

FEASTING ON THE *AAM* OF HEAVEN:  
THE CHRISTIANIZATION OF THE NISGA'A, 1860-1920

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Graduate Department of History  
University of Toronto

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# Abstract

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The Nisga'a of British Columbia's rugged Pacific Coast have long forged their spirituality from both a relationship with the supernatural and other beings with whom they share the Nass Valley, and practices and beliefs brought in from abroad. In the latter half of the nineteenth century the Nisga'a began a period of intense engagement with the different Christianities that began to appear at the margins of their world. British and later Canadian missionary societies set their sights on the inhabitants of the coast while the Nisga'a themselves were exploring the newly available religious rituals and ideas they found in the emerging settler society. By 1905, the year after which ninety percent of the Indians of British Columbia were reported to be Christian, the long-serving Anglican missionary to the Nisga'a James McCullagh jubilantly declared that there was "not a heathen left" on the Nass River. This dissertation explores the process of Christianization that lay beneath such observations, focusing on how the Nisga'a understood this change in their religious life. Using missionary and government sources, as well as interviews conducted with contemporary Nisga'a, I argue that Nisga'a

Christianization was a much more complex and multi-stranded endeavour than conventional framings of the subject allow. Nisga'a eagerly sought out the new Christianities on offer after mid-century, and began a long engagement with their ideas, rituals and forms. Their response is best understood as being informed by a Nisga'a cultural stance that valued new knowledge with the potential to improve their lives and respected the ability to create wealth. The religious change that occurred through their interaction with Protestant Christian forms and their promoters was marked by contingencies, the discovery and negotiation of both congruencies and differences, as well as impositions. Effects of this period of Christianization were far-reaching; the Nisga'a's incorporation of Christianity into their religious framework significantly changed it. Influences also went both ways. As Nisga'a engaged with them, the particular forms, practices and meanings of the Christianities transplanted from Anglo-Canadian societies were tweaked and even transformed. Through this dialogical process, Christianity became a Nisga'a religion. Finally, this dissertation draws on contemporary Nisga'a memories of Christianization gleaned from interviews to examine the different ways this historical process is remembered in the Nass today, and how these understandings shape current cultural projects—including this one—that require plausible pasts.

For Melissa,  
for so many reasons

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

At first there were many people that did not accept this new Christianity . . . why accept a second Christianity when we already had one? . . . It wasn't different, but it was how [the missionaries] taught it was different, because we believed already of the Creation, and how God has given us this valley to be stewards of.<sup>1</sup>

Gary Davis's words, spoken during the first of my interviews with Nisga'a in the Nass Valley, are an eloquent reminder of the diverse ways in which we might remember religious changes like the Christianization of Nisga'a society that began after the mid-nineteenth century. Our understanding of the historical phenomenon of Christianization, in both its local and global dimensions, remains deeply incomplete. One great challenge to fleshing out these histories more fully is our dependence in many cases on sources penned largely by outside observers about the religious experiences of others.

Knowledge that Aboriginal peoples today have of their own history has the potential to offer valuable insights, enriching and complicating the larger narratives of empire and globalization in which their past has been cast. While not available for every historical reconstruction, the histories and memories through which Aboriginal societies relate to their past remain vastly underutilized by historians practising in the Western tradition—to their impoverishment.

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Davis (Wii Gilax Namk'ap), interview by Nicholas May, New Aiyansh, 27 June 2007.

The Davis quote offers a window onto how differently scholars might write Aboriginal histories if they consider the available native accounts of their own pasts. From a Nisga'a perspective we are invited to envision a world of Christian ancestors, of "second Christianities" made to appear disparate by their purveyors from one already in place. In this brief example we also see a hint of tension and an initial reluctance to accept this new Christianity. Was it because the ancestors soon learned that acceptance entailed re-envisioning their first Christianity as fundamentally dissimilar and in need of renunciation, or perhaps because this second Christianity was so similar that "acceptance" was not required? Such perspectives can provoke and sustain new lines of inquiry as well as invite more robust and imaginative readings of conventional sources. Indeed, a central argument of this dissertation, that the Nisga'a's pursuit of the newly available Christianities was driven by a key cultural imperative, emerged from my interviews with Nisga'a elders.

Drawing on contemporary Nisga'a memories and using them in conjunction with the written record, this thesis finds that the Christianization of Nisga'a society in this period was a multi-stranded process, in which the universalizing ambitions of Protestant Christianities entwined with local Nisga'a interest in acquiring new knowledge from the K'amksiiwaa (white people) that they believed had the potential to improve their lives. By focusing on Nisga'a understandings of this process it becomes clear that their Christianization was greatly facilitated by preexisting cultural dispositions: an attraction to new knowledge and a capacity for change. Nineteenth-century Nisga'a approached the Christianities that became available to them with curiosity and confidence. They expected change when they secured their first missionary in 1860, and indeed embraced

the prospect, understanding from experience that the opportunities to acquire new powers and beneficial knowledge that flowed from new encounters were redolent with transformative potential. A number of the needs of turn-of-the-century Nisga'a were served by the Christianity that emerged from this process: it fulfilled the requirement in a colonizing world for an acceptable religion; it ensured the ongoing development of their spiritual repertoire by incorporating the knowledge that had become newly accessible to them; and, to at least some degree, it fulfilled the spiritual needs of individual Nisga'a. The new faith was not an unmitigated success, however. Largely due to the insistence of their missionaries, the new came at the expense of more of their preexisting ways than most Nisga'a had thought necessary, a development that would endow their Christianization with ambiguity. Even with these losses, their new Christianity was not an entirely novel creation, for it carried much from before alongside and within its new forms. Inside one of the more tumultuous periods of their history we find a rather remarkable achievement. Through a process of acquiring and domesticating many of the offerings from the new faith the Nisga'a forged a new religion, one that would take them through a colonial age. If no history is without its present, then engaging with the memories of Nisga'a and other Aboriginal peoples on this and other transformations in their past foregrounds important and often unheard perspectives, creating alternative histories that are well worth the extra effort.

Before proceeding any further this is perhaps a suitable place to explain the title of this study. *Aam* is the Sim'alga<sub>x</sub> (Nisga'a language) word for "good." It is a word Nisga'a could often be heard saying in reference to aspects of the Christianities they were engaging with, whether exclaiming it in response to hearing some passage from the Bible

or describing what they believed the missionaries to be doing among them. Yet it was not reducible to Christianity, reflected for example within McCullagh's harsh criticism in 1910 that the upriver chiefs had merely mixed the name of Christ into the aam of heaven they used to contribute to their preeminence. The use of the phrase "aam of heaven" by Christianizing Nisga'a nicely points to the different ways that they could interpret the appealing aspects of the Christianities with which they were deeply engaging. It speaks to how these Christianities were inevitably understood from existing Nisga'a relationships with the supernatural. Nisga'a feasted on the aam of heaven that became available in these years, but as we will see this was a practice with which they were well acquainted.

## **Scope and Definitions**

This dissertation explores the phenomenon of religious change among the Nisga'a people of British Columbia's north coast. It focuses on a clustering of changes that occurred during a recent period in their history, which collectively may be referred to as Christianization. Among the cargo European colonizers brought with them to the Americas were Catholic and Protestant Christianities that had become naturalized within their own societies in the preceding centuries. Although in some instances Christian beliefs and practices began to circulate among the peoples of the north coast before they had direct contact with Europeans, extensive Christianization of these societies can be pinpointed to a relatively short period that coincided with the beginnings of European settlement and the establishment of formal missions to the Aboriginal inhabitants. In focusing on how one particular people, the Nisga'a, experienced their Christianization, this study aims to contribute to the revisioning of this historical process of religious

change. The chronological period examined is the six decades following two visits by the Anglican missionary William Duncan to the Nass River in 1860, a timeframe in Nisga'a history marked by numerous transformations.

By necessity this study of religious change engages with a number of key concepts, my use of which should be clarified at the outset. The first of these is "religion." This term has enjoyed the status of a universal due to the dominance of European social sciences. Its emergence as an autonomous domain, distinct from other areas of life, owed its antecedents to a cultural revolution in Europe during which portions of social life became increasingly institutionalized and differentiated. Religion defined a distinct sphere of life, bounded by the ritual actions and other practices that separated it from non-religious aspects of life. Christian missionaries, who saw their religion as a portable entity that was transmissible to other peoples like the Nisga'a, epitomized this European break of the religious from other aspects of life. To a great extent the Christianities they had to offer were disembodied, boiled down to a few select words, objects and actions, all removed from the cultures in which they found life.

When setting out to study religious change in the Nisga'a past one is immediately confronted with a problem. Put simply, "religion" was not a separate segment of Nisga'a life for much of the nineteenth century. Contemporary attempts to understand pre-Christian Nisga'a spirituality through the lens of religion express the awkwardness in this paradigm, as reflected by a text used in Nisga'a public schools that explains, "This religion was so much a part of everyday life that it did not even have a name."<sup>2</sup> Nisga'a spirituality, for lack of a better name, had not experienced the kind of cultural revolution

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Boston, Shirley Morven, and Myrle Grandison, *From Time Before Memory: The People of K'amligihahlhaahl* (New Aiyansh: School District No. 92, 1996), 144.

seen in Europe in which aspects of life had been differentiated into autonomous domains. Even if pre-Christian Nisga'a "lacked" this unique domain in their lives, they certainly were not deficient in possessing many concepts and practices that we would identify as "religious." A key concept in Nisga'a cosmology at the beginning of their Christianization was *halayt*, which referred to both persons endowed with supernatural power as well as to demonstrations of this power. Closely related to *halayt*, and indeed its source, was *naxnok*, a term often translated as "spirit" or "supernatural." Marie-Françoise Guédon describes *naxnok* as "any being, event, or ability which appears to exhibit or express some form of power."<sup>3</sup> In keeping with the underlying ideas of reciprocity and balance that have traditionally characterized Nisga'a ways of being in the world spirits and humans were dependent upon one another; their contact had the potential to be mutually beneficial. Nineteenth-century Nisga'a did not view humans as being distinct either spiritually or materially from other entities.

## Christianity

On one level this dissertation is also about Christianity, about how it was carried across an ocean and a continent to reach the Nisga'a by the mid-nineteenth century. While discussing an historical part of what is today a widely divergent, globe-spanning religious tradition it is worth examining what is meant by the term "Christianity" in this study. I take a broad, encompassing definition of Christianity here, one that includes all the religious forms of those historical actors who self-identified as Christian. This study places the different versions of Christianity found in the Nass after 1860—both those

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<sup>3</sup> Marie-Françoise Guédon, "An Introduction to Tsimshian Worldview and its Practitioners," in *The Tsimshian: Images of the Past, Views for the Present*, ed. Margaret Seguin [Anderson] (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), 139.

introduced and more homegrown—on the same plane, recognizing that, like modernity or other widespread phenomena, there is no invariant concept of Christianity against which we can compare all other versions.<sup>4</sup> Such a point is important because historians of Christianity in Canada have tended to implicitly privilege missionary and more broadly Euro-Canadian definitions when assessing the Christianization of Aboriginal peoples. In describing this religious change, they have given more weight to dominant understandings of what Christianity was and is than to how neophytes constructed their new faith, even though the latter are better seen as but the latest actors in a long string of creative articulations. This way of viewing native Christianities is encapsulated in John Webster Grant’s classic survey of the Indian-missionary encounter in Canada when he asks, “How genuine was the Christianity to which these Indians were converted?”<sup>5</sup>

Promoters of different Protestant Christianities in the Nass Valley tried and at times succeeded in presenting their particular Christianity as the best or even the only true Christianity. Within this study, however, faiths like the evangelical Anglicanism of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), or of the upriver Nisga’a whose continuing reverence for their ancestors the missionary James McCullagh branded as “idolatry,” are all conceived as variants of a far wider Christendom.<sup>6</sup> To emphasize the fertile

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<sup>4</sup> Scholars have made this same argument for modernity. See, for example, Harri Englund and James Leach, “Ethnography and the Meta-Narratives of Modernity,” *Current Anthropology* 41, no. 2 (2000): 225-48.

<sup>5</sup> John Webster Grant, *Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter since 1534* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 246. Grant does later opt to leave questions of sincerity and authenticity aside in favour of asking what conversion meant to Indians who embraced Christianity, but nonetheless makes it clear that Western Christianities form the norm against which all others are to be measured, as reflected in the following concern: “If one looks honestly at the record, one is nagged by a suspicion that what they embraced was so different from Christianity as the missionaries understood it as to be classified more properly as a mere imitation of its externals or, at best, as a blend neither quite Christian nor quite traditional,” 246.

<sup>6</sup> My thinking here has been stirred by Peter Brown, who writes in *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) that “throughout this period the

emergence and coexistence of a number of different versions of Christianity in the Nass Valley during the dynamic period of Christianization covered here I have chosen to speak of them as Christianities in the plural. By doing so I follow the lead of William Christian Jr., who reminds us that major world religions “are, in practice, coalitions or mosaics of widely differing local adaptations that share a common core of beliefs, rituals, and organization.”<sup>7</sup> In their imagined universality these local religions contain a host of distinct versions, though practitioners are not always inclined to view their particular configuration as something other than contiguous with the boundaries of the larger tradition, a subset. As a principal example of this, Christian notes elsewhere that “Catholicism has become the prime example of catholicism.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, a number of Protestant Christianities circulated in the Nass after the mid-nineteenth century, with some enjoying greater hegemony than others.

This study joins with the work of other scholars that underscores the vast diversity and fluidity of meaning and practices within Christianity. Elizabeth Elbourne, for example, in her analysis of the relationship between the Khoekhoe, British empire and London Missionary Society in the Cape Colony in the early nineteenth century, notes how “Christianity twisted like a snake in the hands of those who sought to use it . . . but none was able to establish final ownership.”<sup>9</sup> Laugrand and Oosten in a similar vein describe how Shamanism and Christianity are constantly changing and have continued to influence each other since their initial encounter in the Canadian Arctic at the end of the

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Christianity of what we now call Europe was only the westernmost variant of a far wider Christian world,”  
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<sup>7</sup> William Christian Jr., “Folk Religion: An Overview,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 372.

<sup>8</sup> William Christian Jr., “Catholicisms,” in *Local Religion in Colonial Mexico*, ed. Martin Austin Nesvig (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 259.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799-1853* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), 5.

eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup> To say that the Christian tradition has been marked by contestations and even radical transformations of meaning and form is on one hand a commonplace observation. An impressive historiography examining the many changes and tectonic shifts in the Christian tradition over its two millennia exists. Yet outside of Europe, with a few notable exceptions, histories of Christianity generally have an unwarranted flatness as an historically contingent phenomenon gives way to the monolith of capital-‘C’ Christianity. The reasons for this are complex. One explanation is that historians of non-European societies have been more interested in exploring how their subjects experienced and acted upon changes triggered by colonialism than demonstrating how they helped to transform a world religion. At least part of the reason why these historical studies do not emphasize its fluid and open-ended nature is that the Christianities that emerged from this process generally wore a “bad odor,” to borrow a phrase used by an historian of medieval Christianities to describe her subject.<sup>11</sup> Born out of colonial contexts, the ambiguity of their origins has understandably garnered the most attention from scholars. These relatively young Christianities are not places to which scholars of colonized peoples, or for that matter Christianity, typically look to find creativity. And yet, as we will see, such encounters have been transformative for both peoples like the Nisga’a and for Christianity. This dissertation adds to a growing body of literature that explores how Christianity was “remade” in the Americas.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Frédéric B. Laugrand and Jarich G. Oosten, *Inuit Shamanism and Christianity: Transitions and Transformations in the Twentieth Century* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Mayke de Jong, “Religion,” in *The Early Middle Ages: Europe 400-1000*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 131.

<sup>12</sup> A notable contribution in this regard is the collection of essays to be found in *Colonial Saints: Discovering the Holy in the Americas, 1500-1800*, eds. Allan Greer and Jodi Bilinkoff (New York: Routledge, 2003).

Emphasizing Christianity's historical mutability is particularly important when studying the phenomenon of Christianization because it allows us to conceptualize religious change in a more nuanced way. Even though at times different players in the history explored here appear to have understood the option before the Nisga'a as one of either accepting or rejecting a monolithic entity in its entirety, in practice Nisga'a engagements with the new faith were more complicated. Ethnohistorical studies elsewhere in the Americas, for example, show how Indian logic was used to arrange Catholic content and vice versa. Globally, Christianity appears to have spread in much this same way, taking on local elements, or "hybridizing" with initially foreign forms and meanings. Although one hesitates to speak of inevitabilities when describing the past, it was improbable that the new Christianities taking root in the Nass during this period would mirror exactly any antecedent. To begin with, the Christianities the Protestant missionaries offered the Nisga'a had been disembodied, reduced to symbols that were bereft of the cultural context that had helped to anchor their meaning. Yet perhaps more significantly for our purposes here, these newly freed Christian forms did not land on *tabulae rasae*. Their Nisga'a adopters brought their own ways of seeing to these forms, generating new and at times different meanings without necessarily subversive intentions. If most missionaries who worked on the Nass had little sympathy for this kind of bricolage it was nonetheless a well-worn path of Christianization, and one that presented contemporary Nisga'a with a range of options between the extremes offered them.

