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Tlingit Music: Past, Present and Future: What has Survived the Colonial Period?

By Maria Shaan Tláa Williams

“To resist is to retrench in the margins, retrieve what we were and remake ourselves” Linda Tuhiwai Smith, 2001:4

Waa sa ituwatee?

[Hello and how are you?]

Maria Shaan Tláa Williams yoo xat duwasaakw

[My name is Maria Williams]

Yeil naax xat sitee

[I am of the Raven moiety]

Deisitaan naax xat sitee

[I am of the Beaver clan]

Dakl'aweidi yadix xat sitee

[I am a child of the Killer Whale clan]

Atlin kwaan aya xat

[I am of the Atlin Lake people]

Anchorage and Carcross/Tagish First Nations aya xat

[I am also of the Carcross/Tagish First Nations people and the Anchorage people]

My name is Maria Williams, I am Raven of the *Deisitaan* clan and a child of the Killer Whale. I am of the Big Lake people, the *Atlein Kwaan*, and from Anchorage and of the Carcross/Tagish First Nations people. My father was *Aweix* Bill Williams (*Dakl'aweidi*) and my mother *Sneeaxt* Marilyn Williams (*Dleit Kaa* and Black Foot) who was adopted by the *Deisitaan* people of Carcross/Tagish First Nations. *Gunalsheesh deishitaan!*

Gunalcheesh and Thank you for allowing me to speak here people of SITKA
Sheey At'ika Kwaan and our conference organizers Steve Henrickson and Andy Hope
III. I am deeply honored to be in your homeland and to be here with such esteemed
colleagues. Indeed, I am humbled.

My main area of research and my greatest passion in life is indigenous music and
dance practices. In my presentation today I wish to share with you what I have come to
know and observe about Alaska Native music and dance in general and more specifically
music and dance of southeastern Alaska.

First, I wish to tell you a little about me so you can understand my perspective. I
was born and raised in Anchorage. My father, *Aweix* Bill Williams was a fluent Tlingit
speaker, and traditional hunter and trapper. He was a veteran of WWII and a long-time
cook at the Alaska Native Medical Center of Anchorage. Most of my knowledge comes
from him and my other relatives from Atlin and Carcross in Canada - the Inland Tlingit.

I currently teach at the University of New Mexico and am living among twenty-
two indigenous nations there; I am learning from them and their colonial experiences,
which in many ways mirror ours, but there are significant differences.

I have conducted research on Tlingit music primarily from the 18th and 19th
century cultural contexts; the time preceding the great colonizing efforts of Russians and
Americans. Music during the pre-contact times was inseparable from the clan-based
social structure. Each clan house had their own repertoire of music/dance and associated
performance protocols, regalia and styles.

I've also done a lot of research on the renaissance in Alaska Native music and
dance, which begin in the 1970's and continues today. In order to understand the

renaissance, we must examine the colonial periods. From this vantage point we can see how music/dance practices have changed and adapted to the 21st century geopolitical arena that we live in today.

The initial colonial period begins in the mid-1700s with the “discovery” of the Aleutian Islands and subsequent fur rush. Fur was a major global market commodity during this time period, similar to what oil is today. Initial Russian expansion came into this area and the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian had to establish relationships with them. There were battles, wars and exchange during this period, as we are all familiar with. After 1867 and the early American period, we as indigenous people were forced to deal with a completely different colonizing entity, a new colonial language, arrival of missionaries and by the early 1900’s loss a substantial portion of our traditional homelands (with the establishment of the 1907 Tongass National Forest and the 1925 Glacier Bay National Park). This combined with epidemic diseases and the establishment of western-based educational practices such as boarding schools witnessed a period of time that was quite painful. My father went to the Cho-chootla Indian school in Carcross. Half the children died, he himself was punished for speaking the only language he knew at the time, Tlingit. He saw terrible abuse happen to his fellow students – because they were part of the “Kill the Indian – Save the child” government sanctioned education program. He was there for four years and said he never learned English, only shame. He said he learned to speak English fluently only after he was in the army in WWII.

The epidemic diseases, Christian missionaries, the boarding schools, loss of the majority of the land base dealt a significant blow to the traditional clan-based culture,

religion and shamanism, as well as language retention and of course music/dance of the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian peoples.

Effects of Missionaries

In 1874 a meeting in New York City took place that has repercussions even today. The Comity Agreement divided Alaska into a denominational missionary pie – the Presbyterians got Southeastern Alaska and the North Slope, the Quakers get the Kobuk region, the Moravians were assigned mainland southwestern Alaska, the Baptists got Kodiak Island, etc. Today, we are still dealing with the policy set forth by the Comity Agreement. For example, the Quakers believed in English only policies, they also did not believe in dancing. Of the 11 villages in the Kobuk area – there is still only one dance group to my knowledge – the Kotzebue Northern Lights Dancers. The Moravians who established Bethel in the heartland of the Yukon/Kuskokwim region believed in learning the Yup'ik language and developed an orthography. Today, the villages that were missionized by the Moravians still have a high level of language retention. During the renaissance in traditional music/dance of the 1970's it was the Moravian villages that began to produce the best new song composers – mostly because of the high level of language retention.

