

# **Transforming Our Nuuyum: Contemporary Indigenous Leadership and Governance**

**Stories told by Glasttowk askq and Bakk jus moojillth, Ray and Mary Green**

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## VIII Feasting: Haisla Philosophical Roots of Living and Learning Our Nuuyum

Haisla ontology is grounded in our feasting system. There are four clans in our feasting system and each clan has a Hemas and Mus Magthl. In Haisla feasting, one clan would typically be the host. A feast can be hosted for many different reasons: a memorial, a traditional naming, a *tsookwa* (cleansing ceremony), or for leadership purposes. Our people defined cleansing in many different ways: if a person had a near fatal accident while fishing or hunting, he might have a *tsookwa* feast, offering thanks to the spirit world for sparing his life. Similarly, if a person recovered from a severe illness, family members might *tsookwa*. Or, if someone committed a crime or an act of violence and went on to change these behaviors, the person and his or her family members would *tsookwa*.

As stated at the beginning of this essay, our Haisla feasting system includes four clans: Killer Whale, Eagle, Raven, and Beaver. The feast host holds many responsibilities: for example, during a feast for a traditional naming, the person receiving a name must know the account of the name, understand his or her upcoming responsibility as a name holder, and be responsible and respectful to his or her namesake. During one of my visits with my Auntie Sarah and my cousin Nina, we were talking about Indian names. We talked about those of us who carry the names of our aunts, mothers, or grandmothers and our duties as inheritors of names to respect the dignity of the name and leadership of the person who held it before. This particular visit provided me with important knowledge about name giving and receiving that I feel should be included in this section. In the old days before strong colonization, a particular process determined who would receive a chieftain's name. My parents shared:

*When a person who was in a high-ranking clan position passed on to the Spirit World, it was customary that this name would be passed on to the oldest sisters, oldest son. For a woman, the name would go to the oldest sisters, or the oldest daughter of the deceased. It would be the responsibility of the name receiver to cover the expenses for the burial of the deceased, including expenses for a headstone, and all expenses involved in hosting a feast. Usually this feast would take place one year after the deceased had passed.*

In the early stages of planning and organizing a feast, the person or family responsible for it would first contact the clan chief and request a meeting. At this initial meeting, the family would inform the Hemas and Mus Magthl of the reason for the feast, and together the family and chiefs would decide on a date. At this time the family would also identify the feast's cohosts, typically one man and one woman, one of whom would receive a traditional name. In

Haisla feasts, we have a custom of gender balance between the cohosts. The family then invites its clan members to another meeting to inform them of the intent and date of the feast. The cohosts will speak on behalf of the family and clan and will have the responsibility of ensuring that the proper feasting protocol is followed appropriately. Clan members are responsible for contributing money, food, or giveaway goods to the cohosts. Clans include as members all people who have received an Indian name and thus officially belong to a clan. Usually high-ranking members such as chiefs donate a large sum of money or an expensive gift such as a motor for a boat. Other clan members might donate pots, bowls, dishes, blankets, or towels. Younger children who receive a name usually donate smaller items such as tea towels, cups, or coffee mugs. If a family member does not yet belong to a clan or have an Indian name, they can still make a donation. During this time, certain women known as feast cooks will either be asked to make a stock pot of soup, or they will offer to cook.

In the initial meetings, members will declare their donations. The cohosts, together with their clan and family members, will then invite one other person to emcee the feast. Like the cohosts, emcees are also viewed as leaders by their clan and community. Emcees are chosen based on their relationship with the family or clan, as well as on their cultural knowledge and expertise about feasting protocols.

During a feast, a clan would ordinarily serve about 500 people, which necessitates collective and seamless collaboration. Our Nuuyum teaches us that, because we are hosting other clans and clan chiefs, our actions in the feast hall will demonstrate how we live and practice our Nuuyum, so we must be respectful and follow proper protocol. While each clan hosts a feast in a distinct manner, the same philosophical principles underlie all of them.