## **Christianization**

The concept of "Christianization" is central to this analysis of the period of Nisga'a religious change that began in the mid-nineteenth century. As a concept,

Christianization allows for a wider purview of possible religious changes into and around Christianities than does “conversion” with its implicit dualism. It is also less teleological, allowing us to avoid notions of completion or unidirectional movement toward some endpoint. Using the term Christianization (or Islamicization, or for that matter any other process denoted by the suffix “-ization”) opens up the range of responses and changes a given religious framework may experience when interacting with Christianity. It helps us understand religious change as something more intricate and varied than a move between competing, self-contained systems. Taking as our subject Christianization is also an approach that allows us to more sharply focus on religious changes as experienced by those undergoing them. This dissertation draws an important distinction between the historical processes of missionization and Christianization. Study of the latter includes consideration of missions, but also examines the diverse phenomena at work beyond them, only some of which may have been triggered by the existence of Christian missions. These phenomena also worked to make Christianity an increasingly relevant aspect of a given world. The relationship between missions and Christianization is complex and elusive, and this study joins others in decoupling missionary imposition from the Christianities that eventually took root. Missionaries were sparks and shapers: they introduced new forms and rites, but rarely exercised full control over how they would be received. Indeed a central argument of this dissertation is that despite the power imbalance inherent in colonialism, no one party was able to entirely control this process.

## Historiography

Academic study of Nisga'a history by non-Aboriginal scholars remains a largely underdeveloped field. To date no monograph-length study on the Nisga'a past—or for that matter on any aspect of the Nisga'a—has been published. Historians hoping to survey existing scholarship on the peoples of the Nass Valley must be prepared to search it out in the snippets and sketches where it is currently found. The largest body of work has been undertaken by anthropologists whose discipline seemed more suited to considering the pasts of non-Western peoples. Study of the different peoples of the Northwest Coast was in fact formative to the budding discipline of anthropology in the closing years of the nineteenth century. Franz Boas, widely regarded as the founder of the Americanist tradition, began extensive studies of numerous Northwest Coast societies in these years when an opportunity to see Kwakwaka'wakw dancers perform in his native Germany drew him to study this culture area. Over the course of his career Boas was prolific, working feverishly under a “salvation ethnography” paradigm that sought to capture the cultures of North America's Aboriginal peoples before they themselves disappeared. Though the bulk of Boas's work was undertaken among peoples south of the Nisga'a, he did however publish material on the Nisga'a. His *Tsimshian Texts, Naas River Dialect* published in 1902 contains some two dozen *adaawak* or oral histories that Boas collected incidentally while he was in Gingolx in 1894 to learn more about the Athapaskan-speaking Tsetsaut of Portland Canal.<sup>13</sup> In 1909-10 the Bureau of American

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<sup>13</sup> Franz Boas, *Tsimshian Texts, Naas River Dialect*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin no. 27 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1902).

Ethnology published his massive *Tsimshian Mythology*, which was based on the fieldwork of his Tsimshian informant Henry Tate in Lax Kw'alaams.<sup>14</sup>

Boas's particular organization of the ethnographic material he collected and analyzed concerning the Nisga'a had a profound influence on the way they would be understood by non-Aboriginal scholars. Within his publications the Nisga'a, as well as their inland neighbours the Gitksan, are lumped in together with the Tsimshian. Scholars following in Boas's wake continued this practice of combining three politically distinct societies into the category of "Tsimshianic peoples," justifying this classification based on their cultural and linguistic similarities. While recognizing these affinities, the Nisga'a, and the Gitksan, generally do not use this terminology. Somewhat naively, on my first trip to the Nass Valley in 2003, with much of the early ethnographical literature fresh in my head, I made the mistake of referring to "Tsimshian culture," whereupon I was kindly informed that the Nisga'a are *not* Tsimshian, and cautioned not to follow this academic nomenclature. Yet the historian of the Nisga'a has no choice but to grapple with this larger identity, ferreting out where it refers to the peoples of the Nass or whether a Tsimshian informant is really Tsimshian, or even Gitksan. In one sense the use of the Tsimshian identity by Boas and other early ethnographers is not entirely inaccurate, as much of the fieldwork was conducted in coastal Tsimshian communities like Lax Kw'alaams. Still, the earliest academic scholarship on the Nisga'a is to be found in these works, and the valuable insights to be gleaned make the effort of extracting information that pertain to the Nisga'a from these "Tsimshian" sources well worth it.

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<sup>14</sup> Franz Boas, *Tsimshian Mythology: Based on Texts Recorded by Henry W. Tate*, Thirty-First Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology for the Years 1909-1910 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1916).

For all their value to our knowledge of nineteenth-century Nisga'a society, Boas's publications in particular are conspicuously silent on some of the changes that were occurring in Nisga'a religious life. Working under the auspices of the British Association for the Advancement of Science as well as the Dominion Government, both instructed him to generate empirical knowledge about contemporary Aboriginal peoples of the Northwest Coast. Boas, however, had a different object in mind, which comes through in the many silences within his ethnographic data about contemporary Aboriginal life on the Pacific coast. Something of Boas's priorities for his work can be seen in the preface to *Tsimshian Mythology*, where he laments his discovery that Christian influences were reshaping the stories he had first collected from the Nass and lower Skeena Rivers after comparing them with those assembled more recently by Tate. Boas blamed Tate and his informants for removing their coarseness, and concluded that the latter were increasingly reluctant to express themselves "in the traditional form" knowing that it would be seen as improper by white readers.<sup>15</sup> Despite this and other evidence of change, Boas's aim of writing down the imagined essence of Nisga'a and other Aboriginal cultures had the effect of presenting their pasts as effectively static and timeless before the cataclysmic destruction set off by contact with Europeans.

Scholarly analysis of "Tsimshianic" culture past and present in the emerging Boasian tradition continued in the early twentieth century. Anthropologist Edward Sapir published *A Sketch of the Social Organization of the Nass River Indians* in 1915 based on an opportunity he had to interview a deputation of four Nisga'a men who were in Ottawa

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<sup>15</sup> Boas, *Tsimshian Mythology*, 31.

to petition the federal government concerning ownership of their land.<sup>16</sup> Viola Garfield, trained by Boas like Sapir, produced a lucid and comprehensive survey of Tsimshian society for her doctoral dissertation, which was published in 1939.<sup>17</sup> Her study was based on fieldwork in Lax Kw'alaams over three summers where, as she noted, “[m]embers of nine tribes or former local groups from the Skeena and Nass Rivers are resident there.”<sup>18</sup> Significantly, Garfield’s work includes a brief discussion of “Modern Social and Religious Activities,” in which she notes the decline in many of the “traditional” practices described in her study as well as the emergence of religious organizations like the Epworth League. Garfield’s impressive scholarship, which included a second monograph in 1951,<sup>19</sup> was the first to be based on fieldwork and observation of Tsimshian society in practice. Boas had conversely based his discussions of kinship on mythological texts. Both had worked closely with the Welsh-Tsimshian ethnographer William Beynon. Beynon had a pivotal role in the development of the intellectual study of Tsimshian, Nisga’a and Gitksan culture and history. Beginning in 1914 when he was hired as a translator and transcriber by the anthropologist Marius Barbeau, Beynon honed his skills as a gifted ethnographer. The extensive fieldnotes he sent Barbeau from 1929 until 1956, although largely unpublished, have become the “Barbeau-Beynon fieldnotes,” an authoritative corpus on these three native societies housed at the Canadian Museum of Civilization.<sup>20</sup> A sampling from these texts of stories

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<sup>16</sup> Edward Sapir, *A Sketch of the Social Organization of the Nass River Indians*, Anthropological Series 7, Geological Survey Bulletin 19 (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1915).

<sup>17</sup> Viola Garfield, “Tsimshian Clan and Society,” *University of Washington Publications in Anthropology* 7, no. 3 (February, 1939): 167-340.

<sup>18</sup> Garfield, “Tsimshian Clan and Society,” 169.

<sup>19</sup> Viola E. Garfield, *The Tsimshian Indians and Their Arts* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1950).

<sup>20</sup> A catalogue of the Barbeau-Beynon fieldnotes was created by John Cove, *A Detailed Inventory of the Barbeau Northwest Coast Files*, Mercury Series, Canadian Centre for Folk Studies Paper no. 54 (Ottawa:

collected on the Nass and Skeena Rivers was published in a two-volume collection by John Cove and George MacDonald in 1987.<sup>21</sup> This collection has also been the basis for a doctoral dissertation, Marjorie Halpin's study of the Tsimshian (again, including the Nisga'a) crest system, completed in 1972.<sup>22</sup> Barbeau's publications tend to take as their subject the entire Northwest Coast; however some of his works, such as his two-volume compendium of the totem poles of British Columbia and Alaska, despite its errors, have made a noteworthy contribution to the study of Nisga'a history.<sup>23</sup>

Research on the Nisga'a continued to be dominated by anthropologists in the 1960s. This decade saw no monograph-length studies completed specifically on the Nisga'a, but they did figure into larger surveys such as Philip Drucker's *Cultures of the North Pacific Coast*, which appeared in 1965.<sup>24</sup> The year before Wilson Duff had published his succinct *The Indian History of British Columbia: The Impact of the White Man*, the first overview of the Aboriginal history of the province. Duff devoted a chapter of this book to exploring the phenomenon of conversion to Christianity. While breaking new ground in the study of British Columbia's Aboriginal history, Duff's analysis rings somewhat simplistic today. Using census data, Duff noted that by 1904 ninety percent of the Indians of the province were nominally Christian. In 1939 only twenty-eight held

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National Museum of Man, 1985). Beynon also sent Franz Boas approximately 250 transcribed narratives, which have become the "Beynon Manuscripts" now housed at Columbia University.

<sup>21</sup> C. Marius Barbeau and William Beynon, *Tsimshian Narratives*, 2 vols., Mercury Series, Directorate Paper no. 3, eds. John J. Cove and George F. MacDonald (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1987).

<sup>22</sup> Marjorie M. Halpin, "The Tsimshian Crest System: A Study Based on Museum Specimens and the Marius Barbeau and William Beynon Field Notes" (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 1973). The Nisga'a have used *ayuks* (crests), distinct named entities, to express the identities of the houses that own them as well as relationships between houses. As clan symbols, crests also serve as icons of a house's *adaawaḱ*.

<sup>23</sup> Marius Barbeau, *Totem Poles*, 2 vols., Anthropological Series no. 30, National Museum of Canada Bulletin no. 119 (Ottawa: National Museum of Canada, 1950).

<sup>24</sup> Philip Drucker, *Cultures of the North Pacific Coast* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing, 1965).

“aboriginal beliefs” in all of British Columbia, apparently a few Tahltan and the rest Nootka. Duff offered an interpretation of these figures:

Such a rapid and complete conversion is perhaps what one might expect in view of the strong determination of the missionaries of the past century to save heathen souls, but it could also be said that in most areas Indian resistance to the remaking of their lives was weaker than might be expected. Unsettled by the first effects of white contact, they often seemed hungry for new religious guidance.<sup>25</sup>

For Duff the dogged efforts of missionaries and undercutting of the resistance that would normally follow due to the destabilizing effects of contact with whites explained this rather unusual phenomenon of speedy conversion.

The legacy of Duff’s contributions to the study of Nisga’a history is at best mixed, at least in the minds of many contemporary Nisga’a. Duff drew on his fieldwork in northern British Columbia to testify in the famous *Calder v. the Crown* trial that forced the federal government to begin negotiating a treaty with the Nisga’a in 1973. However, from a Nisga’a perspective his earlier publication of *Histories, Territories, and Laws of the Kitwancool*, in collaboration with the neighbouring Gitanyow without any input from the Nisga’a on their complex and intertwined history with this people, has only added to the Nisga’a’s burden of demonstrating clear title to their lands that had been complicated by colonial processes.<sup>26</sup>

A relative paucity of academic scholarship on the Nisga’a past is perhaps best evidenced by the fact that one of the most significant studies on the Nisga’a remains an unpublished doctoral dissertation completed in 1976. Stephen McNeary’s study, “Where Fire Came Down: Social and Economic Life of the Niska,” presents a comprehensive

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<sup>25</sup> Wilson Duff, *The Indian History of British Columbia*, vol. 1, *The Impact of the White Man* (Victoria: Royal British Columbia Museum, 1964), 87.

<sup>26</sup> Wilson Duff, ed., *Histories, Territories and Laws of the Kitwancool* (Victoria: British Columbia Provincial Museum, 1959). Kitwancool is an anglicized version of Gitanyow.

survey of “traditional” Nisga’a life, as well as some reflection on modern Nisga’a society. McNeary had arrived in the Nass Valley with the intention of studying Nisga’a music, potentially comparing contemporary music with recordings of Nisga’a songs made fifty years earlier by Barbeau. An understanding of Nisga’a traditions that was quite different from what he had expected dashed the anthropologist’s plans to compare Nisga’a past with Nisga’a present, however. McNeary explained: “My hopes faded rapidly as I listened to the Aiyansh Silver Harmonic Band play tunes from the Benny Goodman era that ‘should bring back memories to some of our older folks.’”<sup>27</sup> Revising his topic to “traditional economic and social life,” McNeary interviewed a number of Nisga’a elders, primarily in the upriver village of New Aiyansh. His dissertation is a valuable ethnographic study of Nisga’a past and present that in part owes its continuing utility to the absence of any other lengthy study in the years since its completion.<sup>28</sup>

Historical scholarship on the Nisga’a by academically trained historians finally began in 1982. Interestingly, the first and only monograph on Nisga’a history was a study of religious change. Using the vast archival record left by the Church Missionary Society, E Palmer Patterson published *Mission on the Nass: The Evangelization of the Nishga (1860-1890)*, a short survey of the Anglican mission organized by each missionary’s tenure.<sup>29</sup> In a series of subsequent articles Patterson pursued his curiosity about Nisga’a responses to mission, including two articles on the mission community of

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<sup>27</sup> Stephen A. McNeary, “Where Fire Came Down: Social and Economic Life of the Niska,” (PhD diss., Bryn Mawr College, 1976), 1.

<sup>28</sup> In fact, Wilp Wilxo’oskwhl Nisga’a Institute, the Nisga’a post-secondary institution, reprints McNeary’s dissertation for use by its students.

<sup>29</sup> E Palmer Patterson, *Mission on the Nass: The Evangelization of the Nishga (1860-1890)* (Waterloo: Eulachon Press, 1982).

Gingolx<sup>30</sup> and another two that each explored a prominent nineteenth-century Nisga'a chief for whom a sufficient documentary record existed to sustain individual treatment.<sup>31</sup> These articles reflect a concern among historians at this time of showing native agency in their interactions with Europeans. Patterson finds continuity in Nisga'a leadership through the Christianization process, and is eager to show that "the Nishga leaders were not the missionary's underlings, dependents, or dupes," but acted from their own priorities and interests.<sup>32</sup> Under Patterson's supervision Carol Cooper completed a doctoral dissertation on Coast Tsimshian and Nisga'a responses to colonization in the nineteenth century in 1993.<sup>33</sup> The eventual turn of historians to the study of the Nisga'a past reflected a growing interest among them from the 1970s on to better understand the Aboriginal side of the encounter with Europeans as well as to acquire a greater appreciation of historical change in their societies.

## Methodology

Relics from the past available to construct a history of the Christianization of Nisga'a society come predominantly from the hands of missionaries who worked in the valley. If producing texts had not been so central to the missionary enterprise, part of what Sean Hawkins calls the "bookishness of colonial culture," our understanding of this past would rely largely on oral Nisga'a accounts, and be much different.<sup>34</sup> Missionary

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<sup>30</sup> E Palmer Patterson, "Kincolith, B.C.: Leadership Continuity in a Native Christian Village, 1867-1887," *Canadian Journal of Anthropology* 3, no. 1 (Fall 1982): 45-55; "Kincolith's First Decade: A Nisga'a Village, 1867-1878," *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 12, no. 2 (1992): 229-50.

<sup>31</sup> E Palmer Patterson, "George Kinzadah—Simoogit in his Times," *BC Studies* no. 82 (Summer 1989): 16-38; "Neshaki: Kinfolk and Trade," *Culture* 10, no. 2 (1990): 13-24.

<sup>32</sup> Patterson, "George Kinzadah," 36.

<sup>33</sup> Carol Cooper, "To Be Free on Our Lands: Coast Tsimshian and Nisga'a Societies in Historical Perspective, 1830-1900," (PhD diss., University of Waterloo, 1993).

<sup>34</sup> Sean Hawkins, *Writing and Colonialism in Northern Ghana: The Encounter between the LoDagaa and "The World on Paper"* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 14.

writings took a number of forms including journals, correspondence and reports of individual *lipleet*<sup>35</sup> in the valley, as well as productions of the evangelizing societies to which they belonged, such as periodicals and other materials designed to generate interest and support for their activities. A wealth of ethnographic material on non-Western peoples around the world is contained inside the archives of the London-based Church Missionary Society dating from its foundation in 1799. Its holdings for the North Pacific Mission, which included the Nisga'a, are rich for the nineteenth century but thin out in the early twentieth century due to changing practices in the processing of incoming information. The records of the other Protestant organization active in the Nass Valley in these years, the Toronto-based Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, consist mainly of missionary letters published in periodicals and annual reports. Within the writing requirements these missionary societies placed on their agents there was much room for personal inclination. Some *lipleet*, like Robert Tomlinson, were "too busy to write" and left relatively little, while others, notably James McCullagh, viewed the publicizing of their efforts as an important aspect of their work as missionaries and directed incredible energy to producing material.<sup>36</sup>

What can these mostly Euro-Canadian-authored texts tell us about the Nisga'a experiences conveyed on their pages? Sifting out relics of the Nisga'a past from relics of the newcomers' past within which they have been encased presents the ethnohistorian

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<sup>35</sup> Nineteenth-century Nisga'a called missionaries and clergy in general *lipleet*, a Chinook jargon term taken from the French, *le prêtre*, meaning "the priest." Today Nisga'a still use *lipleet* to denote both "priest" and "preacher," "Nisga'a: Words," First Voices, last accessed 8 July 2012, <[www.firstvoices.com/en/Nisgaa/word/afa6beee432e91c1/priest%2Fpreacher](http://www.firstvoices.com/en/Nisgaa/word/afa6beee432e91c1/priest%2Fpreacher)>.

