made no claim of representing the interests of *all* Gitksan people, but was clearly making claims, as the Hereditary Chief of his house, that represented his traditional prerogatives and those of his family group. Although this was not a feast or a potlatch, this was a public performance of hereditary rights, and as such it constituted a declaration of ownership. Furthermore, while it is true that any such claim is traditionally void without the validation of other chiefs, the fact that such claims are being made to outsiders—not only at MOA, but in the pages of books and magazines, anthropological journals, and in courtrooms—may very well compound their political significance both at home and abroad, engendering new forms of prestige and relations of power among people who may not be so interested in the ethnographic details.

Given such an analysis, why this might have political ramifications for other Gitksan families becomes clearer. As museums have come to understand through debates concerning cultural property, museumized objects *do* have cultural meanings to originating peoples, and Northwest Coast objects *do* carry the weight of hereditary privilege; why should a performance within this particular museum by a hereditary chief of a hereditary privilege be viewed as any less meaningful? Although the context is different, it is still a claim of hereditary ownership and is therefore contestable. That the performance was explicitly linked with the 'Ksan doors is not merely a thematic statement; it also multiplies its cultural significance by way of association.

Such acts of collaboration are meaningful not only within the broad context of Native/non-native relations, but also within the Gitksan community, and particularly

among those who do not presently live in their home territories. In this respect, the museum can be viewed as a substitute or satellite forum in which hereditary claims have been and can be publicly expressed, legitimised, and contested. This is not necessarily undesirable; the point is not whether controversies exist, but how they are met and resolved to the satisfaction of those parties involved. But the museum, despite its best efforts, can never be a *neutral* forum in such situations; particularly with a more individualised approach to collaboration, it easily becomes a venue through which certain claims and powers are enacted by particular people, whether deliberately or not.

So while the specific dispute over the ownership of the Skawah story can be resolved only within the Gitksan community itself, Dolly Watts' dispute with MOA is not entirely mislaid; it is understandable precisely because the museum has already acted as a forum in which two claims to the Skawah story have been exercised, and therefore it has become a means, however novel, of legitimising such claims. Museums are places of public witnessing, and the fact that these claims were made to an outside audience, from a certain point of view, contributes to rather than detracts from their power.

This is where an analysis of the terms of this dispute has broader implications for museum practice and policy. Any act of collaboration—including the commissioning of a Northwest Coast carving and the facilitating of a cultural performance—attenuates rather than eliminates the dimensions of power involved in the practice of representing cultures. For better or for worse, any attempt to represent cultures within museums is guided by the assumption that, to whatever degree, cultures *can* and *should* be represented in museums. What is perhaps most interesting is the persistence of this assumption not only among museum professionals, but also among some of the museum's most vocal critics;

the question is not usually about whether the practice of cultural representation is itself a good idea, but revolves around making exhibiting practices more inclusive and *more* representative, whether this is done by focussing on traditionally under- or misrepresented voices, or by contrasting different perspectives in an attempt to convey a postmodern multi-vocality.

Is it enough to simply point out that all representations are contested, while continuing to make them anyway? From a pragmatic perspective, the question is somewhat moot; not only is cultural representation widely understood to be the *raison d'etre* of anthropological museums, but also the mere existence of museums, however defined, will always represent *something* about the cultures in which they are situated and from which their collections were obtained. That there has been a growing movement by First Nations people to get into the business of public representation is understandable, if for only one reason; any act of representation has important power dimensions and political implications, which are sometimes acknowledged explicitly, but are for the most part left unarticulated. First Nations people have been standard objects of museum exhibitions for well over a century and, in this process, they have been stripped of a considerable amount of power. The urge to pursue self-representation is one way of reclaiming the power to define who First Nations people are and have been, whether it be through collaboration with existing museums or establishing cultural centres either wholly or partially directed to an audience of outsiders.

As Marjorie Halpin (1994:6) has noted in a slightly different context: "Northwest Coast Native art is ambiguous, imaginative, unstable, poetic, endlessly variable, changing, and productive of the new, the unexpected." What is happening is that

museums like MOA are truly becoming forums through which living cultures are being both represented and reinvented by originating peoples, as well as by, and sometimes in co-operation or contact with, museums. By virtue of its collections and involvement with the artistic traditions of the Northwest Coast—both of which involve expressions of hereditary prerogatives—MOA has become, perhaps inevitably, a locus for exercising and validating First Nations cultural claims. What is perhaps the most important shift marked by these events is the relative peripherality of the museum in this ownership dispute. And this is an important point: the presence of controversy does not necessarily indicate that MOA has failed in attempting to do the right thing. On the contrary, it may instead be understood as an indication of its success.

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