In addition to the emcee, cohosts, and clan members, people with knowledge of Indian names and their clans play an important role during the feast. Typically these people are recognized cultural leaders. Their duty is to *yoxwasayu*, meaning they must walk door to door to invite other clan members to the feast, and greet them on the day of the feast. My father has shared with me the way people were greeted and seated “in the old days”:

*The Haisla Village hall was located on a very big hill. The men from the clan who are hosting the feast were in place to greet guests and announce their arrival and would start watching out for people as they made their way to the feast hall. One person would wait at the bottom of the hill, another person would wait halfway up the hill, another person at the top of the hill, and another person at the door of the feast hall. The person at the bottom of the feast hall would announce the Indian name and clan of the approaching guest to the person who is waiting halfway up the hill, and this announcement would continue until the guest arrived at the door of the feast hall. The feast hall is organized according to clans, so in this case there would be four sections representing four clans. There would be host*

*men to greet the guest beside each clan section. By the time the guest reaches the feast hall, the seat is ready for him/her. The guest is announced once he or she arrives in the feast hall and they are seated according to their rank and clan.*

One month or two weeks before the feast date, the clan men will yoxwasayu. They will let the guests know who is hosting the feast, who will be *cenud*, which means the person who will receive a name, and learn what the name means. They will let the guests know to bring their own soup bowls, cutlery, and cups. It is protocol that invitations to a feast must be communicated through this face-to-face interaction.

In the earlier days of feasting, chiefs had prestige because of their roles as knowledge holders about vast places, histories, and identities. At one time, prestigious chiefs had an assistant, who acted on behalf of the chief. My father shared this account of this old feasting practice:

*A clan chief was always accompanied by a second person whose responsibility was to act on behalf of the chief. The second person sat on the chair before the chief sat down to ensure the chair was safe. He had the first taste of food to ensure the food was safe. He also spoke in the feast hall on behalf of the chief. If there was a mistake made in his speech, then the repercussion was on him and not the chief. In the old days, this was the cultural practice that was respected and honoured. And although this person represented the chief, he was not ranked as a chief.*

Today, chiefs do not have this type of assistant, but they are still seated according to their rank, served first, and allowed to speak first. The Indian names of assistants to chiefs are still used today, but these people are now viewed and ranked as equal to clan chiefs. From a young age on, Haisla people understand and live these cultural practices. Families and clan chiefs have understood and respected both their roles and the philosophy that substantiated them.

Welcoming people to the feast required that the clan chiefs, family representatives, and the emcee shared an account of the feast with their guests. Welcoming people was an important task, and it took time and patience to ensure that people understood the feast work that was about to happen. This feasting protocol is our people's method of preserving history within our clans and communities. The cultural significance of feasting is partially indicated by the length of time a feast might take: in the old days, feasting continued late into the night.

Both male and female clan chiefs played important roles in how our Nuuyum was lived, for it was their responsibility to teach Nuuyum protocols to the clan's families. Living these feasting protocols teaches our people responsible and respectful leadership. It is important to communicate feasting processes and protocols appropriately and effectively, so that young clan members and other people will learn our feasting Nuuyum. The qualities of leadership generated from feasting include approaching problems collectively, communicat-

ing respectfully, and developing a knowledge of landscape, seasons, ancestral places, and identities. These laws inform how clan members learn about each other, about territories, and about histories. In this manner, leadership illustrates the personal relationships between individuals and their connectedness to one another.

An important ethical component of feasting is what we call “witnessing”. Witnessing is a method of gathering and recording historical and statistical knowledge of our people, such as who has passed on to the spirit world, which families have newborns, and who will inherit chieftainship names. Haisla people also refer to witnessing as *tsookwa* (cleansing feast), and for us, *tsookwa* represents knowledge about the well-being of community members. Witnessing requires that each person in the feast hall understands the work done by the host, whether that refers to feeding the people, gifting them with monetary or dry goods, and ensuring appropriate protocol. The provision of food and gifts creates a reciprocal obligation, so that the guest must in turn remember details of the feast, for example, for a person who could not attend the feast. Hence the feasting system constitutes a reciprocal relationship: both the host and the guests are responsible and accountable for the historical knowledge created, affirmed through their participation. For Haisla people, this protocol constitutes a form of law—it is how we define Haisla Nuuyum.