<sup>36</sup> Roxy Tomlinson, interview by Imbert Orchard, 25 October 1965, British Columbia Archives (hereafter BCA). McCullagh was prolific in producing manuscripts and publications, employing his literary skills to cultivate interest in and potentially financial support for his work among sympathetic readers in Britain. The genres he engaged to this end included journal entries, vignettes of "Indian life," sermons and poetry.

with challenges, but can be done with critical, sensitive reading. John Peel, who has worked extensively with the CMS archival material with respect to the Yoruba, argues that the least of our problems with these records is the expression of strong prejudice. Such biases are easy to identify and filter. “The real challenge,” according to Peel, “is to allow for the effects of the missionaries’ selective interest in what they saw, the rubrics governing their reportage, and the psychological, even ontological, assumptions that lay behind them.”<sup>37</sup> Much of this selectivity can be accounted for by considering, as Allan Greer has pointed out with respect to the *Jesuit Relations*, the different genres in which missionaries and their editors at home produced their texts.<sup>38</sup> Protestant missionaries who worked among the Nisga’a frequently drew on Christian literary traditions such as narratives of transformation, sermons and even hagiography to frame their writings, but as religious men committed to transforming Nisga’a society they were also ethnographers of it. For this reason, anthropologist Michael Harkin in his study of the nineteenth-century Heiltsuks, another Northwest Coast people, argues that the Methodist missionaries who evangelized them were better observers of change in this period than early anthropologists such as Franz Boas, who aimed to capture a static—and yet disappearing—indigenous culture.<sup>39</sup> With an awareness of such limitations and strengths missionary sources can offer an unparalleled window into the changing world of nineteenth-century Nisga’a. Missionaries like James McCullagh and William Collison spent almost four decades in the valley, and their and other liplet’s fluency in Sim’algax

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<sup>37</sup> J.D.Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 12.

<sup>38</sup> Allan Greer, “Colonial Saints: Gender, Race, and Hagiography in New France,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (April 2000): 323-48.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Harkin, “(Dis)Pleasures of the Text: Boasian Ethnology on the Central Northwest Coast,” in *Gateways: Exploring the Legacy of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, 1897-1902* (Washington, DC: Arctic Studies Center, Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, 2001), 94. Harkin notes the irony of this fact.

placed them close to the action we are concerned with here. By reading critically through their “noisy” claims there is much we can learn about the Nisga’a.

This dissertation also draws on interviews I conducted with contemporary Nisga’a. The decision to undertake these interviews as a significant component of this project came easily given that Nisga’a society today is one in which oral traditions continue to play a significant role. Where orally transmitted knowledge of the past flows abundantly, as in the Nass, the potential exists to craft histories far richer than could be produced by relying on solely one type of source. Sitting down formally and speaking with Nisga’a authorities on the topic of Christianization expands the available source material for historical analysis in an important way, allowing me to incorporate Nisga’a perspectives on their past—local knowledge not otherwise accessible to the scholar. It also provides some healthy balance against the written record, weighted as it is so heavily toward the views of European missionaries and colonial administrators. As will become clear in this study, the use of interviews where possible in the consideration of Christianization and other phenomena enriches our interpretations of native historical experiences.

The value of oral tradition as a source for history has been amply demonstrated in the quarter century since Jan Vansina elegantly made a case for how it might be used in his *Oral tradition as history*.<sup>40</sup> Anthropologists and to a lesser extent historians who have worked with oral traditions of largely non-Western societies point to their value beyond simply serving as sources to be mined for data. Julie Cruikshank suggests that oral tradition, like history or anthropology, “can be viewed as a coherent, open-ended

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<sup>40</sup> Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

system for constructing and transmitting knowledge.”<sup>41</sup> Engaging with these sources opens windows onto other ways people reconstruct and carry their pasts, and I turn to this question more directly in Chapter Six by examining how some contemporary Nisga’a remember Christianization. Like all sources oral traditions are part of social process, and must be understood as such. Recent scholarship has blurred the traditional distinction between written and oral texts by focusing on the way both are speech acts, utterances that are extracted from everyday discourse but nonetheless embedded in the contexts of their emission and reception.<sup>42</sup>

Identifying whom to interview was a process facilitated by the Wilp Wilxo’oskwhl Nisga’a Institute (WWNI), the Nisga’a post-secondary school responsible for overseeing research in the valley. The interview has become a Nisga’a institution, an accessible means for researchers to engage with the rich Nisga’a oral tradition through its contemporary keepers. WWNI provided names of potential participants, drawing on Nisga’a criteria for the creation of sound knowledge. These included selecting people recognized as being authorities on my topic. Another priority was balancing the perspectives offered by the various divisions that cross-cut Nisga’a society, which meant finding an equal number of participants from each of the four clans, the four modern villages and both genders. The working list was by no means fixed, however, and seemed to grow every time I met with the WWNI. Almost all of the Nisga’a I approached on my evolving list became participants in the project. For those who declined to participate the reasons were varied, but included being too busy, not feeling

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<sup>41</sup> Julie Cruikshank, “Notes and comments: Oral tradition and oral history—Reviewing some issues,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 75, no. 3 (September 1994): 408.

<sup>42</sup> Karin Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3.

knowledgeable enough, being in poor health, and observing the year of silence that follows the loss of one's partner. Others enthusiastically agreed to be interviewed, yet despite repeated efforts different circumstances kept us from sitting down together. Unfortunately more than one potential interviewee passed away before we could complete an interview, reflecting the elderly status of authorities on the Nisga'a past in general.

Elders by far dominated the group of Nisga'a whom I eventually interviewed, although a few participants were slightly younger. My interviewees included four Anglican priests who had been adopted by Nisga'a clans during their time as clergy in the Diocese of Caledonia. All of them had embodied the changing approach of the Anglican Church in the 1960s and 1970s to aspects of Nisga'a culture that predated Christianization. Many of my informants identified themselves in terms of kinship, as a Wolf or Raven for example, which in hindsight may have been partly encouraged by one of my opening questions inviting them to tell me about themselves. Some mentioned work that had defined earlier periods of their lives, as commercial fishers with their own gillnet boats or professional fallers in the forest industry, for example. For a number of my interviewees their experiences of leaving the Nass Valley for residential school were significant events in their lives and relationships to Nisga'a culture and language, and they noted how they had spent part of their formative years away at distant institutions in southern British Columbia and Alberta.<sup>43</sup> All spoke English fluently, although for most their first language was Sim'algax.

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<sup>43</sup> Nisga'a interviewees who had attended residential school seem to have attended one of the institutions located in Alert Bay or Lytton, British Columbia, or Edmonton, Alberta, all a considerable distance from the Nass Valley.

As one might expect, my informants differed with regard to their specific knowledge of the history of the Nisga'a's Christianization. As individual people, they also varied in approach to the interview, as well as in their abilities. Some showed great interest and wrote out answers to the questions I had given them beforehand, while others seemed content to complete the interview after the first hour. A few were particularly gifted speakers; others hinted at the extensive training they had received in acquiring the knowledge of their *wilp*, or house. Most were not only authorities on the history of the different Christianities that took root in the valley in the last century and a half, but also leaders in contemporary Nisga'a society. Chiefs or matriarchs, priests and specialists in areas as diverse as ethnobotany and basket weaving, they are busy people in their communities with often great demands on their time. The Nisga'a with whom I worked, then, are by no means "representative" of all Nisga'a. Importantly, the composition of my informants reflects Nisga'a criteria for the creation and transmission of cultural knowledge. This method draws on those who bear and in many ways embody this knowledge. As repositories of knowledge and authority on Nisga'a culture, elders carry greater weight than youth. All of my informants have or had at some point in their life a connection to one or more of the two Christian denominations—Anglican and Salvation Army—that have churches in the valley today. Nisga'a perspectives I heard, and which were subsequently woven into this study, then, reflect these selective criteria.

The knowledge generated by my interviews is the result of a particular social process, as is true with all sources. At the most basic level it consists of Nisga'a oral traditions in the performance mode of an interview. Given the importance of the interviews to this study it is worth going in some detail into the circumstances by which

they came to inform my analysis. My initial proposal to interview Nisga'a was assessed by two different ethics review boards, and I conducted the interviews according to their guidelines as well as my own sense of what constitutes ethical, respectful research.<sup>44</sup> Potential participants were first contacted by telephone, and when possible given a list of questions I had created. This list helped provide a framework that we could engage with if desired, but I also encouraged interviewees to talk about what they thought was important. An early question, in fact, asked what they would like to learn from a history of the Nisga'a's Christianization, and how such a study might be useful to the Nisga'a. In a similar vein I tried to keep the questions open to Nisga'a direction, using their responses as a cue to where we should venture. A number of my informants embraced this opportunity to take the discussion where they wanted, addressing such topics as the strained relationship with their current bishop, racism, or the abuse of women at the canneries. I listened intently to discussions of hunting experiences, or the consequences of not respecting the *haw'ahlkw* (taboos), only to understand in retrospect how these tie in to a larger Nisga'a spirituality, and how their description in often personal stories spoke to my topic of Christianization more directly than I might have initially thought.

Nisga'a I interviewed led the way into some difficult terrain to a surprising degree. More than one woman in Gitwinksihlkw told me about how in the 1960s a Salvation Army officer had "made a mistake" in abusing boys. Yet stories of abusive or inappropriate behaviour involving the missionary James McCullagh, which have not been made public but were picked up informally during my time in the valley, did not appear

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<sup>44</sup> These protocols are the Nisga'a research protocol as administered by the Wilp Wilxo'oskwhl Nisga'a Institute (WWNI) and the policies and guidelines of the Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Research Ethics Board at the University of Toronto.

in the interviews.<sup>45</sup> Such silences remind us of the presence of much that remains unsaid around our different utterances.

On several occasions it became apparent that my informants were following Nisga'a protocols for telling stories. One of my younger interviewees requested we hold our session last among those in his village, in deference to the knowledge of those older than he. Many stopped if we approached stories that did not belong to them, and which were therefore only rightfully told by others. The late Jacob McKay (Bayt Neekhl), for example, explained that he could talk freely "about" his paternal kin, but that as a member of his mother's house he could not relate their particular stories. As a listener receiving these stories I was mindful of the Nisga'a view that when an elder shares her knowledge with you she is giving you something of value. Fortunately I was kindly told early on that giving each participant a small gift would be an appropriate way to recognize the value of the knowledge received, and the homemade jam and other items I soon brought with me to interviews were warmly accepted. One aim of this dissertation is to complete the circle of giving, by offering knowledge that contemporary Nisga'a find useful in the traditional sense of having the potential to improve their lives, as described to me by McKay.

In oral interviews the dialogic process by which researchers and informants or sources co-create knowledge is perhaps most evident, and my work in the Nass was no exception. The strong interest evinced by many Nisga'a in my work, and statements made about its value, encouraged me. So did the clear effort of some to find a way to meet with me, and to smooth my path. This included a call from my first interviewee on

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<sup>45</sup> With one important exception. In John A. (Ian) Mackenzie, interview by Nicholas May, Terrace, 29 July 2008, Mackenzie, a former priest in the valley, brought up these rumours and dismissed them, citing the opinion of the late elder Bertram McKay (Axdii Wil Luugooda), who had told him they were baseless.

the night before our scheduled interview to warn me that a heavy spring freshet had flooded the highway, as well as prayers offered for me and my endeavours. As an outsider I had to accommodate my work to rhythms of life in the valley, such as the different salmon runs when people were very busy, and deaths, which bring almost every non-essential activity to a temporary halt. During the interviews I sometimes wondered how Nisga'a viewed me, and on occasion a comment offered insight. One man, upon learning that I was living in Hazelton, a village in the heart of nearby Gitksan territory, declared humourously that I was a spy!<sup>46</sup> An elder in Gingolx surmised from my interest in the church that I was training to be a minister. Another reminded me of the imbalance between researchers who query and informants who are invited to open up aspects of their lives, when she said that before we began our interview she would like to know what church *I* go to.<sup>47</sup>

All of the interviews were recorded and then completely transcribed. A laborious task, the latter created hundreds of pages of manuscript, but was justified on the grounds of making the information they offer more accessible to myself as well as other researchers who may be interested in the future. This step parallels a larger trend within Nisga'a society in recent years to write down their *adaawak*. Changing the forms by which social memory is expressed has not been done without some anxiety, but has been undertaken with the belief that this is the best way to ensure the survival of valued

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<sup>46</sup> This comment was in reference to the complex issue of the overlapping land claims of the Nisga'a, Gitanyow and Gitksan in the upper reaches of the Nass Valley that have tested otherwise positive relations between these nations.

<sup>47</sup> Grace Azak (Ne'Jiits Hoostkw), interview by Nicholas May, Gitwinksihlkw, 27 September 2007. Azak's question certainly encouraged my already ongoing reflection regarding my motivations and why I am so interested in studying the Nisga'a's Christianization. My curiosity about encounters with difference and thought-worlds and their transformations no doubt drew me to this topic, but I suspect my ambivalence toward the Calvinist Christianity my Dutch grandmother tried to instill in her family factors in somehow.

cultural knowledge. Transcribing an interview transforms it from a performance of the past into a fixed text. The final product, which incorporates feedback from the interviewees, takes on the distinctive characteristics of a text; namely, it becomes an utterance detached from the flow of conversation, woven into a form to be apprehended and evaluated. Perhaps misleading is the word “final,” for while entextualization freezes discourses it also has a way of setting them in motion, as they are redeployed in new contexts and interact with the flow of knowledge. In accordance with Nisga’a research protocol both the interview recordings and transcripts have been given to the WWNI, where they will be made accessible to the public and potentially take on a “social life” of their own within the valley.<sup>48</sup> Ideally they will contribute to future performances of the past they invoke.

## **What Follows**

The changes in Nisga’a spiritual practices and beliefs explored in this dissertation did not occur in a vacuum. Chapter Two aims to provide historical context by placing them within a longer trajectory of change and adaptation going back to the Nisga’a’s beginnings as a people. To provide this perspective I draw on archaeological studies and Nisga’a *adaawaḱ*, which from their respective viewpoints offer insights into Nisga’a origins and their long relationship with the Nass Valley. This chapter’s latter half discusses the many changes in Nisga’a society that were contemporary to their engagement with Protestant Christianities.

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<sup>48</sup> Anthropologist Julie Cruikshank marvels at “the social lives transcribed texts gain in the communities where they originate and continue to be told,” *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1998), xiii.

Chapter Three continues the consideration of Nisga'a religious change in its broader contexts by focusing on the larger civilizing projects under which much of their Christianization occurred. Missionary societies and colonial and later Canadian authorities each took up their own particular projects for reforming the Nisga'a and other Aboriginal peoples, but the aim of this chapter is to explore how nineteenth-century Nisga'a understood and responded to the array of opportunities and constraints before them. As we will see, many Nisga'a pursued their own "civilizing" projects, following a course of improvement that drew on both preexisting cultural priorities and interaction with K'amksiiwaa projects for them. The Nisga'a had a keen eye for new ways that showed potential to improve their lives, and many saw within the arrival of British law and Christianity in their valley a new form of light not unlike earlier dispensations from heaven. When, however, Nisga'a felt themselves progressively held back from fully enjoying the benefits they understood these new forms to offer, they launched a moral critique that used an increasingly shared discourse to draw the K'amksiiwaa authorities' attention to this inconsistency.

Chapter Four, "The Christianization of *Aam*," goes to the heart of the religious changes within Nisga'a society during this period by exploring a number of key transformations in Nisga'a spirituality with respect to newly available Christian forms. Turn-of-the-century Nisga'a did not engage with these forms in any single way; rather, their Christianization occurred through a complex array of movements that included incorporating, self-Christianizing, as well as purging and reformulating. With varying degrees of consciousness, Nisga'a drew from both earlier habits of engaging with the

supernatural and more recently acquired practices to create a uniquely Nisga'a version of Christianity.

How the Nisga'a localized one initially foreign Christian form in their valley after its introduction at the turn of the century is the subject of Chapter Five. This chapter examines the emergence of the Church Army as a Nisga'a organization, an evangelical wing of the Church of England that had only recently emerged in the slums of working-class Britain. Missionary William Collison introduced the Church Army to the Nass in 1894 in an effort to channel the religious fervour he found among the young men at the Gingolx mission. The organization spread rapidly throughout the Christianizing north coast as Nisga'a and their neighbours eagerly took up this attractive means of expressing Christian devotion through older habits of faith, namely the practice of accessing the supernatural through exuberant collective ritual, a process that created a unique institution.

