

## Wahlgidouk - Giver of Gifts

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### ABSTRACT

This article describes the successful language revitalization efforts of a strong, Kasaan Haida elder woman and her efforts to document her family and village history. It also tells the story of Kasaan Haida people as effected by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article décrit les efforts de revitalisation de la langue qui ont porté fruit, d'une aînée haida de Kasaan et de ses efforts pour documenter l'histoire de sa famille et de son village. Il raconte aussi l'histoire du peuple haida de Kasaan, pris par la Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

*Wahlgidouk* is one of my mother's Haida names. Her English name is Julie Coburn. She says it means "giver of gifts," more specifically the one who carries in the gifts to be distributed at the "potlatch" or ceremonial giveaway hosted by reciprocal clans. The name is an honorable one - suggesting something about generosity, and it is especially fitting given the gifts of language and literature she has continued to share throughout her life. Her name is a good one to think about when inspiration is needed.

Wahlgidouk turned 82 in August 2003, and she is still filled with love and hope although her life has not always been easy. I remember as a young girl her telling me that every morning when she got up out of bed her feet touched the floor, she would say "Háw'aa, (thank you) salaana (the one above) for another day." She remains active and joyful with a positive spirit I admire. As one of the few remaining of approximately twelve fluent speakers of our Alaskan Haida language, her efforts to retain the language offer a beacon of hope.

Raised just after the time of overt Haida language suppression at the Sheldon Jackson Presbyterian missionary boarding school in Sitka, Alaska where she attended high school in the 1940s, she tells me she always understood Haida while growing up in Kasaan, Alaska, because her parents, my *naan* and *chan* (grandmother and grandfather) always spoke it to her. But they asked that their children answer them in English because by the late 1920s and 1930s in Southeastern Alaska, my *naan* and *chan* knew their children's survival depended

upon acquiring the new language. How easy it would have been for my mother to have lost the language entirely at this point - but she didn't. Instead, she made a concentrated effort to re-learn it in the 1970s and 1980s, at a time when many Alaskan Haida had begun to realize how Western contact had negatively affected retaining our language and cultural traditions. Because of her commitment, she is now one of the more fluent of our remaining Alaskan Haida speakers who are all in their late 70s and 80s.

We Haida are a small group among Indigenous peoples, but it was not always so. Some estimates put the overall original Haida population at about 14,000. By the late 1880s this was reduced by at least 90% due to introduction of deadly diseases such as smallpox, tuberculosis, influenza, whooping cough, venereal disease and other diseases to which Native peoples had little resistance (Boyd 1990, 144). The original homeland of all Haida people is Haida Gwaii (Islands of the People), or what is otherwise known as the Queen Charlotte Islands in British Columbia, Canada. Sometime prior to contact, a group of Haida migrated north to Xisgwáíay, "Old Island," (Cogo 1981; Young 1971, 3) in the southern tip of the Alexander Archipelago in the southeast Alaskan Panhandle. There, the people established at least five villages in the area including Sukwan, Howkan, Klinkwan, Kungilanas, Kasaan, and numerous temporary subsistence campsites they used while gathering the abundant sea and land resources, including fish, sea greens, shellfish, and berries.

The devastation of the populations eventually led to consolidation of the villages, as it did for our relations in Haida Gwaii whose original villages were reduced from at least nineteen (Boelscher 1990, 19) to two: Massett and Skidegate.

In Alaska, we have two remaining villages: Hydaburg and Kasaan, which are relocations from their original sites. In 1902, the original village of "Old" Kasaan was abandoned when the people moved from there over to a new site, which became known as "New" Kasaan, now simply referred to as "Kasaan." The move was driven, in part, by the influx of immigrants causing both population reduction and economic changes.

The steady influx of non-Natives into Alaska led to rapid cultural change for all Native peoples. As the immigrants moved into the area, often seeking economic opportunities fueled by the discovery of precious metals such as copper and gold, they also began to establish industries such as salmon salteries and canneries. A wage economy soon developed. These activities began gradually supplementing Haida traditional subsistence food gathering and hunting practices. For example, in "New" Kasaan, the immigrants had established a mining company and needed labor for their commercial enterprise. The immigrants asked the Kasaan Haida to move from their original village, and they were promised year round employment and a school for their children. Because the people recognized Western education would be important for their children's future, they agreed to the move. At its peak population in the 1930s and 1940s, the village had about 140 residents, but as the economies gradually declined, the population slowly began to move away, sometimes to nearby Ketchikan, or other parts of Alaska and the "lower 48" states. People often moved in search of steady employment, better educational opportunities for their children, or better access to health care. Today, the Kasaan population remains at about forty or so. I am fortunate my mother and father have returned to live there in their later years because every summer, my husband and I bring our boys, twelve and fifteen, home to Kasaan so they will grow up knowing this place and its significance to who they are. We also enjoy catching, smoking, and preserving our winter supply of salmon.