## IX Responsibilities for Family/Clan Members Hosting a Feast

My mom shared with me the process by which our clan members prepare food and giveaway gifts:

*Gifting the people is categorized and organized according to ranks of chieftainship and according to which Clan they belong to. A month or two weeks prior to the feast, the Clan gathers at a meeting place to “tag” giveaway gifts. In this process the Clan must know who the Chiefs are and which Clans they belong to. They must remember past feasts and who were “newly” appointed Chiefs. They must remember the babies or young people who received names. In so doing, each person will be gifted accordingly. Chiefs receive comforters, cash, and sometimes larger gifts such as a boat, motor, or trap line. Those who are ranked second to Chiefs are gifted with comforters, blankets, large pots or bowls, and cash. The remainder of Clan members are noted as “commoners” and receive cake pans, bowls, towels, and small blankets. Young children are gifted with tea towels, smaller dish sets and blankets. If there are guests who do not have a Clan name, there are giveaway goods set aside for them. All guests receive a tea towel (women) or socks (men). All guests are provided with a loaf of bread, a box of crackers, oranges, and apples. The Chief ladies each receive a cake. Once these gifts are distributed, the host will make cash payments. In the event of a memorial feast, cash payments are for services provided to the family during the loss of their loved one. People who receive payment typically are grave diggers and people who provide food, prayers, and song for the grieving family, and there is*

*payment for the use of facilities like the church or the recreation center. Typically the meal served is what our people refer to as “wedding stew.” There are certain ladies in each Clan who cook a stock pot that is usually about 50 to 60 quarts. In order to feed 500 people there are usually five stock pots of stew prepared. During the day before the feast, the Clan members gather and cut vegetables and stew meat. At the venue where they will work on vegetables, whoever is the last person to arrive must cut onions for the stew, so people are usually on time, as they do not like cutting onions. On the morning of the feast day, the stew is cooked and simmered all day until it is time for feasting. The Clan hosts prepare the feast hall by setting up tables, chairs, and a table for the giveaway, by setting out baked goods, by preparing for speeches and name giving, and by generally ensuring that feasting protocol is prepared. At five o’clock, the feast begins and carries on until the feasting work is done.*

The ranking order of gifting is still the same today, but the gifts and cash have changed with the economy.

In our Nuuyum, the feasting process articulates community leadership, which in turn informs Haisla laws and governance. I have reflected on these feasting processes to examine how feasting philosophies could inform contemporary governing models.

## **X Weaving Stories and Histories**

Like other Indigenous people around the world, our people created and sustained relationships with settler systems to ensure we had a voice in, and made equal contribution to, the economic expansion. In describing this situation, I draw on the term “weave” to illustrate how Haisla Nuuyum and our cultural teachings have been affected by colonialism, and that Haisla Nuuyum simultaneously intersects with Western knowledge.

During industrial (economic), colonial (legal and political), and religious (moral) expansion, Haisla histories and Nuuyum became much more unsettled and complex. While our people recognized that industry was quickly expanding throughout our territories, they also saw the necessity of preserving our Nuuyum through all available means. Some people saved their vacation time to fish for oolichans or to plan and work for their feast. Rather than going fishing with their families, children were in residential or day schools; this too affected the length of time families spent in the fishing areas, as families did not want to be away from their children. Furthermore, English became the main language of communication within our Villages.<sup>45</sup>

Through these weaved stories and experiences, our people have incorporated various methods of learning, understanding, and living Haisla Nuuyum. We have heard stories and experiences about oolichan trails, other trading

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<sup>45</sup> The English language was forced on our people through varying colonial mechanisms such as residential and day schools, Indian agents, and missionary work.

trails, and such devastating events as floods, disease, and the disenfranchisement of generations of people. Our ancestors armed themselves with their cultural knowledge and practices as they met and engaged with newcomers who have put a new face on the northwest coast of British Columbia. The old teachings of our Haisla ancestors and way of life brought together the elements of respect, honor, and curiosity that were manifest through oolichan fishing, historical landmarks, and our feasting system. Our people lived highly complex, nuanced, and sophisticated lives, as demonstrated by the multi-pronged approaches they took to ensuring the survival of our cultural practices by adapting and maintaining them despite local incursions and economic demands.