The final chapter turns more directly to the interviews I conducted in the Nass Valley to ask how contemporary Nisga'a remember the process of Christianization. Nisga'a today understand the act of remembering to have a key role in their wellbeing. Many of my interviewees recalled a Christian past that flows uninterrupted from the ancestors up to a disjunctive present in which continuities with earlier ways are more challenging to maintain. In my conversations with elders, memories of Christianization in the period studied here emerged that reveal the Nisga'a have preserved moments of this past that for various reasons cannot be left out of the present—such as their vital importance or the trauma they carry that refuses to be forgotten. Presenting such memories offers the potential for alternative histories of Christianization.

## Chapter 2

# A Changing Nisga'a World: From Beginnings to the Long Nineteenth Century

As dramatic as the changes brought by the Christianization of Nisga'a society were, they nonetheless occurred within multiple narratives of Nisga'a history, in which, depending on the scope and focus of the story, they can appear as pendants to more noteworthy developments or world altering in their magnitude. They were in fact both. This chapter aims to situate the history of Christianization explored in subsequent chapters within two significant framings. First is the *longue durée* perspective presented by the Nisga'a's existence as a people living for millennia in what is now called the Nass Valley. How the Nisga'a came to be Nisga'a, and how they came to inhabit their beautiful valley and understand the world from these subjectivities, had tremendous bearing on the way they experienced this recent religious change. The second important framing is that of the many contemporary developments that unfolded alongside and in dialogue with this religious change. From its early beginnings in a distant and dimly lit post-glacial past before the Nisga'a culture hero Txeemsi stole daylight, to the challenges arising from the recent arrival of Europeans on British Columbia's north coast, the perspectives offered by these explorations of Nisga'a history present a picture of a society that has

experienced tremendous changes in its life world, yet transformations that have often contained within them tenacious continuities.

## **Nisga'a Beginnings**

Nisga'a understand how the world began and how they came to inhabit the Nass Valley through their *adaawaḱ*, the oral histories they have carried over countless generations. *Adaawaḱ* form an incredibly diverse corpus, explaining historical phenomena as diverse as the encounters of ancestors with supernatural beings to how a particular village got its name. Together these stories tell the collective history of the Nisga'a people, and point to a long and complex past. As narratives, they also reveal Nisga'a cultural priorities and values, offering clues as to how life should be lived. The story of how the Nisga'a came to be Nisga'a, a people who see themselves as sharing their valley with a host of other beings, illuminates the cultural importance given to principles of harmony, balance and interconnectedness.<sup>1</sup>

Absence of light was the most striking feature about the first days noted in the *adaawaḱ*.<sup>2</sup> Initially the world was in total darkness, with at most only a faint glow over the land akin to moonlight. There were no creatures on the earth at this time. Diverse nations of people lived in the sky, but when they descended to earth many of them put on cloaks, taking the form of animals. When Sim'oogit Laxha, or Chief of Heavens, placed people on the Nass he grouped them into four clans and gave them a language different from people to be found elsewhere. These first people on the river were the Wāhlingigat,

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<sup>1</sup> Many *adaawaḱ* were translated and transcribed in English under the auspices of the Ayuukhl Nisga'a Study in the latter quarter of the twentieth century, and published by the Nisga'a Tribal Council in four volumes. See Nisga'a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga'a Study*, 4 vols. (New Aiyansh, BC: Wilp Wilxo'oskwahl Nisga'a Publications, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> The following narrative is taken from general *adaawaḱ* about how the Nisga'a world came to be, which are not the property of any specific house and thus may be told by anyone.

or “the old people,” the ancient ancestors of the Nisga’a. Soon they founded a village, *Lax Gwinsk’eexkw*, meaning “village in darkness,” which was located on an island in the river near present-day Gitlaxt’aamiks. Nisga’a stories recall this early period as one of challenges for the *Wahlingiat*, a time when human vulnerability was most patent. Fortunately things soon changed with the birth of *Txeemsim*.<sup>3</sup> His birth was far from conventional, as he sprang out of his dead mother’s casket. As a young boy *Txeemsim* took an unusual interest in stories told to him by an elder. In the words of Chief *Minee’eskw*, “[w]hen the young lad realized that they came from a place above he was full of inquiries.”<sup>4</sup> Later, when he had grown into adulthood, *Txeemsim* made many trips to *laxha*, the sky, a vast open country where *Sim’oogit Laxha* lived. On each of these trips he brought back something of value to the Nisga’a.

*Txeemsim*’s most important acquisition from the house of his grandfather, Chief of Heavens, was *’max*, the container holding daylight. He accomplished this using his characteristic trickery, crying each day for the ball-shaped container that his grandfather kept hanging on the wall, and each day taking it a little further into the garden as he played—until one day he bolted with it, landing at *Magoonhl Lisims*, the headwaters of the *Nass*, just below the home of *Sim’oogit Laxha*. There he soon found ghost-like people fishing for oolichan on the river, who only mocked him when he asked for food. In response *Txeemsim* tore open the container, releasing light all over the world. *Txeemsim*’s theft of daylight before Chief of Heavens was ready to bestow it heralded the beginning of a new mode of existence for the Nisga’a. It was the first of *Txeemsim*’s

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<sup>3</sup> Nisga’a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga’a Study*, vol. 1, *Nisga’a Origins: “In the Beginning . . .”* (New Aiyansh, BC: Wilp Wilxso’oskwhl Nisga’a Publications, 1995), explains that “*Txeemsim* first appears as ‘An’moogam Haat,’ literally, “One-who-sucks-intestines,” and becomes ‘Wiigat,’ short for ‘wii *xwdayim gat*, meaning “a very hungry person,” before he took the name *Txeemsim*,” 10 footnote 24.

<sup>4</sup> Nisga’a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga’a Study*, vol. 1, *Nisga’a Origins*, 23.

many feats, all of which improved life for the Wāhlingigat and their descendants. Too many exist to mention, but some of the more notable include moving the massive rock Goothl Lisims (“Heart of the Nass”) downstream from where it obstructed the river’s flow; tricking the chief who guarded the oolichans into releasing them earlier in March when the people most needed them; releasing the world’s water from a wicked chief who was hoarding it by making him think he had soiled himself while sleeping, then offering to help him clean it to save embarrassment; and returning to heaven to bring back fire so people could burn even green wood. Txeemsim also learned many lessons, especially those concerning the harvesting and preparation of food, in his attempt to satiate his ever-present hunger. He in fact learned how to cook salmon by accepting advice from his own excrement, which was surely a lesson in humility. In both deeds and misdeeds Txeemsim outlined the first contours of a moral and successful life, uncovering the importance of virtues like generosity and the efficacy of strict rituals like bathing and fasting in achieving one’s goals.

Another development that enabled humans to live an improved existence began after Txeemsim had finished his travels up and down the Nass: the Nisga’a’s acquisition of powers from supernatural beings. Through numerous distinct and often unexpected encounters, Nisga’a were able to establish beneficial relationships with these beings, who in many instances willingly offered their power. These relationships are integral to the founding of every *wilp* or house within the four constitutive clans,<sup>5</sup> and the way Nisga’a have understood their assistance to be essential for a successful life reflects their view of the universe and the place of humans within it. Nisga’a believed that they shared their humanness with every other type of being. Being human was a residual category of

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<sup>5</sup> These clans are the Ganada (Raven), Gisk’aast (Killer Whale), Laxgibuu (Wolf), and Laxsgiik (Eagle).

being, or existing at the simplest level.<sup>6</sup> As such, humans were particularly vulnerable, living without the powers that other species and beings enjoyed on top of their humanity. The Nisga'a recount two stories about how the first Nisga'a were born that convey this sense of human fragility compared to others. They involve an argument—one between Tree and Stone, and the other between Elderberry and Stone—about who should give birth first. When Txeemsim came along he touched either the Tree or the Elderberry, who then gave birth to humans bearing their qualities, which explains why people only live for a short time.<sup>7</sup>

While the different species and beings with whom Nisga'a have shared their valley would be considered “non-human” in Western classificatory systems, for nineteenth-century Nisga'a they were “more than human.” The image of animals wearing cloaks over their humanness captures this ontology well. For the Nisga'a, the fundamental problem for every being was its quest for continued existence, a proposition that was unavoidably dependent on its interactions. Although each type of being had its own realm, all were nonetheless interdependent for their survival. Beings were intruding into one another's worlds all the time, feeding and themselves becoming food. Nisga'a considered the world to resemble a large box, of which their own houses containing the members of a lineage group were a microcosm. The world held all the souls of the universe, which were finite in number and circulated between the different realms. Nisga'a deaths and births respectively gave to and took from the more-than-human realm. Ultimately, both souls and powers came to humans from these other realms.

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<sup>6</sup> John Cove, *Shattered Images: Dialogues and Meditations on Tsimshian Narratives* (Carleton: Carleton University Press, 1987), 287.

<sup>7</sup> Boston, Morven. and Grandison, *From Time Before Memory*, 153.

Their ancestors' acquisition of powers from encounters with beings belonging to these realms, and maintenance of relationships that enabled such benefits to be enjoyed by subsequent generations, created a new mode of existence for the Nisga'a that recast their original balance with other beings which had made them so vulnerable. Thanks to these encounters Nisga'a had a means to reach the potential available to humans, evidenced by the different beings with whom they shared the world. Nisga'a have expressed this potential to be more than human using the concept of "real," which is denoted by the prefix *sim*. As Cove notes, the quality of being real encompasses the ordinary and integrates the human with the non-human, or more precisely the more-than-human realm.<sup>8</sup> Real is a relative category in that it may be possessed in degrees. It also exists across species, and thus a term like *sim'oogit* (real-being), which Nisga'a use to address their chiefs, is not limited to people. Having realized these possibilities to in effect experience different kinds of being, Nisga'a found ways to maintain and transmit them to following generations. One way they have done this is through *ayuks*, or crests, which commemorate specific historical encounters with "supernatural" or more-than-human beings. The *adaawak* also work to a similar end by conveying the message that while humans have the potential to obtain a universal order more amenable to their needs, its existence rests on ensuring proper relationships with other types of beings. Nisga'a histories underscore a view of human success as being contingent upon a recognition of interdependence, and the reciprocal obligations that flow from it. This understanding of the world that emerges from such memory practices is of an unavoidably precarious existence, but one that offers the potential for greater stability through respectful

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<sup>8</sup> Cove, *Shattered Images*, 105. Cove elsewhere writes that the concept of "real" might also be translated as "powerful," 75.

relationships in which beings are given the opportunity to exist in different ways. The interdependence of different types of being for the Nisga'a presented simultaneously the limits of human potential and—through the sharing of powers—the means for its transcendence. Grasping this cosmology will enrich our understanding of the responses of nineteenth-century Nisga'a to the Christianities that became available to them.

Evidence from archaeology offers additional insights into the story of Nisga'a beginnings. Archaeologists believe with some certainty that people have lived in this northwestern corner of the Americas for at least 12,000 years, and possibly much longer. Finding sites older than 10,000 years is a challenge in present-day British Columbia for a number of reasons, not least being the changes in sea level since then and the presence of acidic soils. More than 11,000 years ago only small parts of the province were not glaciated. Waning of glaciers in the following millennia would have made vast tracts accessible to migrating peoples. Theories that the ancestors of these earliest peoples came from “Beringia,” the unglaciated region of Siberia and Alaska that straddled the Bering Strait, rest on the fact that this strait was a dry platform before the glaciers retreated, as well as the genetic similarities between indigenous peoples of the Americas and northeast Asia, suggesting a common biological ancestry. Similarities in artifacts also denote interaction between these areas, which may have occurred through migration, diffusion or even trade.<sup>9</sup>

The earliest inhabitants of British Columbia are thought to have been small nomadic bands who brought with them the specialized knowledge needed to survive a cold environment. While the earliest indication of human settlement on the north coast is

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<sup>9</sup> Roy L. Carlson, “Introduction to Early Human Occupation in British Columbia,” in *Early Human Occupation in British Columbia*, eds. Luke Dalla Bona and Roy L. Carlson (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1996), 4.

to be found in nearby Alaska and Haida Gwaii and dates from 7-9,000 years ago, the three major archaeological investigations that have been undertaken closest to the Nass Valley indicate an initial occupation at each of these sites around 5,000 years ago.<sup>10</sup> This is the approximate time during which archaeologists have found evidence for the beginning of significant growth in the complexity of cultures across this region. Not unlike the Nisga'a they point to the importance of abundant salmon, which colonized rivers like the Nass after glacial ice retreated, to the development of Northwest Coast cultures. Over the next three millennia, known as the Middle Period (5,000 to 2,000 years ago), there is evidence that coastal societies developed an ability to accumulate surpluses, enabling a period of sedentary leisure in winter villages once food supplies had been secured. By the end of this period, archaeological remains suggest that most of the practices and social institutions described in the earliest ethnographic accounts that constitute what we think of as Northwest Coast culture could be found among the inhabitants of this area.<sup>11</sup>

From a careful reconstruction of the archaeological record, then, we can surmise that Aboriginal peoples like the Nisga'a have been living on what is today the north coast of British Columbia for millennia. Linking archaeological groupings from before the Middle Period—cultures defined by the stone tools that have survived—to present-day ethnic groups is much more difficult. Yet in the opinion of at least one expert, the “most economical hypothesis” is that Aboriginal peoples are descendants of the province’s

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<sup>10</sup> Gary Coupland, “The Early Prehistoric Occupation of Kitselas Canyon,” in *Early Human Occupation in British Columbia*, edited by Luke Dalla Bona and Roy L. Carlson (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1996), 159. The three major sites are Prince Rupert Harbour, Kitselas Canyon, and Hagwilget Canyon, all within 200 km of the Nass Valley.

<sup>11</sup> Roy L. Carlson, “The Later Prehistory of British Columbia,” in *Early Human Occupation in British Columbia*, edited by Luke Dalla Bona and Roy L. Carlson (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1996), 224.

earliest settlers.<sup>12</sup> The high number of languages in this area adds support to a view of biologically stable populations over a long time.

To make the point of extensive continuities of habitation and culture should not obscure the evidence of momentous changes over these long spans of history, or worse, present a picture of Nisga'a or other Aboriginal peoples as living in some largely static "ethnographic present" until contact with Europeans introduced a dynamism. In a kind of reversal of this view Matson and Coupland suggest that the Northwest Coast culture pattern may still have been spreading southward at contact, and that contact may have stopped its expansion.<sup>13</sup> An interesting study bringing together archaeological data and Tsimshian history from their *adaawaḵ* attributes the forging of their settlement pattern of seasonal mobility between coast and interior to the stresses and stimuli that followed successive waves of migration of peoples from the northern interior onto the north coast between 3,500 and 2,000 years ago.<sup>14</sup> Though a comparable study has yet to be undertaken for the Nisga'a, the fact that they share many *adaawaḵ* of migration with the Tsimshian suggests that life in the Nass Valley also changed considerably as a result of this influx of peoples. In 1981 the accidental discovery of human remains while land was being cleared in the village of *Laxgalts'ap* for new houses opened a window onto both continuity and change in the valley. An excavation identified the site as a shell midden burial ground, an example of a widespread mortuary practice throughout the coast that seems to have given way to historically known practices of above-ground corpse disposal

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<sup>12</sup> Carlson, "The Later Prehistory of British Columbia," 215.

<sup>13</sup> R.G. Matson and Gary Coupland, *The Prehistory of the Northwest Coast* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1995), 259.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew R.C. Martindale and Susan Marsden, "Defining the Middle Period (3500 BP to 1500 BP) in Tsimshian History through a Comparison of Archaeological and Oral Records," *BC Studies* no. 138-139 (Summer 2003): 13-50.

around the year 1300. This custom was unknown to at least some Nisga'a, and yet it has a certain continuity with the practice present-day villagers have of burying their dead in the cemetery at the edge of Laxgalts'ap.<sup>15</sup> The Nisga'a's long habitation of the Nass Valley has included within it numerous changes.

### **K'alii Aksim Lisims**

K'alii Aksim Lisims, or the Nass River, has long been and continues to be at the centre of Nisga'a life. From its headwaters in the glaciers of the Skeena Mountains, the river flows in a southwesterly direction nearly 400 km before draining into the Pacific Ocean via the fjord-like Portland Inlet. Below its junction with the Cranberry River the Nass Valley narrows considerably, its flat floor increasingly hemmed in by the Coast Mountains which rise steeply on either side. The climate varies from the coast, where the relatively warm waters of the Alaska Current moderate land temperatures, to inland sections where seasonal temperature extremes resemble those of a continental climate. In winter snow covers the entire valley and the prevailing northerly winds hold temperatures below freezing. The river freezes to just below Laxgalts'ap, where tidal influence begins to be felt. Spring brings warm winds from the coast up into the valley, where runoff from the mountains causes the river to surge and even on occasion overflow its banks. Summers are warm with daytime high temperatures around twenty degrees Celcius but cool nights. Most rain occurs in the fall—precipitation which gradually changes into snow as the season progresses, beginning on the mountaintops and advancing down to the valley floor in November.

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<sup>15</sup> Jerome S. Cybulski et al., *A Greenville Burial Ground: Human Remains and Mortuary Elements in British Columbia Coast Prehistory*, Archaeological Survey of Canada Mercury Series Paper no. 146 (Hull, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1992).