Hydaburg, like Kasaan, was also created by relocation from the remaining original village

sites, a move that took place in 1911. Like the Kasaan people, Haida people from the other villages moved to the new location because they wanted to provide better educational opportunities for their young people. Unwilling to send their children away to boarding school - the only other option available at the time - they agreed to a US government plan to establish a local school if the villages agreed to consolidate (Vaughan 1985, 112-15). Today, Hydaburg population is about two hundred and fifty. Needless to say, not all Alaskan Haida have remained in the villages; like their ancestors they have sometimes moved away to larger urban areas seeking employment and educational opportunities for themselves or their children.

As suggested by these drastic population losses, changing economies, and increasing involvement in Western education, pressure was strong upon the people to assimilate. At the same time, they recognized the need to adapt to the changing world. Unfortunately, and as a consequence, the Alaskan Haida language is no longer being learned as a first language. There are the slightly different versions of Haida spoken by our relations in Massett and Skidegate across the international border in what is now known as Canada. Yet my mother's story of reclaiming her language when she was in her early 40s provides hopeful promise to those of us who now only minimally speak. We can look towards her and others like her to what *can* be accomplished. Her story reminds me of other Indigenous women's stories.

A few years back, I was fortunate to be able to attend a conference where Ofelia Zepeda, Tohono O'odham, poet, linguist, professor and 1999 winner of the McArthur Fellowship, gave the keynote address. Although many of the specific details of her presentation have faded from memory, what profoundly stands out to me about her talk was the story she told about one tribal group's successful work towards re-learning their language after the last speaker has been gone for many years. Because of this, they had only been able to work from previously collected archival accounts of their language. Like my mother's determination to re-learn and use daily our language, these people have also found a way to restore some of what might have been completely lost.

Later in her life, my mother began writing her life stories in English. It started with stories of our family genealogy, the places we lived around, and stories of her life growing up in Kasaan. Because so many families had moved away from the village, she thought it was important to write these stories, so that her children, grandchildren and others who had lived there would know something of their history. She wrote these out in long-hand and I helped her by typing them up.

At the time, my husband and I were living in Renton, Washington, where I was attending the University of Washington in Seattle and where our two sons were born. Although my parents often spent time with us in the winter when they would travel down to visit us and other friends and relations living in the area, this particular time my mother spent longer with us because the doctor had found some cancer that needed to be removed. She stayed with us during her recovery and during this time she recorded many words in Haida for me to keep so I could practise my Haida language when she was not there. This was great fun for her, and she particularly enjoyed calling other Haida women she knew in the Seattle area when she wanted to confirm a pronunciation, or ask a question about the meanings of particular words.

We also worked on typing up the stories she had written down in English. Some were later published in *Alaska Native Writers, Storytellers and Orators: The Expanded Edition* (Spatz, Breinig and Partnow 1999), a volume of Native writing I co-edited. Others remain in our family collection to be added to later. What follows is a sample of her writing from our collection describing what it was like to gather our *sgíw* (black seaweed), a delicious food that when sun dried crunches in our mouths like popcorn. After it has been dried, we enjoy eating it by the handful, or sprinkling it in our fish soup where it expands and takes on the flavor of the salmon or other fish with which it is cooked; and then also the flavor of the *sataaw* (eulachon oil) we often add to the soup after it has been served. Wahlgidouk wrote this:

Ever since I can remember, seaweed gathering was a must. In the early 30s, we'd have moved out to the fish camp on Grindall Island by mid-May to stay for six weeks or so. King salmon fishing was

good, [and] although the prices were very low, we were able to make enough to live on until purse seining opened in July. The men hand trolled, no kickers or fancy salmon gear; they used a wooden "trigger stick" which was fashioned and secured to the side of the skiff. When the stick moved, you pulled in the line and usually had a large King salmon.

