

Adawx and Maalsk

Tsimshian culture is grounded in the *adawx*, the narratives that tell its history. *Adawx* tell about the origins of the world from a First Nations perspective, one that has been passed on from generation to generation. They are defined as "true tellings" or "sacred history."

The *adawx* tell of events which happened when the world was very different from what it is today. Animals could take human form and humans could become animals. It was also a time when supernatural beings were visible to people. Humans were sometimes able to visit the worlds of these beings up in the sky or below the sea. Some *adawx* tell how specific crests came to be, while others are origin stories which tell how natural phenomenon and human technology came to be.

House groups own the *adawx* that tell how their ancestors acquired the House Crests. They also describe the origins and the migrations of their ancestors. Only members of the House Group have the privilege to tell these stories. The *adawx* are proof of the rights of the House not only to its crests, but also to its territories and the resources found there.

These *adawx* were told formally at a feast. They could take many hours, even days, to tell. The invited guests were chiefs from other House Groups or tribes. They listened to the *adawx* and witnessed the dances and songs that re-enacted the stories. Then the visiting chiefs (or their spokesmen) would make their own speeches. By speaking publicly, they would show the world that they agreed with all the rights and privileges given by the *adawx*. If they disagreed, they said nothing.

There is another type of Tsimshian narrative called *maalsk*. These are historical narratives which have happened in more recent times. They tell of battles or recount memorable feasts of great chiefs.

In the past these stories have often been called myths or legends, but such words don't fit the First Nations interpretation. Tsimshian narratives like *adawx* and *maalsk* are widely believed to be true. The words myth, legend or folk tale, however, often suggest something false.

The message of the *adawx* and the *maalsk* is one of persistence. In the recent Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en land claims case known as Delgam Uukw, the *adawx* were used as evidence of the ownership of their territories long before the coming

of Europeans. The judge in the original case would not allow the use of oral history as evidence. However, when the case was taken to the Supreme Court of Canada, the judges there all agreed that oral histories like *adawx* were admissible as evidence and will be considered as evidence in the future.

William Beynon

Tsimshian oral tradition contained hundreds of *adawx*, *maalsk* and other narratives that were passed on from generation to generation. Unfortunately, many of these were lost after European contact.

Thanks to one man, however, we can still study many of the narratives. William Beynon worked most of his adult life to record the stories of the Tsimshian, Nisga'a and Gitksan people. By interviewing elders and recording their stories, William Beynon has preserved the oral tradition for future generations.

Beynon was born in Victoria, BC in 1888. His father was a Welsh sea captain. His mother was from Lax Kw'alaams, a member of the Wolf clan of the Gitlan tribe. Her father was Arthur Wellington Clah. Clah taught Sm'algyax to the missionary William Duncan. Clah also kept a diary of his life experiences. Beynon's grandmother was originally from the Nass. He eventually inherited the high ranking Nisga'a name *Gusgai'in*.

Although he grew up in Victoria, William Beynon learned Sm'algyax from his mother. He visited Port Simpson for the funeral of his uncle in 1913 and decided to stay. He started a new life among his mother's people. The next year he met Marius Barbeau, an anthropologist from Ottawa, who was in Port Simpson on field work. Over the next fifty years, Beynon worked with Barbeau and other anthropologists, notably Franz Boas, to record the rich legacy of Tsimshian oral tradition.

William Beynon was a scholar who has contributed significantly to the language and culture of the Tsimshian. His work is being studied locally, nationally and internationally.