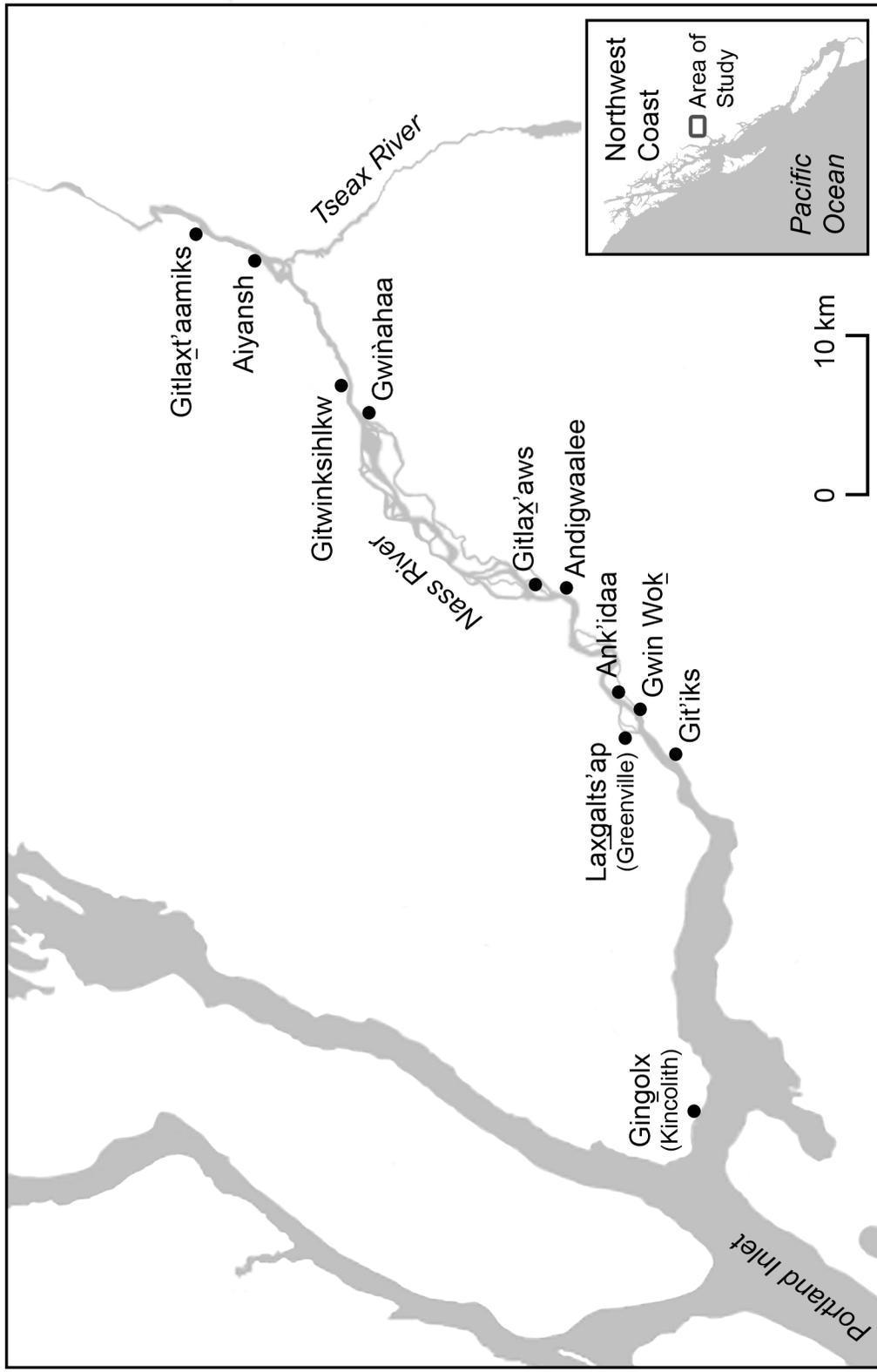


Figure 1  
Map of Nisga'a villages, circa 1860-1900

The Nisga'a's intense engagement with the Nass Valley over the course of millennia speaks to how a people and a place can be mutually constitutive. Nisga'a have traditionally viewed themselves as sharing their valley with other beings. These include clearly supernatural beings, like the *naxnok*, or spirits, whose abodes, known as *sbi naxnok*, can be found throughout the valley. Other beings might be classified as flora and fauna, which like humans are thought to have souls. Western red cedar, Sitka spruce and western hemlock are predominant in coastal forests but gradually give way to spruce, lodgepole and jack pine, balsam, trembling aspen and alder as one travels upriver from the coast. Stands of cottonwood line the river's banks and grow on its islands. Hemlock clings to the mountainsides as high as the tree line. Open areas in the valley give rise to thick patches of shrubs, including wild rose, thimbleberry and salmonberry. Animals that have made their home in the valley include mountain goats above the tree line, and black bears, grizzly bears, wolves, martens and beavers in the lower altitudes. Ravens and bald eagles are the most conspicuous birds, but other smaller avians also inhabit the valley. Five species of salmon visit the Nass and its tributaries every year beginning in June. Their vast numbers make the Nass the third most important river in modern British Columbia in terms of its salmon run. The Nass also has the largest run of oolichan, a type of smelt, on the entire Northwest Coast.

This abundance of food made the Nass one of the most densely populated rivers in what would become British Columbia at the onset of the period of Christianization. The origin of the river's modern name seems to make reference to its status as a place of food. Txaa K'alii Aksim Lisims, or Lisims for short, is the Nisga'a name for their river, which they still use today on occasion. It refers to one of Txeemsim's acts; after

improving the river he walked downstream from its headwaters, stopped at the mouth and turned to look up at his creation, which he noted was murky (*lisims*) in appearance.<sup>16</sup>

The name Nass likely comes from the neighbouring Tlingit to the northwest in what is today the Alaska panhandle, who came to this abundant river for the food it offered and so named it with a word meaning “food depot.”<sup>17</sup> In fact, the Nisga’a’s very name also refers to the bounty of their home. Thousands of birds, animals and human beings have historically converged near the mouth of the Nass in the month of *Xsaak*<sup>18</sup> when the oolichan begin to arrive. As elders have explained, every creature used their upper (*nisk*) and lower lip (*tl’ak*) to eat the oolichan, giving rise to the valley’s reputation as the place of *nisk* and *tl’ak*. From this the inhabitants of the valley became known as the Git Nisga’a, or the people who live in the “valley of eating.”<sup>19</sup>

If we were to imagine what a typical year for the Nisga’a might have looked like in, say, the year 1700, a defining characteristic would be such movements through the valley to harvest and process food as it became available in season. The Nisga’a economy of this time period has been described as being based on movement, for houses, the basic unit of economic production at this time, moved to camps near seasonal resource-harvesting areas as they began to yield food.<sup>20</sup> Although some food-harvesting and preserving activities overlapped, the Nisga’a year had distinct phases that generally followed the known availability of specific resources during certain times. As mentioned

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<sup>16</sup> “Geo BC,” The Province of British Columbia, <<http://apps.gov.bc.ca/pub/bcgnws/names/54007.html>>.

<sup>17</sup> Susan Marsden, Margaret Seguin Anderson, and Deanna Nyce, “Tsimshian,” in *Aboriginal Peoples of Canada: A Short Introduction*, ed. Paul Robert Magosci (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 265. Many early writers spelled Nass as “Naas.”

<sup>18</sup> March, meaning literally “to eat oolichans.”

<sup>19</sup> Nisga’a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga’a Study*, vol. 1, *Nisga’a Origins*, 76-7.

<sup>20</sup> Nisga’a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga’a Study*, vol. 4, *The Land and Resources: Traditional Nisga’a Systems of Land Use and Ownership* (New Aiyansh, BC: Wilp Wilxo’oskwahl Nisga’a Publications, 1995), 95.

above, the migration of millions of oolichan into the Nass estuary in March heralded a welcome end to the long winter season when food preserves had reached their lowest levels. Using sophisticated tools to catch the oolichan such as rakes and special nets strung below the ice still on the river, Nisga'a then heaped them into large bins where they were heated and rendered into prized grease. The entire process took around one month to complete. This grease was also a staple in the diet of the Nisga'a's north coast neighbours, and every spring several thousand arrived at Ts'imk'olhl Da'oots'ip (Fishery Bay) to catch and render the oolichan, providing an opportunity for interaction with other nations unmatched at any other time of the year.<sup>21</sup> Summer was by far the busiest season as Nisga'a moved between their camps on the river and its tributaries to access various salmon fisheries and berry patches on the land. Hunting and trapping for bear, mountain goat and numerous other species began in the fall and continued into the early winter. Autumn also ushered in trading expeditions, which were primarily oriented toward the inland Gitksan and products they could offer in exchange for the Nisga'a's largely coastal goods.<sup>22</sup> With the onset of this season Nisga'a returned to their villages. Winter was a time of relative rest, when the year's food had been gathered and stored, the spirits drew near and the long nights and cold weather set the stage for important ceremonial aspects of Nisga'a life.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Oolichan was an important food source for Aboriginal peoples along the Northwest Coast for a number of reasons. It is high in calories, being twenty-percent fat by weight when fresh, and was the first fish to arrive after the long winter. Oolichan grease's slow degradation and state as a stable fat at ambient temperatures are properties that make it ideal for storage and transportation. For more on the nutritional qualities of oolichan grease see Stephen D. Phinney, James A. Wortman and Douglas Bibus, "Oolichan Grease: A Unique Marine Lipid and Dietary Staple of the North Pacific Coast," *Lipids* 44 (2009): 47–51.

<sup>22</sup> McNeary, "Where Fire Came Down," notes that Nisga'a ties of trade and marriage ran predominantly on an east-west axis, given the different items ecologically different lands could offer, 117.

<sup>23</sup> See Nisga'a Tribal Council, "Using the Land: The Traditional Nisga'a Year," chap. 3 in *Ayuukhl Nisga'a Study*, vol. 4, *The Land and Resources*, for a detailed discussion of the Nisga'a seasonal round.

By the closing years of the eighteenth century the Nisga'a began to enter a period of remarkably rapid cultural change as white newcomers started to float in and out of their coastal valley. Appropriately the Nisga'a came to call these seemingly rootless people K'amksiiwaa, or "Driftwood."<sup>24</sup> This period of intense cultural encounter and the transformations that flowed from it were inseparably entwined with the process of Christianization explored in this dissertation. The remainder of this chapter touches on some of the most salient of the other developments stemming from contact, namely the spread of new diseases; the expansion of trade; the Nisga'a's participation in the development of a capitalist economy, largely as wage labourers; their encompassment in a new colonial state; the attempt by colonial and later federal governments to turn the Nisga'a into wards in need of "civilization"; and finally the struggle of the Nisga'a for recognition of their ownership of their land in the new province of British Columbia. But we begin with the intrusion of Europeans into the Nisga'a world.

### **K'amksiiwaa**

Imperial designs of European powers drew them to the Northwest Coast of North America in the latter half of the eighteenth century. In their largely riverine lands the Nisga'a had little direct contact with the first K'amksiiwaa to visit the area but nonetheless felt the effects of their presence as it intensified at the end of that century. The first European explorer to reach the coast was the Russian Vitus Bering in 1741, whose reconnaissance soon led to Russian colonization of what became Alaska. In 1774

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<sup>24</sup> Other Aboriginal peoples in British Columbia appear to have similarly named the European newcomers according to their perception of them. Keith Thor Carlson writes that the Stó:lō name for non-natives is Xwelitem, meaning "the starving ones," *The Power of Place the Problem of Time: Aboriginal Identity and Historical Consciousness in the Cauldron of Colonialism*, foreword by Sonny McHalsie (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 284.

Juan Pérez sailed north from Mexico on an expedition designed to reinforce Spanish claims to the area, the first of numerous Spanish expeditions to the Northwest Coast at the close of the eighteenth century. Pérez travelled as far as Haida Gwaii before turning south again. 1778 saw Captain James Cook survey the entire Northwest Coast on his third Pacific voyage in an unsuccessful attempt to find the elusive Northwest Passage for Britain. Captain George Vancouver, who further explored and charted the coast for Britain during his 1791-95 expedition, was one of the first Europeans to record an encounter with the Nisga'a. While investigating a northward extension of K'alii Xk'alaan, which he would rename Portland Inlet, in July 1793 Vancouver met several small groups, some of whom were undoubtedly Nisga'a. These parties showed a willingness to trade fur pelts for European goods, but could not convince Vancouver to visit their settlements. Nisga'a remember Vancouver's expedition as "the ones who [had] gotten lost up Ts'im Gits'oohl."<sup>25</sup>

## New Diseases

One of the most significant challenges the Nisga'a were forced to confront during this period was the arrival of previously unknown diseases to which they had little or no immunity that came with their new and stronger links to the outside world. In the century after contact with Europeans the Northwest Coast saw the introduction of several new scourges from the Eurasian disease pool in addition to at least two—syphilis and

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<sup>25</sup> George Vancouver, *Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean and Round the World: Performed in 1790-1795 with the "Discovery" and the "Chatham" Under Captain George Vancouver*, vol. 2 (New York: Da Capo Press, 1968 [1798]), 338-39. For a discussion of Nisga'a encounters with Vancouver and other European explorers see E Palmer Patterson, "Early Nishga-European Contact to 1860: A People for 'Those who Talk of the Efficiency of Moral Lectures to Subdue the Obduracy of the Heart,'" *Anthropologica* 25, no. 2 (1983): 193-219. This Nisga'a memory of Vancouver's visit can be found in Nisga'a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga'a Study*, vol. 2, *Nisga'a Clan Histories* (New Aiyansh, BC: Wilp Wilxo'oskwhl Nisga'a Publications, 1995), 243. Ts'im Gits'oohl is the Sim'alga name for Alice Arm, the east arm of Observatory Inlet.

tuberculosis—from other parts of the Americas.<sup>26</sup> Like new trade goods travelling along well-established routes, a number of diseases likely reached the inhabitants of the north coast well before interaction with Europeans. The Nisga'a practice of living together in large houses in villages was conducive to the spread of the new illnesses. Robert Boyd has undertaken the most comprehensive study of the introduction of novel infectious diseases among the Aboriginal peoples of the Northwest Coast in the first century following contact, using demographic data that is relatively abundant. Nisga'a suffered population loss primarily through at least three major smallpox epidemics during this century, but two recorded measles epidemics with much lower death rates also took their toll.<sup>27</sup> Outbreaks of scarlet fever, measles and whooping cough also occurred throughout the period of Christianization and continued into the twentieth century.

Little is known about the early smallpox epidemics that spread along the coast in the closing years of the eighteenth century other than that the mortality rates for previously unexposed populations would have been high. The major smallpox epidemic of 1836 began in Tlingit territory in the Russian fortress at Sitka and quickly advanced down the coast, taking with it one third of the Nisga'a population.<sup>28</sup> As dire as this mortality rate sounds, that from the smallpox epidemic of 1862-3 was even higher. This outbreak began in Victoria, where colonial authorities promptly forced a population of several hundred natives from northern coastal communities encamped on the edge of the city for trading purposes to return to their distant homes.<sup>29</sup> The various dispersing

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Boyd, *The Coming of the Spirit of Pestilence: Introduced Infectious Diseases and Population Decline among Northwest Coast Indians, 1774-1874* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999), 62.

<sup>27</sup> Boyd, *The Coming of the Spirit of Pestilence*, 204.

<sup>28</sup> Boyd, *The Coming of the Spirit of Pestilence*, 227.

<sup>29</sup> This forced dispersal demonstrates the important point, made by Mary-Ellen Kelm for a later period, that the poor health of Aboriginal peoples in British Columbia “was created not just by faceless pathogens but

Aboriginal peoples became ideal vectors for the disease. Boyd calculates that thirty-seven percent of a Nisga'a population of 1,454 before the epidemic died in this outbreak, leaving 923.<sup>30</sup> In sum, existing population data suggests a population decline on the north coast of approximately sixty-six percent during the period 1835-90. When measured from pre-contact populations before the first smallpox epidemic of the 1770s to post-epidemic population the loss is more astounding. Boyd estimates the Nisga'a population to have declined seventy-five percent over this period, from 3,635 down to 877 in the year 1882.<sup>31</sup>

The effects of population loss of this magnitude on nineteenth-century Nisga'a society can hardly be overstated. Contemporary Nisga'a remember how, in response to the especially high death toll at the lower Nass village of Gitxatin, the chiefs decided to abandon the village, moving their people to the nearby villages of Ank'idaa and Git'iks.<sup>32</sup> Although documentation is scarce, hints of the effects of widespread population loss on the transmission of knowledge in an oral society, and on the very ability of the social structure of ranked names and houses to function, have come down to us. Something of the Nisga'a's determination to cope as best they could can be seen in the way they distributed the immortal names that gave structure to their society. Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, McCullagh noted that in each clan there were many unoccupied

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by the colonial policies and practices" of Euro-Canadian governments, *Colonizing Bodies: Aboriginal Health and Healing in British Columbia, 1900-50* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1998), xix.

<sup>30</sup> Boyd, *The Coming of the Spirit of Pestilence*, 229.

<sup>31</sup> Boyd, *The Coming of the Spirit of Pestilence*, 223; 230; 263-4; 315. Boyd notes that while Peter O'Reilly in his Reserve Survey of 1882 recorded 877 Nisga'a, the 1889 Northwest Coast Indian Agency census counted 805, an eight-percent difference that may be attributable to a dysentery epidemic on the Nass in 1888, 223.