While the men fished, the women and children picked seaweed. We purposely waited for a good minus tide so we could gather abalone and gum boots at the same time. Grandmother and mother showed us how to spread the seaweed on the warm, flat rocks above the high water. As soon as it was partially dried we turned over the large pieces. (The seaweed stuck together in large sheets and made it easy to turn.) The rocks were very hot on a sunny day and it didn't take long for the seaweed to dry if the weather was good. The seaweed was usually half-dried before sunset, and we put it into a clean tablecloth or sheet. Next morning, we'd grind the seaweed and again spread it on the rocks to store in five gallon coffee cans for winter use. But if the weather was rainy we had to hang it over the stove to dry, which was not as efficient, less fun and much more time and work.

(Unpublished Personal Collection. Printed here with permission.)

In Wahlgidouk's story of seaweed gathering she mentions Grindall Island - a special place to Kasaan Haida, as many families would come to the small island in the spring, set up camp, spend time seaweed gathering, salmon fishing, and berry picking before heading back to Kasaan. Families also had small potato gardens, not on Grindall Island, but planted in plots of land that was also a boat trip away, and they would often combine the trip to Grindall with a stop to plant potatoes. On the way back to Kasaan, they would hill the potatoes and return in the fall to harvest them. She enjoyed writing about these places and wanted to share with us what life had been like for the Kasaan Haida of her time. She said she wanted to do this so

that we would always know some of our history and the places important to our people. Her writing now can also function as a document that helps with retracing and recovering important traditions - information some of our younger generation may have lost touch with as many have increasingly built lives in urban areas.

Fortunately, I do remember gathering seaweed as a small child, but as my brothers and sisters and I grew older we moved into Ketchikan. Because the Kasaan cannery had closed, my father, a commercial salmon troller, needed to be closer to Ketchikan where he would sell his fish. My older brothers entered high school in Ketchikan, my older sister was in sixth grade, and I started first grade there. Although we always came home to Kasaan in the summer where my grandfather and other relations still lived, we began to get more of our seaweed through trade with others who lived closer and were able to pick it in the early spring when it is the best tasting.

Many other Kasaan Haida have moved away from our village, yet since we are a small group of people and many of us are related we would often get together as family in Ketchikan where my four uncles and their families had also moved. I grew up with these relations, playing with my cousins. Although we lived in Ketchikan, we always knew we were Kasaan Haida. But because so many families had moved away when the *Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act* (ANCSA) was enacted in 1971, our village almost lost the opportunity to claim a land base. ANCSA was enacted partly because the state needed to settle the claims of Alaska's Indigenous population quickly in order to build the trans-Alaska oil pipeline after oil was discovered in Prudhoe Bay. ANCSA provided for 44,000,000 acres of land and \$962,000,000 as payment for lands ceded. Instead of establishing reservations as they exist in the continental United States, regional and village corporations were created and the land and monetary settlement accrued to the corporations. Individual Natives then enrolled as shareholders in the corporation. Any financial benefits they now receive are dependent upon the corporation's ability to generate profits (McBeath and Morehouse 1994; Dauenhaur and Dauenhauer 1994).

In the end, we were allowed to create a village corporation after we were able to prove

ourselves in court. Because of our small population, the government did not want to acknowledge our claims to our traditional land base. People who had moved from the village had to testify they had lived there and that they intended to return. Since many Kasaan people do and have always returned for summer food gathering, we were able to prevail. This allowed us to reclaim some of our lands.

I was a young girl during the land claims era, and I remember my mother's involvement after ANCSA was enacted. She was one of the people who visited people in their homes to make sure they were enrolled. When ANCSA was signed into law, I remember everyone being excited and hopeful about the future. Yet as years have gone by we have also come to recognize ANCSA's weaknesses. For example, we were not able to reclaim some land most significant to us - including Grindall Island. Nor were we able to keep Karta Bay - another area significant to us because it was where we have always netted our sockeye salmon for winter use. We were unable to reclaim these areas because no one from our village who was involved in the negotiation process really understood all the ramifications of ANCSA, or had much experience with high-powered negotiations with Federal and State officials.

Many years later, when I began studying the ANCSA more closely, I asked my uncle why we were not able to get two of the places most important to us. He told me that it was not offered by the US government. They had pre-selected portions of land they were willing to cede, and the State of Alaska was also at the bargaining table regarding portions they would be able to keep. Looking back, I now realize that if we had been more "savvy," we might have successfully fought for the return of these important food gathering areas.