By the 1960's the Native people of Alaska began to work together for the first time in history to address their indigenous land claims. This led to the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) – a social engineering project that had as its goal to transform indigenous subsistence-based cultures into corporate land and resource exploiters. One of the ironies behind the ANCSA is that music/dance became staples at every political gathering. From the AFN, to regional meetings and then gatherings such

as the Festival of Alaska Native Arts, to the re-establishment of other types of dance festivals; by the 1980's a renaissance was born. Celebration started during this time period (in 1982), as did the Camai Festival in Bethel, the Kivgiq in Barrow, the Athabascan Fiddling Festival and others.

Young people were and are intuitively drawn to dance and sing. Today many, many dance groups now exist – where just a decade or two earlier, there were just a handful. The important question about the renaissance in traditional dance/music is – “Do we dance and sing like we did in the 19th century? Has the cultural context changed?” After all, we are the children of the survivors – those that fought for our land, our human rights and our cultural legacy. So, what has survived these major colonial periods?

When I moved to New Mexico in 1993 to teach at the Institute of American Indian Arts, and then later at the University of New Mexico, I had an epiphany. The tribes in the southwest have their religions and their sacred repertoires still intact. Why are their religions intact – while in Alaska they have not survived? A deep and painful question, with deep and painful answers.

Effect of Epidemic Diseases

I did research on the effects of the epidemic diseases, which wiped out entire villages in some instances, and in most cases at least fifty-percent of a village. Sometimes entire clan houses disappeared. For Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian people whose music/dance repertoire were clan based and clan owned this had dire consequences. The music repertoire began to decline in an almost geometric rate. The music of the shaman or *ixt!*, often referred to as *yek* songs also began to disappear due to the diseases,

pressures from the missionaries and U.S. government, as traditional religious practices were outlawed until the American Indian Religious freedom Act of 1978 (Public Law 95-341).

As Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian people began to abandon their clan houses this brought about gradual changes in how clan songs/dances were brought out – how they were performed and when they were performed. The 20th century witnessed the greatest amount of changes. Today, most dance groups are a combination of moieties, clans, and houses. The repertoires are often not delineated in terms of what clan officially owns them, and the associated protocols. The *at.oox*, the ceremonial hats and other highly clan-related cultural patrimony in some villages have maintained the repertoire of songs associated with them. Each clan hat, for example, has its own repertoire of songs that can only be performed when that hat is brought out. As cultural patrimony began to disappear, such as clan hats, due to collection frenzy for northwest coast art, the repertoires became lost because by the time these could be repatriated, the people that knew the repertoire had passed on.

Language Retention

New song composition is another delicate area. Song composition is directly related to the level of language retention. In villages where language retention is fifty-percent or greater the level of new song composition is very high. We are all familiar with going to Alaska Federation of Natives or the World Eskimo Indian Olympics and seeing Inupiaq groups from the Arctic Slope or

Yup'ik groups from SW Alaska bringing out new songs year after year. These are primarily social songs, I would like to point out, but they are new song compositions.

Today there are only a handful of Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian song composers. We need to address this and also to more fully document the clan songs that have survived. The special songs associated with the *at.oow*, the clan origin or migration songs are particularly vital because these are our ceremonial histories. Earlier I had mentioned how tribes in the SW have maintained their religious practices and the associated music/dance repertoire – this is what has remained of our traditions and this is why we must hold them most dear.

During my research for my master's thesis I discovered older recordings of primarily Tlingit music, which was my main focus. Recordings made by anthropologist Catherine McClellen in 1950-52 included many of my father's people's songs. The songs were love songs, mourning songs, war songs and even *Yek* songs. They were mostly *Deisheitaan* and *Dukluweidi*, and *Yunyeidi*. My father helped me translate the text of the songs and often accompanied me when I interviewed people. I must thank others that were helpful and sharing of their information – our conference theme – Catherine McClellen, Walter Soboleff, David Katzeek, Anna Katzeek, Elizabeth Williams-Nymen, and Johnny Jack. *Gunalsheesh*. The songs were performed by individuals such as Annie Geddes, Edgar Sidney and others, all in their seventies and eighties in the 1950's.

Conclusion

I hope to see more song composers. I am especially excited about the creation of new regalia and hope that people are writing songs for the regalia, especially the clan-regalia.

I am so inspired when I see all the new dance groups. I see beautiful regalia, face painting, and such pride. In essence, this is what has survived – our spirit and who we are as Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian, who we are as indigenous people.

Gunalsheesh to everyone here, to Elaine Abraham and Judy Ramos, to Nancy Davis who could not be here today, and of course to the conference organizers, Steve Henrickson and Andy Hope III to all of you in attendance. *Gunalsheesh!*