<sup>32</sup> "Galts'abim Gitxat'in - Village of Gitxat'in," Ancient Villages & Totem Poles of the Nisga'a, <[www.gingolx.ca/nisgaaculture/ancient\\_villages/gitxatin/gitxatin.htm](http://www.gingolx.ca/nisgaaculture/ancient_villages/gitxatin/gitxatin.htm)>. The site of the old village of Gitxatin was chosen by the chiefs of the lower villages for a Methodist mission in 1877, and became the modern village of Laxgalts'ap, a name which translates as "village on village."

names that had been filled in earlier times when there were more Nisga'a. Sometimes an individual carried several names to bring them forward, but the missionary suggested that even those left empty were remembered: "To fill these vacant places and revive the old names is the one ambition of the surviving members of the clan-section families."<sup>33</sup> Indeed names, like crests, by their uniqueness brought to humanity something of the power to be found in the cosmos. To nineteenth-century Nisga'a retaining them—even if it meant physical bodies holding several—was critical to maintaining the balance between humans and the more-than-human realms. New diseases washed through Nisga'a communities in waves of epidemics through the period of Christianization considered in this dissertation, affecting their vitality. From a Nisga'a perspective they were but one of many challenges threatening their survival as a society.

## **Expanding Trade**

Nisga'a showed avid interest in the trade goods they could acquire in exchange for fur pelts when K'amksiiwaa began visiting the Northwest Coast near the end of the eighteenth century. In this part of the continent the fur trade had two distinct phases. Beginning in 1785, the first phase was a maritime trade in sea otter pelts. Cook's journals had been published in Britain the previous year, confirming rumours of the fabulous prices sea otter pelts obtained by his crews at Nootka Sound had fetched in China. Such trade with British and American ships began to wind down as a result of overexploitation by 1810. The fur trade then shifted into its second phase, a land-based trade in beaver and other pelts. When Alexander Mackenzie travelled down the Bella Coola River to its mouth in 1793, the North West Company, which had been rapidly

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<sup>33</sup> James B. McCullagh, *The Indian Potlatch: Substance of a Paper Read before C.M.S. Annual Conference at Metlakatla, 1899* (Toronto: Women's Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, 1899), 5.

expanding into the continent from its Montreal base, reached the Pacific Ocean. By the time of the Company's forced merger with the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) in 1821 it had established a half dozen fur-trading posts across the northern Interior Plateau between the Rocky and Coast Mountains, an area that became known as the district of New Caledonia.<sup>34</sup>

That the vastly enlarged HBC could not capture most of the trade with the interior peoples who lived within easy reach of their fur trading posts speaks to the importance of the well-established indigenous systems of exchange during the fur trade era. Europe was incorporated into an elaborate trade network of furs and goods that connected the north coast and interior regions, and which had long enabled exchange of the different products to be found in each respective environment. The grease trail that brought the highly valued oolichan oil rendered on the lower Nass to native peoples of the interior in exchange for furs and other goods was only the most famous facet of this system. As in the eastern regions of the continent, European goods found their way into native societies long before the latter directly encountered Europeans. Located in a valley that straddles the coast-interior division, the Nisga'a were well placed in this trading network of both practical and luxury items, and with their coastal neighbours continued to purvey the new goods to the interior in exchange for valuable fur pelts. The efficiency of these networks of exchange led HBC traders to complain that interior groups often favoured trade with their coastal neighbours. Cooper points out that the Carrier and other Dene-speaking groups of the Interior frequently preferred to trade with coastal peoples like the Nisga'a and Tsimshian because they could bring European trade goods to them through existing

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<sup>34</sup> See Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1977) for a survey of the nature of this trade in what became British Columbia.

trade networks at often cheaper prices from the coast, and also because they offered valuable coastal items Europeans could not provide—such as oolichan oil, seaweed, abalone, dentalium and slaves.<sup>35</sup>

In 1831 the HBC attempted to rectify its inability to command the trade of its New Caledonia district from the Interior by establishing a trading fort on the coast, in the heart of Nisga'a territory. Its new fort on the lower Nass was part of a strategy to build a series of coastal trading establishments that would capture the inland furs being sent west by coastal peoples to American maritime traders. The latter had developed a pattern of arriving at the river's estuary to trade for pelts in the early spring, when the oolichan began to run and Aboriginal peoples from around the north coast congregated to process their grease as well as trade.<sup>36</sup> The Company had founded what was soon named Fort Simpson without having fully explored the Nass, apparently on the reasoning that any river used by Aboriginal peoples for extensive trade would be an ideal conduit for its own trade. When later reconnaissance revealed the Nass to be less navigable than they had believed the Company moved the fort to the nearby Tsimshian Peninsula on the coast in 1834.<sup>37</sup>

The Nisga'a appear to have responded opportunistically to the establishment of a major trading post on the edge of their territory. They frequented Fort Simpson in its first decades, and in the 1850s and 1860s when the Coast Tsimshian pursued commercial

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<sup>35</sup> Cooper, "To be Free on Our Lands," 117.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew R.C. Martindale, "A Hunter-Gatherer Paramount Chiefdom: Tsimshian Developments through the Contact Period," in *Emerging from the Mist: Studies in Northwest Coast Culture*, ed. Quentin Mackie, R.G. Matson, and Gary Coupland (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003), 24.

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan R. Dean, "These Rascally Spackaloids": The Rise of Gispaxlots Hegemony at Fort Simpson, 1832-40," *BC Studies* no. 101 (Spring 1994): 51. The account of Peter Skene Ogden, Chief Factor at the new HBC fort, of a large feast he attended by invitation in the spring of 1832 before the fort was relocated to the Tsimshian Peninsula provides a rare description of early-nineteenth-century Nisga'a dramatic performance. See "An Indian Festival," chap. 4 in *Traits of American-Indian Life and Character: By a Fur Trader* (London: Smith, Elder, 1853).

opportunities in the south the Nisga'a took their place as the main supplier of fur to the HBC at this fort.<sup>38</sup> In search of better goods for their furs, the Nisga'a also began to make trips to Fort Victoria on the southern tip of Vancouver Island. Chiefs like Maas Gibuu of the upriver village Gitlaxt'aamiks profited from their trading prerogatives with inland peoples like the Tahltan and Gitksan, whose lands produced superior furs, in the middle decades of the century. Another chief, Sganisim Sim'oogit or Chief Mountain, drew on his shared ancestry with the Athapaskan-speaking Ts'ets'aut who had settled in Portland Canal to invoke his hereditary privilege to govern the trade of all the valuable inland furs they trapped.<sup>39</sup> The Wolf *sigidimnal* or female chief Niisyok formed a marriage alliance with William Henry McNeill, Chief Factor at Fort Simpson from 1856 to 1863, and controlled a great deal of the trade that flowed to the fort from the Nass and the inland areas beyond.<sup>40</sup>

As occurred elsewhere on the continent where Aboriginal peoples joined Europeans in the pursuit of furs, expansion of the trade networks that crisscrossed the valleys and passes of the north coast to include the K'amksiiwaa and their goods produced changes in Nisga'a society. These changes are far from fully understood, although some general developments are well known. Trapping took on increased importance as Nisga'a exchanged furs for iron tools, firearms, clothes and other desired

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<sup>38</sup> Cooper, "'To Be Free On Our Lands,'" 22. Patterson, "Early Nishga-European Contact to 1860," offers a discussion of Nisga'a interactions with Fort Simpson in the mid-nineteenth century.

<sup>39</sup> The relationship between Eagle chief Sganisim Sim'oogit or Chief Mountain and the Ts'ets'aut is complex and has been described in various ways. When Matthew Gurney and Robert Stewart (Txaalaxhatkw) related a narrative of the origin of the name Sganisim Sim'oogit to ethnographer William Beynon in 1947-48 they explained that "[i]ts origin has always been regarded as Jits'aawit [the Nisga'a name for the Ts'ets'aut]. Mountain himself said, 'Some of our people were Jits'aawit in origin.'" In the early 1980s Mountain (Herbert Barton) explained that his predecessor, who also had the name Sagaween, "did not actually enslave [the Ts'ets'aut] but made them his vassals," Nisga'a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga'a Study*, vol. 2, *Nisga'a Clan Histories*, 267; 273.

<sup>40</sup> E Palmer Patterson, "Neshaki: Kinfolk and Trade," *Culture* 10, no. 2 (1990): 13-24, offers a discussion of the prominent Nisga'a woman Niisyok (Martha McNeill).

goods. The willingness of the Nisga'a and their neighbours to hunt furs to trade for European goods led to competition for trapping grounds on the upper Nass above the Cranberry River. Struggles between the Tahltan-Lax̱wiyip, Gitksan and Nisga'a for control over this area in the nineteenth century were such that none could hold a permanent village there. Eventually the upriver Nisga'a and the Gitksan managed to push the Tahltan-Lax̱wiyip from the Nass Valley. McNeary points out that although the Nisga'a had long participated in extensive trade with their neighbours, for the first time many necessary items had to be obtained from outside their valley.<sup>41</sup> Others argue that the continuing integrity of their subsistence base, reflected in evidence that Nisga'a cut back on trade in furs when food supplies ran short, demonstrated their ability to avoid complete dependence on rice, molasses and other foodstuffs obtained at the forts.<sup>42</sup>

Participation in the fur trade increased the wealth of the Nisga'a, as was true in general for Northwest Coast societies. The influx of new wealth had a number of repercussions, including attempts to reshuffle status in this highly ranked society. Chiefs who controlled trade relations acquired more wealth and as before expressed it through feasting, a practice that through distribution assured the continued wellbeing of the house, as well as affirming and even increasing its status. Marsden and Galois indicate how a destabilization of prior balances of power occurred among the neighbouring Tsimshian, owing to the way opportunities for new wealth opened differently among chiefs.<sup>43</sup> There is reason to believe that the period of heightened rivalry among chiefs of the lower Nass in the 1860s was fueled by similar changes. This conflict found expression in the height

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<sup>41</sup> McNeary, "Where Fire Came Down," 84.

<sup>42</sup> Cooper, "To Be Free On Our Lands," 123.

<sup>43</sup> See Susan Marsden and Robert Galois, "The Tsimshian, the Hudson's Bay Company, and the Geopolitics of the Northwest Coast Fur Trade, 1787-1840," *Canadian Geographer* 39 (Summer 1995): 169-83.

of the *pts'aan*, or totem pole, that one was able to raise. At this time the Wolf and Eagle clans essayed to assert their dominance over the Killerwhales, the first clan to reside on the Nass and until then the foremost on the river. With the help of the Wolf chief Hlidax the above-mentioned Eagle chief Mountain, also known as Sagawaan, whose great wealth derived in part from his monopoly on the furs harvested by the Ts'ets'out of Portland Canal, erected the tallest pole ever raised in the valley. Both chiefs had been in contention with the Killerwhale chief Sii Sbiguut, who was determined to raise the tallest pole despite Hlidax's warning that no pole should be taller than one he had recently raised as a memorial to his father. Following through on his threat Hlidax shot and wounded Sii Sbiguut, but the latter's death soon after at the hands of a disloyal nephew did not prevent his heirs from defiantly raising the pole in his memory. Only by taking the unconventional step of combining their crests to make the Eagle pole the tallest did Hlidax and Sagawaan eventually triumph.<sup>44</sup> Hlidax appears in the historical record as a particularly ambitious chief, not least in his willingness to challenge the monopoly that the powerful Tsimshian chief Legax claimed over trade with the Gitksan.<sup>45</sup>

Effects of the Nisga'a's trade in furs with the K'amksiiwaa on their society were complex and resist the kind of simplification implicit in theories of enrichment or dependence that have been applied to the trade more generally. A trade good such as

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<sup>44</sup> See description of Sagawaan's pole, currently housed at the Royal Ontario Museum, given by Richard Morgan (Goagyaehl), "Transcript – Sagaw'een Pole, Git'iks," Ancient Villages & Totem Poles of the Nisga'a, <[www.gingolx.ca/nisgaaculture/ancient\\_villages/gitiks/video/sagawaan/sagaweentranscript.htm](http://www.gingolx.ca/nisgaaculture/ancient_villages/gitiks/video/sagawaan/sagaweentranscript.htm)>. Marius Barbeau recorded a version of this struggle for hegemony through poles, as told by Chief Mountain (Alfred Mountain) at Gingolx in 1927 in *Totem Poles*, vol. 1, *According to Crests and Topics*, Anthropological Series no. 30, Bulletin no. 119 (Ottawa: National Museum of Canada, 1950), 5, 292. According to Mountain, Hlidax was insulted that Sii Sbiguut had chosen the famous carver Oyee as carver even though it was his right to do the work. Nisga'a chief Hay'maas (Chester Moore, at the time Hlayim Wil) notes that Sagawaan's adding of crests from other houses to his pole "was a cause of much trouble; it was not the traditional way," Nisga'a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga'a Study*, vol. 2, *Nisga'a Clan Histories*, 270.

<sup>45</sup> "The House of Hlidax," in Nisga'a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga'a Study*, vol. 2, *Nisga'a Clan Histories*, 324.

alcohol, when combined with firearms and a sharpened sense of rivalry, could and did have incredibly destructive consequences. Liquor was a staple among the offerings of the American maritime traders who visited the north coast. The HBC continued this practice from its fort, offering rum in exchange for furs until its officials reached an agreement with the Russian American Company in 1842 to curtail the sale of alcohol on the entire north Pacific coast.<sup>46</sup> Although different K'amksiiwaa governments passed laws banning the sale or gift of intoxicating drinks to Indians as early as 1860, and the 1876 Indian Act prohibited Aboriginal peoples from buying, selling or consuming alcoholic beverages, all of these efforts did little to hinder Nisga'a access to alcohol. Whites continued to barter liquor for furs from independent schooners, regularly anchoring in nearby Russian waters before the sale of Alaska in 1867 to minimize the risk of prosecution and confiscation of their ships.

Nisga'a incorporated alcohol into their feasts as a substitute for food, with the same expectation that guests were obliged to consume what they were given—a reworking of a novel good that encouraged its widespread overconsumption. Naxnok performances, in which chiefs acted out the negative human qualities their naxnok names often denoted in a bid to bring them under control, appear to have incorporated the new phenomenon of drinking. One early-twentieth-century observer described a dramatization at Laxgalts'ap in which the performing chief poured out drinks for all the chiefs in attendance from a whiskey bottle he carried. On his emptying of the bottle a barrel of whiskey was rolled in.<sup>47</sup> The journal of Arthur Doolan, the first missionary to

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<sup>46</sup> Cooper, “‘To Be Free On Our Lands,’” 143.

<sup>47</sup> Collector C.F. Newcombe described this dramatization in relation to the naxnok mask worn by the chief who performed it, which he collected at Laxgalts'ap (Greenville) in 1912, Marjorie Halpin, “‘Seeing’ in

reside on the Nass, is dotted with references to gunfire in the lower villages and wounded people in need of assistance, frequently following the mass consumption of liquor at a feast.<sup>48</sup> While Doolan's entries emphasize the novelty of these situations to him, it seems likely that the Nisga'a who experienced them also understood themselves to be living in a particularly violent and unstable time in their history. Indeed, as we will see, a number of turn-of-the-century Nisga'a described the period immediately preceding the arrival of missionaries as a time of violence and lawlessness.

### **A Changing Economic Order**

In the 1880s, the Nass Valley became host to the type of industrial economic production Nisga'a had already begun to migrate to southern points to participate in seasonally. The abundance of the different species of Pacific salmon in north coast rivers like the Nass, which archaeologists believe nourished the earliest human settlements millennia ago, caught the eye of a number of K'amksiiwaa who saw business opportunities in commercial canneries. Indian Reserve Commissioner Peter O'Reilly recognized the importance of salmon to Aboriginal peoples in the province, and his surveys of reserves included allocations of exclusively native fisheries. However, the federal department of fisheries was ideologically opposed to the idea of granting exclusive native fishing rights, arguing that they contravened the common-law principle of the public right to fish. At the end of this tussle its view won out, a victory that helped to separate the connection between land reserves and fish that O'Reilly had

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Stone: Tsimshian Masking and the Twin Stone Masks," in *The World is as Sharp as a Knife: An Anthology in Honour of Wilson Duff*, ed. D.N. Abbott (Victoria: British Columbia Provincial Museum, 1981), 291.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Doolan, Journal, 17 October 1865 and 7 March 1866, Church Missionary Society Archives, Church Missionary Society, North Pacific Mission, Papers and Correspondence, 1852-1924 (hereafter CMS fonds), C.2./O.

acknowledged, and laid the groundwork for development of commercial fishing interests along the province's major salmon rivers.<sup>49</sup> In 1881 an Irishman named Henry Croasdaile built the first Nass cannery on a plot of land he had acquired at Stoney Point, in the heart of the Nisga'a's fishing ground on the lower Nass—the first of many that would dot the mouth of the river in the coming decades.