Additionally, ANCSA was implemented using a distinctly Western "for profit" corporate structure. That is to say, the corporation is run by an elected Board of Directors, charged with the responsibility of generating profits for shareholders. This is in contrast to self-determined "tribal" systems based on traditional political structures. This corporate structure has contributed to further disintegration of tribal ties, especially among the younger generation. The following anecdote may be telling: A few years ago, one of my cousins noted

that when young people were asked about their tribal status, they often answered with the corporation's name to which they were enrolled. When queried further, they often could not name their clan. "Corporate" identity has, in some cases (and perhaps mostly with the younger generation) replaced a specific "tribal" identity.

Recognition about what was happening to us as people began to strike home. This, coupled with the increasing age of our elders, led some of us Kasaan Haida to want to "do something." This "something" eventually emerged from family gatherings and talks about how to provide something tangible for us to pass on to our descendents, and others whose histories and families tie us to Kasaan.

One day, my mother, my sister Della, and I were sitting around talking. We began to get excited about the possibility of a historical gathering of the "Kasaan Haida elders." The elders would be invited to a gathering to honor them, and we would videotape their sharing of food and stories. As it turned out, my uncle Willard Jones, our hereditary Taslaanas clan leader (and also an elder) organized the event. We gathered seven of our elders who now live in Kasaan, Ketchikan and Seattle. They enjoyed the chance to get together, and the event generated excitement to do more.

Later, a larger group of us Kasaan Haida, including my mother, my uncle, Willard Jones, and my cousins Eleanor Hadden and Frederick Olsen Jr. began talking about what we might be able to do to provide more opportunities like this for our elders. We wanted to strategize ways to draw on their knowledge so we could pass it along to the next generation, many who are now scattered across the country in a kind of "cultural diaspora." We agreed that eventually some already hungered to know more, and those who did not may have children or grandchildren who yet might someday want to learn more about their ancestors and Kasaan. We began to brainstorm a larger Kasaan project involving oral history interviews with the elders, which we would audio and video tape. After writing up a draft of what we envisioned, modeled somewhat on the first gathering, we sent it around to the elders and others who might want to participate. We then reworked it with community input.

Eventually we were able to seek out and get some small grant funding through the State

Humanities Forum to help with production costs - but the project overall was grassroots and community-based in that all the interviewing, transcription, videotaping, and editing was accomplished by Kasaan Haida people - mostly volunteers. We were fortunate to be able to include videotaped portions of seaweed gathering and processing upon Grindall Island, and to have the elders share their perspectives about what *they* thought was important to pass on. Our elders were also able to tell us much Kasaan history. Our eldest elder was Pauline Blackstad, who turned one hundred November 16, 2003 and has recently passed away.

We wanted to include as much Haida language as we could and so my mother and Erma Lawrence, who is ninety and the most fluent of our speakers, agreed to be videotaped as they sat and talked Haida. Like my mother Wahlgidouk, Erma (Ahljuu) is a generous woman whose continuing gifts of language and literature have sparked others to persevere.

The project took just over two years to complete, and one of the products was a twenty-five minute video superbly edited by our camera and media person, Frederick Olsen Jr., who had previously moved to New York and spent time working in the media industry. Like many Kasaan Haida, he has maintained his ties to the land and the people and regularly returns to Kasaan in the summer. We are fortunate that he contributed his considerable talents to this work - especially to the video production which we named *Gaá saa an Xaadas Guusuu- Kasaan Haida Elders Speak*. It was well-received by our people, and we made it available at cost to them. We also decided to make the video available to those who might want to learn something about us and from our own perspectives, with any profits earned from it to go to our newly formed Kasaan Haida Heritage Foundation. Through this entity, we hope to continue working on developing a written body of Kasaan Haida oral history, as there is so much more to do and to learn.

Other fortunate news about our language gives us reason to celebrate. Sealaska Heritage Institute, the non-profit arm of the Southeast Alaskan regional "for profit" ANCSA corporation, and responsible for administering Sealaska Corporation's education, language and cultural programs for southeast Natives, recently applied for

and received a large three-year Haida grant to develop semi-immersion curriculum for K-2.<sup>1</sup> This will be integrated into Hydaburg and Kasaan schools. Additionally, part of the work entails Master-Apprentice language teams - a proven language revitalization approach. Wahlgidouk is looking forward to contributing her time and energy.

Learning from our histories, learning from our elders, learning from our languages - these all are priceless gifts. Wahlgidouk is "giver of gifts." May we all learn to be a givers of gifts. Håw'aa (Thank you).

## ENDNOTE

1. Sealaska Heritage Institute is sponsoring the project through a \$467,722 grant from the US Department of Education sought on behalf of the Haida language and culture. The project is ninety-seven percent federally funded and three percent is funded through non-governmental sources.

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