

The World of Txamsem



INTRODUCTION

Long ago, in a more supernatural time, when the Nass and Skeena Rivers were new, the legend of Txamsem was born.

In a village located on the Salt Water there lived a very important chief. One morning, his guardsmen found a baby lying under a totem pole. The chief decided to raise the baby as his son and he called him Txamsem. Txamsem was continually ravenous and ate all the time. He grew and grew until he became a giant. For thousands of years, Txamsem or Big Man wandered from the sea coast, through the huge river valleys and over the high mountains. Txamsem became known to all the Alugiyat (the people) who lived in what is now known as Northwestern British Columbia.

Both the Nisga'a people of the Nass Valley and the Tsimshian people of the Skeena River Valley knew about him. The Gitksan of Hazelton called him Weeget as did the Haisla of Kitimaat Village. The Tahltan knew him as Siskee-a-choo or Crow. The Tlingit of the mainland coast and the Haida people of Haida Gwaii (the Queen Charlotte Islands) knew him as Raven.

No matter what name he was known by, Txamsem dominates the stories and legends of all these people. Born of the spirit world, Txamsem was not an ordinary person. He had many special powers and could do magic. Txamsem could transform himself and in the following stories he becomes a raven, a pine needle, an old woman, a squirrel and a deer.



The first stories in this book tell how Txamsem gets light and fire for the people. In both, *Txamsem Steals Fire* and *Txamsem Steals Light*, Txamsem uses deception to benefit others. Other stories, not in this collection, tell how he gets fresh water and creates the tides. Additional Txamsem stories explain the importance of the salmon and oolichan to the survival of the people. Many Txamsem stories tell how something is created by accident as in *Why People Have Shrivelled Knuckles*. In this story, Txamsem tries to copy the magical tricks of others with some interesting results. These are all classed as Creator Stories.

Playing tricks is a special favourite of Txamsem, and he endeavours to fool animals and humans alike. However, lots of Txamsem's tricks do not work out and he often finds himself in awkward situations because of his foolery. In the Trickster stories, Txamsem is endowed with many characteristics that represent human weaknesses. He is at different times greedy, dishonest, foolish, vain, deceitful and a liar. Although these are not very desirable characteristics, it is exactly these qualities that are central to situations that happen in *Txamsem Fools Squirrel Woman*, *Txamsem's Wooden Slave* and *Txamsem and the Crab*. Sometimes Txamsem is trapped by his own wrongdoing, and sometimes he gets away with his deeds.

The story, *Txamsem and Salmon Woman* tells how Txamsem, for a short time, learns the value of hard work. With Salmon Woman as his wife, he becomes a good provider and an industrious person. However, Txamsem throws away his good life and, as in many of the stories, ends up very unhappy.



This story reminds us that we must honour and show gratitude to the Spirit Beings that help provide people with the gifts of Nature. It is a moral tale, in that there is a direct consequence for unsuitable behaviour. In this case, Txamsem loses everything because of temper and greed.



Map of British Columbia showing cultures of the Northwest



Creator Stories