Despite these favourable conditions the canneries that proliferated on the Nass and other rivers along the British Columbia coast in these years were utterly dependent for their expansion on one other factor, namely cheap labour. Nisga'a formed a key part of this supply by taking up the invitation to wage labour in large numbers. Two years after Croasdaile opened his cannery the Methodist missionary Alfred Green noted that the two canneries now operating on the river employed about six hundred "Indians," as well as four hundred Chinese and fifty white workers.<sup>50</sup> On the Nass and elsewhere along the Northwest Coast, canneries were built around the availability of Aboriginal labour. They quickly became a major source of seasonal employment as Nisga'a incorporated them into their annual economic round. Tasks were gendered, with men engaged in fishing and women working indoors washing fish, filling cans and mending nets, sometimes with children helping at their sides. The 1912 *Annual Report* of the Department of Indian Affairs described the women as "indispensable at the canneries on account of their alacrity in the filling of cans."<sup>51</sup> In fact the women's skill at canning often meant

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<sup>49</sup> Douglas C. Harris, *Landing Native Fisheries: Indian Reserves and Fishing Rights in British Columbia, 1849-1925* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008), 15.

<sup>50</sup> Green, Naas River, 4 September 1883, in *The Missionary Outlook* (May 1884): 79.

<sup>51</sup> Dominion of Canada, *Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Year Ended March 31, 1912* (Ottawa: C.H. Parmelee, 1912), 265.

employment for the men as well, for canners would hire their husbands as a way to ensure they would have them processing fish inside.<sup>52</sup>

As historians have observed for other Aboriginal peoples in British Columbia, waged labour became an important source of wealth for the Nisga'a in the latter half of the nineteenth century.<sup>53</sup> Canneries provided the majority of paid work available in the valley or nearby, but other opportunities existed as well. Nisga'a found employment with the many K'amksiiwaa who passed through their valley at this time, including prospectors, miners and surveying parties. Even more jobs were available outside the valley, and Nisga'a migrated during the summers in search of them. During the 1870s they worked alongside other Aboriginal peoples in canneries on the lower Fraser River and sawmills in Puget Sound. In a rapidly industrializing region, Nisga'a pursued work in new areas like railway construction and mining. Nisga'a aided in the construction of the Esquimalt-Nanaimo Railway in 1884 and 1885, and during the same decade could be found labouring in gold mines north of the Nass Valley near Dease Lake.<sup>54</sup> Although their primary form of engagement with the emerging capitalist economy was as waged labourers, some were also traders and storekeepers. When considered alongside Nisga'a engagement with the fur trade, a picture emerges congruous with James McDonald's finding for the nineteenth-century Tsimshian of a people "intimately connected, from the

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<sup>52</sup> Douglas Harris, *Landing Native Fisheries*, 142, 163.

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, John Sutton Lutz, *Makúk: A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008); Rolf Knight, *Indians at Work: An Informal History of Native Labour in British Columbia, 1858-1930*, rev. ed. (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1996); Paige Raibmon, *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth Century Northwest Coast* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>54</sup> Dominion of Canada, *Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Year Ended 31<sup>st</sup> December 1886* (Ottawa: Maclean, Roger, 1887), 79; George M. Dawson, *Report on an Exploration in the Yukon District, N.W.T., and Adjacent Northern Portion of British Columbia* (Montreal: William Foster Brown, 1889), 193.

earliest contact period, with the commercial and industrial development of the northwest region of British Columbia, both as traders and as labourers.”<sup>55</sup>

The Nisga’a experience of waged labour in the nineteenth century seems to confirm Lutz’s finding that the Aboriginal peoples in British Columbia who were keen to participate in the new capitalist economy were generally those with their own prestige economies.<sup>56</sup> Nineteenth-century Nisga’a turned to newly available wage labour as a way of augmenting the wealth circulating in their own economy, which had the potential to improve their lives as well as bestow status through its distribution.<sup>57</sup> Nisga’a women and men did not pursue waged labour out of necessity. Their relative freedom from an utter dependence on wages, enabled by access to resources used for survival that continued to be available in differing degrees, can be seen in the attempts of cannery operators in the early twentieth century to replace the Nisga’a and other Aboriginal peoples with Chinese and Japanese labourers more dependent on the capitalist economy.<sup>58</sup> Preexisting priorities propelled many Aboriginal peoples into the paid workforce and through this helped shape the development of new industries and the spread of capitalism in British Columbia.

While older Nisga’a economies continued, the addition of waged labour offered by the developing capitalist economy brought significant changes to Nisga’a society.

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<sup>55</sup> James McDonald, “Images of the Nineteenth-Century Economy of the Tsimshian,” in *The Tsimshian: Images of the Past, Views for the Present*, edited by Margaret Seguin [Anderson] (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), 40.

<sup>56</sup> Lutz, *Makúk*, 234.

<sup>57</sup> For example, McCullagh noted this increase in wealth and its use by young men to be initiated into the different levels of secret societies, which formerly only chiefs and leading men could afford to give the requisite feasts to join, Moeran, Joseph William Wright, *McCullagh of Aiyansh* (London: Marshall Brothers, 1923), 55.

<sup>58</sup> Lutz notes this contrast between immigrant labourers and Aboriginal peoples, marked by the option the latter had to not sell their labour because they could fall back on other economies. He interprets employers’ complaints about Aboriginal peoples not being dependable enough as really being a criticism that they were not fully yoked to the capitalist economy, *Makúk*, 284.

Work in commercial fishing and canning performed by men and women respectively changed patterns of seasonal movement linked to resource harvesting. By the 1880s Nisga'a were congregating on the lower Nass in both summer and fall to work at the canneries. Other paid work further from home required even greater changes to the subsistence economy. In working for and then spending cash, nineteenth-century Nisga'a partially integrated their own economy into an increasingly globalized commercial economy, simultaneously drawing from and being drawn into a new network of relations over which they had much less control. Perhaps the most significant change in terms of these developments for individual Nisga'a and their society was the decline of the economic importance of house groups, which had earlier served as the primary economic and productive unit. The availability of outside employment meant that individual Nisga'a no longer depended solely on their houses to survive.<sup>59</sup>

### **Coming Under the Queen's Flag**

One of the most significant changes the Nisga'a experienced in the nineteenth century was the gradual erosion of their sovereignty. Imperial sparring at Nootka Sound between Spain and Britain in the closing decade of the eighteenth century had opened the way to the claims of the latter to part of the Northwest Coast of North America. British control over this vast area remained contested by the expanding United States until the Oregon Treaty of 1846 extended the international boundary along the forty-ninth parallel west of the Rocky Mountains, after which the Colonial Office gave the Hudson's Bay Company permission to establish an agricultural colony on Vancouver Island. In 1858 the start of the Fraser Canyon Gold Rush led the colony's governor, James Douglas, to

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<sup>59</sup> McNeary, "Where Fire Came Down," 197.

found the Colony of British Columbia on the adjacent mainland in a bid to assert British control over an area experiencing an inrush of American prospectors. The northwestern boundary of this new colony was the Nass River, a mapping fiat that was both a harbinger of coming Nisga'a difficulties with getting K'amksiiwaa to recognize their territorial boundaries, and placed the Nisga'a on the colony's distant periphery. Another gold rush, this time on the Stikine River in 1862, prompted a similar imperial response as Douglas removed a further chunk of land from the exclusive trade zone of the Hudson's Bay Company. The resulting short-lived Stikine Territory had as its southwestern boundary the Nass River, effectively encompassing the northern half of the valley. Within a year Douglas added the Stikine to the Colony of British Columbia, placing the entire Nass Valley within its domain.

Nisga'a did not immediately feel the effects of this enmeshing of their various *ang'ooskw* or house territories into the British Empire by these and other manoeuvres. In the 1860s the new colonial presence exerted itself on the north coast primarily through the occasional visit of a Royal Navy gunboat.<sup>60</sup> A symbolic encounter between the Nisga'a and the new colonial state took place in September 1866 when the gunboat *H.M.S. Forward* under Lieutenant D'Arcy Anthony Denny gingerly sounded its way up the Nass River as far as the lower villages. Accompanied by the missionary Arthur Doolan, who was anxious to see British law enforced on the Nass, the captain and

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<sup>60</sup> In 1865 the British Royal Navy transferred the headquarters of its Pacific fleet from Valparaíso, Chile, to Esquimalt Harbour, near Victoria. See Barry Gough, *Gunboat Frontier: British Maritime Authority and Northwest Coast Indians, 1846-90* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984) for a discussion of British naval support for Christian missions in British Columbia and the gunboat diplomacy employed on the Aboriginal inhabitants who lived on the colony's coast.

officers on board landed in state at the three villages.<sup>61</sup> Doolan reported that many chiefs had fled in advance of the visit. The Wolf chief Gints'aadax received them at a feast, where he performed *wil swantkwhl mixk'aax*, the down feathers in his headdress soon filling the house as he danced before them. This sacred ceremony, in which guests are welcomed through the blowing of down feathers over their heads while a peace song is sung, was meant to signify peaceful intentions.<sup>62</sup> Denny's message was a stern warning: although the Nisga'a had claimed that no gunboat could come up their river, he had proven them wrong. Since this was the first visit of a gunboat to the Nass the captain explained that he would not punish any for buying whisky, but that next time he would be less forgiving. He also warned the assembled Nisga'a not to commit any violence against the Englishmen who lived among them or they would suffer in consequence. The head chiefs of the three villages responded by saying that they were friendly to "[K]ing George," would try to do what Denny advised them, and regretted that the schooners were allowed to come to them.<sup>63</sup> Their reference to "King George" almost thirty years into Queen Victoria's rule speaks to the Nisga'a's appreciation of a relationship with the K'amksiiwaa that stretched back beyond these new assertions of authority over them.<sup>64</sup>

Despite this visit the power of the new colonial state was limited and only haltingly exercised on the Nass in these years before the colony's confederation with Canada. When in April 1868 three members of the Gingolx mission were murdered in

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<sup>61</sup> Doolan, Journal, 30 September - 1 October [1866], CMS fonds, C.2./O. No author is attributed to this document, but every indication points to Doolan having penned it. See also Duncan, Journal, 5 October 1866. William Duncan fonds.

<sup>62</sup> My interpretation here is based on the description of the *wil swantkwhl mixk'aax* ceremony provided by Joseph Gosnell (Hleek), interview by Nicholas May, New Aiyansh, 28 June 2007.

<sup>63</sup> [Doolan], Journal, 30 September - 1 October [1866], CMS fonds, C.2./O.

<sup>64</sup> The expression may also point to the Chinook jargon term "King George" coined during the era of George III, which was used by natives along the coast to refer to the British, and was contrasted with "Boston," used to refer to Americans. Here too the expression would point to an earlier relationship and familiarity rooted in the fur trade that preceded Lieutenant Denny's mission.

their canoe by a Tsimshian party seeking immediate revenge for a kinsman's death during a fight at a feast in the lower villages, the colonial government was reluctant to intervene, notwithstanding protests from the missionaries Robert Tomlinson and William Duncan. Tomlinson considered these Christian settlers to be British subjects entitled to the protection this status entailed. Authorities in Victoria, however, questioned the wisdom of establishing a settlement in so remote and vulnerable a location as the mouth of the Nass, and then expecting the fledgling state to use its limited resources to enforce a peace.<sup>65</sup> Conflict between the Nisga'a and Tsimshian continued, however, with the latter blockading the Nass River's mouth at one point. Eventually the two missionaries succeeded in convincing colonial authorities to intervene. The following year the warring parties lined up facing each other on the deck of the *H.M.S. Sparrowhawk*, which was anchored off Metlakatla on an official visit for this purpose, and under the watchful eyes of Governor Frederick Seymour and the Commissioner of Lands and Works, Joseph Trutch, agreed to cease their hostilities. Even this forced peace did not carry enough weight to fully bring an end to hostilities—an achievement the belligerent parties had yet to work out with Tomlinson's assistance in subsequent years.<sup>66</sup>

### **“We don't wish to be taken care of as Children”**

When the Colony of British Columbia joined the Canadian Confederation in 1871, the control it had assumed over the lives of the Nisga'a and other Aboriginal

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<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Duncan's letter to Governor Seymour, 10 September 1868, William Duncan fonds, urging the governor to take up the case of the murders. In his report on the attempt to settle the war with a visit from Governor Seymour on the *H.M.S. Sparrowhawk*, Chief Commissioner of Lands and Works Joseph Trutch observed that it “would appear more judicious and advisable that missionary enterprise should radiate gradually from the centre of civilization instead of isolating itself at once in points like Kincolith [Gingolx] on the utmost verge of the Colony,” *Papers connected with the Indian Land Question, 1850-1875* (Victoria: Government Printing Office, 1875), 69.

<sup>66</sup> Tomlinson, Kincolith, to Duncan, England, 30 April 1870, William Duncan fonds.

peoples within its borders passed to the federal government. The Nisga'a, who over centuries had developed political systems based on kinship and rank to regulate their society, now found different aspects of their lives increasingly falling under the jurisdiction of the young state. In 1876 Parliament passed the Indian Act, which with its successive amendments laid the legal and administrative frameworks that would uniformly treat the "Indians" of Canada as wards of the state with the ostensible goal of protecting their interests, and more importantly, guiding their assimilation into the growing settler society.

The near complete absence of formal treaties between the K'amksiiwaa and the different peoples they found in what became British Columbia meant that the extension of federal powers into places like the Nass Valley after 1871 occurred without even a semblance of the official agreements reached with local inhabitants that generally occurred elsewhere in Canada. Control over the lands and resources of the Nass Valley, along with the power to alienate them to whites as it saw fit, was assumed by the federal government. Other changes likewise arose autocratically according to the young Parliament's paternalistic assumption of responsibility for Aboriginal peoples. The Nisga'a were pushed to create an elected band council form of local government based upon their villages, and to accept an Indian Agent. A pivotal moment in the imposition of the Indian Act on the north coast was the application of the Gingolx mission village to be placed under the Indian Advancement Act of 1884. This law was enacted to grant certain privileges to more "advanced" bands with a goal of preparing them for the exercise of municipal powers. Gingolx's resident missionary William Collison pressed the members of the mission to accept this act as a way to get an Indian agent appointed to

the region and hopefully quell the Tsimshian at the nearby Anglican mission of Metlakatla, who were questioning the government's right to come in and mark off land reserves.<sup>67</sup> Yet as was true of colonized peoples elsewhere, the Gingolx people's apparent acquiescence belied their own motivations. Placement under the Indian Advancement Act secured Nisga'a ownership of parts of the mouth of the Nass River that were being contested by the Tsimshian. After the people of Gingolx became the first band in the Northwest Coast Agency to come under the act, the federal government sent a surveyor to mark off the Gingolx reserves and appointed an Indian agent, who would reside at Metlakatla.

### **Colonial Civilizing Projects**

Efforts by Christian missionaries were not the only attempts made to reform the Nisga'a into an ideal derived from the colonizing society. Colonial and then federal governments endeavoured to assimilate all Aboriginal peoples into their emerging settler societies. As with all modern colonialisms, politicians and bureaucrats justified their assumption of authority over natives by invoking a civilizing project, in which an imagined hierarchy between the dichotomy of native savagery and European civilization required interventions to elevate the former. The Canadian state, through its Department of Indian Affairs and the appointment of Indian Agents, took a growing interest in virtually every aspect of Nisga'a life in the closing decades of the nineteenth century with an eye to assisting them on the path to civilization.

Within Nisga'a and other Northwest Coast societies in the nineteenth century no institution was more central to the vitality of their political, social and spiritual lives than

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<sup>67</sup> Collison and Nash, Annual Report of the North Pacific Mission, 10 June 1886; Collison, Kincolith, 17 August 1886, CMS fonds, C.2./O.2.

the feasting system, known to outsiders as the “potlatch.” For the Nisga’a the most important feast was and is the *yukw*, or settlement feast, by which a successor to a ranked name “settles over” his deceased predecessor and thus takes that name and the political and spiritual powers and responsibilities that come with it. Historically feasts served to publicly legitimize status changes in the oral society of the Nisga’a, with guests giving assent to the change by their attendance and acceptance of gifts. In the Nass and elsewhere the move to ban the potlatch was led by Christian missionaries. James McCullagh, a CMS missionary and one of the more articulate critics of the Nisga’a feasting system, recognized it as a form of government. He lamented its continuing authority over Nisga’a after they converted, and criticized it for promoting values at odds with European notions of civilization and progress.<sup>68</sup>

An amendment to the Indian Act in 1884 banned the practice of the potlatch. Nisga’a were divided in their responses, though not necessarily along religious lines. Support for the ban tended to come from Christians who believed that the institution was antithetical to their new religion, but also from chiefs weary of the alcohol and violence that had become too characteristic of feasts.<sup>69</sup> Some Christian chiefs regarded those who took names, fishing streams and hunting grounds through their willingness to feast as ambitious usurpers, and so called for an end to the old system. Debate over the potlatch came to a head at the end of the nineteenth century as the ban was finally enforced on the Nass, and both supporters and opponents presented their arguments to the federal

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<sup>68</sup> See McCullagh, *The Indian Potlatch*, for McCullagh’s most developed critique of turn-of-the-century Nisga’a feasting practices.

