

Waap : The House Group

What is a House Group?

The *Waap* is the most important group in Ts'msyen, Nisga'a and Gitxsan cultures. In English it is called the House or House Group. The word Waap means both the building and the group. So *Waap* refers to the longhouse and the people who own it.

The House Group is a kind of **lineage**. This word means "a direct line of descent from ancestors." Your lineage is all the generations of your family who lived before you: your grandparents, great grandparents, and so on. A House Group is a special lineage group. It is like a family, but it has a unique identity. It is also closely connected with clans. Everyone in one House Group belongs to the same clan. So, a person's father belongs to a different House Group. Only the mother's side is included in the House Group.

Identity is very important in Ts'msyen culture. Traditionally, people had to know the history of their House Group to be acceptable in society. If you did not know your traditions and where you came from, you would be shamed or made fun of. People might say, "You have no grandmother." So there was a very strong sense of belonging and identity with your House Group in the past.

The House Group and the head chief have the same name. The territories, crests, songs and names of that House Group are passed down through the chief. These special crests, names and songs are inherited property and cannot be used by any other house. They are all connected to an *adaawx*, a narrative or story which tells about their origin.

How does a House Group show its unique identity?

There are two main ways a House Group remembers and shows its identity: orally and visually. To put it another way, identity is shown through words and pictures.

The oral side of identity is passed on through *adaawx*. These are the stories which tell the important histories of the ancestors. They tell such histories as how the ancestors came to their lands and what battles they fought. There are also special songs which are sung by chiefs which are part of the oral record. They are called *liim'oy*.

The visual side of a House Group's identity is shown through Crests. These are special designs with natural and supernatural creatures which are connected to the House Group's clan and history.

These Crests are owned by the House Group, and they are the only ones who can display them.

The words and pictures, the *adaawx* and crests, are closely linked. The origins of a crest are explained through the telling of the *adaawx* that goes with it.

How is the House Group connected to the land and resources?

The members of a House Group have a direct connection with the land and all the resources on it. Each House Group has its own territories where its members fish, hunt and gather plants and berries. Ownership of the land is one of the hereditary rights that is passed on from generation to generation.

The *adaawx* are also connected to the land. An *adaawx* **validates** the ownership of the land. That means the *adaawx* proves that a House Group has rights to the lands that it claims.

In return for using the land and its resources, Ts'msyen people believe they have a responsibility to look after it for future generations. This is called **stewardship**. Today we say that House Groups have stewardship over their territories.

What other hereditary rights does a House Group have?

Besides the **adaawx**, **territories**, **crests** and **songs**, there are two other important hereditary rights of House Groups. They are **Names** and **Dances**.

Names come from a bank of names owned by the House Group, and sometimes particular branches of a clan may retain certain names. These names follow the maternal line; that is, a woman's name and a man's name both come from the mother's clan.

There is a normal progression of names—from baby names, to adolescent names, to adult names. One person may receive different names throughout his or her life. Once a new name has been assumed, the previous name usually returns to the bank of names. An adult who receives more than one name may, however, keep all these names, depending on the circumstances under which they were given. For example, the adult may be "holding" a name before it is passed to a relative of a younger generation.

When do House Groups show their unique identity?

The main time that members of a House Group show their identity is at a feast. Visitors from other House Groups, Villages and Nations are invited to witness the display of their identity. All the different parts of the House system come together at the feast:

- Guests are treated to foods that have been harvested from the House Group's territories. As the food is served, the place where the food came from is announced.
- Crests are displayed throughout the feast, on things like clothing, headdresses, feast dishes
- Feasts are held inside longhouses which are decorated with House Crests
- Adaawx are told for all the guests to hear.
- Songs, dances and dramatizations are performed, which all tell part of the House Group's history.
- Guests validate the House Group's rights to tell the adaawx, display the crests and most importantly, to use their territories. They do this by accepting the food and feast gifts, and by making speeches.

How many House Groups were there in the past?

Around the time of European contact, there were between 175 and 200 Waap or House Groups spread among the 14 Ts'msyen Villages. Some villages had 9 different House Groups, and others had 15 or more.

What did the newcomers think of the House System when they arrived in Ts'msyen territories?

The newcomers didn't understand the House System at all. When they looked at the land, they only saw empty spaces. They didn't realize the ancient and complex system of stewardship that was in place to take care of the land. When they saw totem poles and other crest paintings, they didn't understand the long history and the importance of the crests to the House Group's identity.

They didn't understand feasts, either. All they saw was people spending a long time eating, dancing and making speeches, and, worst of all in the newcomers' eyes, giving away their belongings. They had no idea how all these things worked together to build a strong society and unique culture.

Why is the House System a successful social organization?

The House Group system operated successfully for many hundreds of years, perhaps thousands of years. It was a successful economic system because it distributed the abundant resources of the land and sea fairly. Each House Group had stewardship over its own territories. One group could not gain control over a large territory.