## XI Reflection

Our feasting system continues to be a strong force that brings our people and clan members together, whether in naming and memorial ceremonies or during sporting competitions or fundraisers during crises. Vine Deloria Jr. has elaborated on the importance of clans: “Clan structures began to evolve as tribal populations grew. . . . Clans enhanced the life-world and never reduced it to a mechanical process.”<sup>46</sup>

On one occasion, our chief and council hosted a feast to commemorate a peace treaty between Haisla, Kitasoo, and Heiltsuk,<sup>47</sup> which had occurred in response to the BC treaty process requiring First Nations people to negotiate away pieces of land to settle an agreement with British Columbia and Canada. The peace treaty was made in ceremony in our feast hall, and the chiefs of the three Villages made an agreement with one another that they would not allow the BC treaty process to interrupt their communities’ relationships with each other.

During this peace feast, people were reminded about our cultural knowledge and respect for the water, land, and animals. They spoke of the importance of maintaining cultural relationships and responsibilities for the future generations of all three nations. Importantly, our people were reminded of how colonial forces have harmed our way of life, of how our cultural governing systems have been subjugated, and of how we must gather as people to reclaim and solidify the cultural practices relevant and distinct to our Villages.

The intentions of this peace feast, in terms of strengthening relations between Indigenous peoples, are echoed in the work of Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel. They argue that Indigenous peoples and communities must be unencumbered by the state and should work towards a resurgence of governance

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46 V. Deloria, *For This Land: Writings on Religion in America* (New York: Routledge, 1999) at 178–79.

47 Kitamaat Village Council, *supra* note 1.

that reflects our cultural ways. They further argue that engaging in state politics distracts us from Indigenous methods of governance:

Colonial legacies and contemporary practices of disconnection, dependency and dispossession have effectively confined Indigenous identities to state-sanctioned legal and political definitional approaches . . . such compartmentalization results in a “politics of distraction” that diverts energies away from decolonizing and regenerating communities and frames of community relationships in state-centric terms, such as aforementioned “aboriginality”.<sup>48</sup>

In his 2003 keynote address to the Alaskan Federation of Natives (AFN) Convention, the Maori scholar Graham Hingangaroa Smith also refers to the “politics of distraction,” a tactic by which Native people are kept busy with bureaucratic demands, so that they will have little time left to complain, question, or rebel against the status quo.<sup>49</sup> These three Indigenous scholars argue that, rather than negotiate within Western regimes of governance, we must assert traditional forms of leadership inherent in our clan feasting to formulate a Haisla governing entity.

## XII Suggestions for Centring Haisla Nuuyum into Leadership and Governance

While many Indigenous communities are negotiating with settler, resource, and industrial companies and engaging in industrial economic development, these negotiations often do not include community and clan members in an ethical or transparent way.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, surrounding communities and other non-Indigenous towns typically are not included in the dialogue until well after the beginning of discussions. To that end, and to be inclusive of community, clans, and Haisla people, it is important to develop wide-ranging relationships at the inception of economic discussions or treaty negotiations. This will ensure a greater level of accountability, and that knowledge of the economic proposal may be discussed and negotiated in a productive and effective manner by all the people affected. Although some non-Indigenous people make attempts to consult, consultation continues to take place within Westernized forums. Instead I suggest that negotiations take place within the Haisla feasting system.

In my reflection on our current governing systems,<sup>51</sup> I want to examine if

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48 T. Alfred & J. Cornthassel, *Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism* (Oxford: Government and Opposition, 2005) at 600.

49 G. Smith, *Indigenous Struggle for the Transformation of Education and Schooling* (Auckland: University of Auckland Press, 2003) at 1.

50 Most times, clan and community members are not aware of the negotiations until well after the proposal has been presented and developed.

51 When I speak of “our” in this context, I am referring to other Indigenous nations as well, and not necessarily focusing only on the Haisla governing system.