<sup>69</sup> See Moses Oxidan, Peter Kla-a-yu Calder, William Hymas, Nathaniel Lai Robinson, Fishery Bay, to Attorney General, 14 April 1899, BCA, Attorney General correspondence, 1872-1937, 1950, Box 4, File 5, for an example of the concerns of some Nisga’a chiefs about how the practice of feasting was changing.

government in petition after petition.<sup>70</sup> With help from their missionaries the Nisga'a by this time had become a petitioning people, comfortable with the practice of expressing their grievances in signed letters to K'amksiiwaa governments that were making decisions about their lives from outside the valley.<sup>71</sup> For most Nisga'a feasting was not among the cultural practices they were willing to give up in their Christianization and civilization, and by the early years of the twentieth century missionaries in the Nass begrudgingly accepted that it was unlikely to ever stop. In a particularly candid note to the Indian Agent Charles Perry in 1912, the resident missionary at Gingolx William Collison lamented that every summer the Nisga'a of the lower Nass made the village "their dumping ground for all kinds of potlatches."<sup>72</sup>

The latter half of the nineteenth century also saw the opening of day schools for the Nisga'a. Although intended as instruments of assimilation in their offering by missionaries and the federal government, they were also recognized by Nisga'a of all ages as a way to access new knowledge from the K'amksiiwaa world, and thus at times eagerly sought. Anglican and Methodist missionaries opened the first schools in the valley, though by the 1870s they were receiving intermittent funding from the federal government depending on enrollment. So attractive were the schools generally among the peoples of the north coast that some Gitksan moved to the Nass River villages to take advantage of them before receiving their own, just as Nisga'a could be found attending school at Metlakatla. Schools generated significant changes in Nisga'a society. As we

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<sup>70</sup> For a discussion of the potlatch ban and the different responses of the Aboriginal peoples of British Columbia to it see Douglas Cole and Ira Chaikin, *An Iron Hand Upon the People: The Law Against the Potlatch on the Northwest Coast* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1990).

<sup>71</sup> Jean Usher notes the development of a petitioning culture among the neighbouring Tsimshian as well, *William Duncan of Metlakatla: A Victorian Missionary in British Columbia*, *Publications in History*, no. 5 (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1974), 128.

<sup>72</sup> Collison, Kincolith, to Charles Perry, Metlakatla, 5 July 1912, Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), Indian Affairs, Nass Agency, Correspondence and Agent's Reports, 1910-15, vol. 1662.

will see in Chapter Three, the school opened by Arthur Doolan, for example, interfered with the socialization of young men of *hlguwilksihlkw* status, or those in direct line to become chiefs. Literacy spread rapidly through Nisga'a society, and by the early years of the twentieth century "McCullagh's boys," a group of young men taken in by the missionary from a young age, were well versed in how to operate the printing press at Aiyansh mission. By 1890 the Canadian government had opened an industrial school at Metlakatla, and at Port Simpson a few years later it began to fund the Crosby Girls' Home and Crosby Boys' Home started by the Methodist missionaries, commencing their transformation into residential schools for Aboriginal children.<sup>73</sup> Some Nisga'a children attended these new institutions. Near the turn of the century a few ventured further afield to places like Lytton and Chilliwack in the southern end of the province to receive education and skills training, initiating a phenomenon of residential schooling that would become commonplace over the course of the new century, and have significant consequences for the transmission of Nisga'a cultural knowledge.<sup>74</sup>

## The Land Question

K'amksiiwaa who began to pour north into what James Douglas hastily declared to be the Colony of British Columbia in 1858 in response to their arrival sought wealth not in furs but gold. In their wake, the settler colony that sprung up was hungry for yet another kind of wealth, one whose value contemporary Nisga'a could equally appreciate—namely, land. Land, through its ability to feed and sustain, had long been

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<sup>73</sup> Jan Hare and Jean Barman, *Good Intentions Gone Awry: Emma Crosby and the Methodist Mission on the Northwest Coast* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006), 231.

<sup>74</sup> Nisga'a youth who attended a residential school in the early years of the twentieth century went primarily to St. George's Indian Residential School in Lytton, BC, which opened in 1901 and was run by the Anglican Church. For a comprehensive history of native residential schools in Canada, see J.R. Miller, *Shingwauk's vision: a history of native residential schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

recognized as literally the ground from which Nisga'a houses drew their wealth, a view that continued in the fur trade era when animal pelts could be transformed into even more types of goods than were possible before. This shift in the needs of the K'amksiiwaa marked by the advent of settler colonialism meant that the Nisga'a faced a new challenge that was absent in the seventy or so years over which they had traded with these newcomers. Though much shorter than in other parts of Canada, the cooperative fur trade period in British Columbia appears to have given native-newcomer relations here a similar tenor, one that differed greatly from what was to follow.<sup>75</sup> One of its effects was that the Nisga'a did not anticipate the K'amksiiwaa's attempt to take their land. When government commissioners informed them that their land belonged to the Queen the Nisga'a at first laughed, then quickly grew alarmed when it became clear that they were serious. Outlandish as it seemed, especially coming from Driftwood who now appeared interested in lodging themselves more permanently in the valley, this claim began a protracted struggle in these years that the Nisga'a would refer to as "The Land Question." The question at issue for Nisga'a delegates who started travelling to distant K'amksiiwaa political capitals to push their case in the 1880s was whether the newcomers would recognize a Nisga'a ownership of the lands that preceded their recent arrival. From the moment this question was first posed it took on an increasing importance in the collective life of the Nisga'a, influencing—and as we will see, even marginalizing—other contemporary developments. Due to both the centrality of the land to the Nisga'a's

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<sup>75</sup> Fisher, *Contact and Conflict*, remains the classic statement positing a fundamental divide in native-newcomer relations in British Columbia between the fur trade era and that of the settler colony that followed. This distinction has been softened since, recently by John Sutton Lutz's finding that Aboriginal participation in the economy of what became British Columbia continued into the industrial era, *Makúk*, 7-8. Nisga'a shock at the surveying and apparent loss of their lands, and the sentiment of betrayal by the K'amksiiwaa explored in Chapter Three, suggest that with respect to some aspects of the native-newcomer relationship there was indeed a seismic shift after the 1858 gold rush and founding of the mainland colony.

continued existence, and the unsatisfactory answer put forth by the K'amksiiwaa, the urgency this issue took on seemed warranted.

To facilitate K'amksiiwaa resettlement of the land colonial authorities in British Columbia created a system of Indian reserves. This policy of marking off land for Aboriginal peoples had antecedents in the colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia, although limited, as well as in other areas of Canada before the new province took it up in earnest in the 1870s and 1880s. Reserves were conceived as transitional places; deliberately designed to be inadequate in providing for the long-term livelihood of their residents, thus forcing them into the labour market and facilitating their assimilation into the white settler population. British Columbia differed starkly from the Dominion in its steadfast refusal to recognize the existence of Native title to land, a prior claim that the Canadian government believed needed to be extinguished by treaty before European resettlement. It also insisted that the reserves laid out for its Aboriginal peoples be much smaller than the federal government was in the practice of making. As Cole Harris shows, the provincial stance ultimately won out, ignoring the question of Aboriginal title—the question Nisga'a most needed answered when considering what their status would be in the new unfolding order.<sup>76</sup>

Surveying of reserves in the Nass Valley began abruptly in October 1881. The provincial government felt no need to inform the Nisga'a of its policy or even what the term reserve meant before proceeding to measure them out, and expedited the process because of the situation's perceived urgency. Emerging K'amksiiwaa projects to establish commercial fisheries on the Nass and Skeena Rivers threatened to precede the

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<sup>76</sup> Cole Harris, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance, and Reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002).

marking of reserves, and so Israel Powell, Superintendent of Indian Affairs for British Columbia, instructed the Indian Reserve Commissioner Peter O'Reilly to make a late-season visit to the Nass with the intention of marking out reserves for the Nisga'a.<sup>77</sup> Although most Nisga'a had not yet returned from a summer of working at distant canneries on the Fraser River, O'Reilly went ahead with his task, and when inclement weather stopped him felt that he had completed his work.<sup>78</sup> Yet the reaction of both the Nisga'a and the Tsimshian to his reserves proved the matter was anything but settled. In the ensuing years Nisga'a would repeatedly note to government officials how O'Reilly had almost surreptitiously gone about his business, and how they had not understood what was taking place. Whereas the Native populations in the Interior and further south along the coast of the province had had a few decades to adjust to the demands of a new settler society, along the Nass and Skeena O'Reilly's hasty visit occurred simultaneously with the first trickling in of K'amksiiwaa settlers and the establishment of industrial canneries.<sup>79</sup> White settlement within the Nass Valley occurred relatively later and was markedly lighter than in other parts of British Columbia.<sup>80</sup> In the span of fewer than five years the first white settlers—a handful of men mainly focused on commercial opportunities—arrived and managed to preempt valuable parcels of land, followed by a surveyor who the Nisga'a later learned was acting for a government keen to set limits on their lands in order to alienate them from all that that now lay outside their stakes.

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<sup>77</sup> Cole Harris, *Making Native Space*, 174.

<sup>78</sup> Later the Nisga'a Land Committee described how the reserves were created: "The reserve was laid off in the summer when everyone was away on the Fraser, fishing, except a few old chiefs. They objected. The White chief persisted. They were courteous—what could they do?—they asked that the lines might follow the tops of the mountains and so embrace all our land," "The Indian Land Question: Interview with Land Committee," *Hagaga* (May 1910).

<sup>79</sup> Cole Harris, *Making Native Space*, 184.

<sup>80</sup> The 1881 census recorded 3,086 people living in the lower Skeena and Nass region, identifying almost all of them as Indians (2,893 or ninety-four percent), and the remainder as Chinese (101) and white (92). Cited in Harris, *Landing Native Fisheries*, 140.

The Nisga'a took issue with this imposed reserve system on a number of levels. With regard to O'Reilly's purported complete survey of all lands and resources used by Aboriginal peoples for their sustenance, Nisga'a pointed out how it fell short of adequately recognizing the extent of the ang'ooskw held by their different houses. Whilst defending the sufficiency of his surveying work at a meeting of Nisga'a and Tsimshian delegates with Premier Smithe in 1887, O'Reilly explained that "Every inlet is claimed by some one, and were I to include all these, it would virtually declare the whole country a reserve; this arrangement I could not justify." Premier Smithe in effect recognized that the new reserves denied the Nisga'a much of their lands when he expressed his puzzlement at why the Nisga'a would want to hold onto their hunting grounds, explaining that these were vestiges of their former state "when they were little better than wild animals that rove over the hills," and required a large amount of land.<sup>81</sup>

Transcripts from meetings of delegations with provincial and federal officials and from hearings held to address grievances attest to the Nisga'a's strong dislike for the term "reserve."<sup>82</sup> The suggestion of impermanency they detected in it was not without basis. They cited the recent sale of the Songhees Reserve near Victoria as an example of the institution's inability to keep Aboriginal lands from falling into white hands, and

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<sup>81</sup> British Columbia, *Report of Conferences between the Provincial Government and Indian Delegates from Fort Simpson and Naas River* (Victoria: Government Printing Office, 1887), 256-7. The variation between native claims to land and the provincial government's judgement of how much land the different native societies of British Columbia required was immense. Douglas Harris writes that when the reserve allotment process finished in the 1920s only slightly more than one third of one percent of the land area of the province had been designated as Indian reserve, *Landing Native Fisheries*, 5.

<sup>82</sup> Two government commissions visited the Nisga'a and other Aboriginal peoples after the surveying of reserves in the late nineteenth century in an attempt to address native opposition to colonial land policies. Published transcriptions of their proceedings can be found in British Columbia, *Papers Relating to the Commission Appointed to Enquire into the Condition of the Indians of the North-West Coast* (Victoria: Government Printing Office, 1888), and British Columbia, *Report of the Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for the Province of British Columbia* (Victoria: Government Printing Office, 1916). The latter was more popularly known as the McKenna-McBride Royal Commission, which toured the province from 1912-16.

demanded recognition of Nisga'a title before any talk of marking off land for K'amksiiwaa. More fundamentally, Nisga'a chiefs questioned how land they had inherited from their ancestors could have come to be owned by the Queen, asking government officials to name the chief who had given it to her. Having learned of the federal government's policy elsewhere in Canada of creating treaties with Aboriginal peoples and negotiating the transfer of title, Nisga'a began to frame their petitions using these terms in the years after their lands were surveyed into reserves. The delegation that travelled to Victoria in 1887 to meet with Smithe and O'Reilly asked for a treaty. Smithe asked where they had gotten their ideas about a treaty and asserted that their demands for one were "misguided," as there were no provisions for one in either English or Dominion law of which he was aware.<sup>83</sup> Their meeting did lead to the creation of a joint Provincial-Dominion commission that visited the north coast later that year to hear Indian grievances. In keeping with provincial policy, Attorney General Alex Davie gave specific instructions to Commissioners Cornwall and Planta to be careful "to discountenance, should it arise, any claim of Indian title to Provincial lands."<sup>84</sup> Sure enough, when the commissioners reached the Nass, Nisga'a at the Methodist mission of Laxgalts'ap greeted them with demands for recognition of title. Remaining true to their instructions, the commissioners tried to assuage discontent by arranging for O'Reilly to revisit the Nass to adjust the reserves he had so hastily drawn up.

While the provincial government refused to countenance the question of Nisga'a title, its policies opened the door for the non-native settler interested in staking out a claim to land in the valley. In the early twentieth century boosters promoted the Nass

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<sup>83</sup> British Columbia, *Report of Conferences*, 255-56.

<sup>84</sup> British Columbia, *Papers Relating to the Commission Appointed*, 416.

Valley to prospective settlers as a place of abundant fertile land available for the taking.<sup>85</sup>

White resettlement was expected and anticipated as much by promoters of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway, which upon its completion in 1914 ran south of Nisga'a lands along the Skeena River to its terminus at the new coastal port city of Prince Rupert, as by missionaries like James McCullagh, who encouraged the members of his mission at Aiyansh to grow produce for an incipient market. An inrush of homesteaders into the valley did occur in these years, primarily around the upriver villages of Aiyansh and Gitlaxt'aamiks and along the adjacent Tseax River. This new population peaked around 1910. That year saw the publication of a number of remarkable pamphlets professing to offer a Nisga'a perspective on "The Indian Land Question" from the Aiyansh mission press.<sup>86</sup> It also found the Nisga'a increasingly aggressive, intimidating and generally in "an ugly mood," at least in the eyes of would-be settlers and government authorities.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Harris, *Making Native Space*, writes that while Aboriginal peoples were not allowed to preempt land after 1866, they had the legal right to purchase Crown land when it entered the market, although this too was removed by an amendment to the Provincial Land Act in the early twentieth century, 224. On boosterism see Prince Rupert Board of Trade, *Wonderful Farm Area in the Far Famed Naas Valley* (Victoria: Thos. R. Cusack Press, [ca. 1912]). Richard McBride, Premier of British Columbia in these years, touted the central and northern districts of the province as "New British Columbia," a vast area that the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway promised to open up to settlement, "The Development of The New British Columbia," *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 13 December 1908.

<sup>86</sup> "The Indian Land Question: Interview with Land Committee, Naas River" *Hagaga* (May 1910); Indian Land Committee, *Indian Protest Against White Settlers Coming into the Aiyansh Valley, Naas River, British Columbia* (Aiyansh: 1910), located in BCA, Attorney General Correspondence, 1872-1937, 1950, Box 18, File 1. The use of the Aiyansh mission press to disseminate the Nisga'a stance on the resettlement of their lands raises interesting questions about the process of missionization as well as of Nisga'a relations with their missionaries, which will be explored in part in Chapter Three. Suffice it to say here that Indian agent Charles Perry believed James McCullagh to be behind the agitation, although the relationship was more complex. The Nisga'a's protest drew media attention in the newspapers of nearby Prince Rupert and the cities of southern British Columbia. For a sampling, see "Naas Red's Protest: Issue Formal Objection to White Land Stakers Entering Country," *The Evening Empire*, 27 May 1910; "Indian Point of View: Why Native Inhabitants of Naas Country Object to White Settlement," *The Evening Empire*, 30 May 1910; "Redskins Talk of War if Land is Taken," *Vancouver Province*, 2 June 1910.

<sup>87</sup> Prospective settler Robert MacDonald placed a report with Chief Constable Wynn in Prince Rupert describing the confrontation he had had while trying to enter the Nass by evading Nisga'a: "They are in an ugly mood towards all white settlers and say they will cut down all locators [sic] posts. There will be no settlers get into the country this year is [sic] the government does not come to the rescue," Wynn, Prince Rupert, to Frederick Hussey, Victoria, 10 June 1910, BCA, Attorney General Correspondence, 1872-1937, 1950, Box 18, File 3.

The prospect of violence seemed very real to the latter. In the final days of 1911 reports circulated of an “uprising” in the valley against white settlers.<sup>88</sup> McCullagh used a new telegraph line to summon a posse of provincial police up from the coast “to restore sober conditions” among the upriver Nisga’a, but the issue was clearly about more than intoxication. Indian agent Charles Perry reported that the people of Aiyansh “gave as their excuse for their intemperate condition that they were discouraged because their land troubles were not being settled quickly enough for them.” When Perry and the Chief of Provincial Police met with the chiefs of nearby Gitlaxt’aamiks the latter told them “that they did not want any favors from the Government until the land question was settled,” including a proposed new school.<sup>89</sup> Tensions cooled with the outbreak of World War I, when most of the homesteaders left to enlist and those who survived the war did not return—proving to be more driftwood that had only momentarily stopped in the valley.

As the Nisga’a struggle to have their ownership of traditional lands recognized met with an entrenched refusal in British Columbia, they increasingly directed their efforts to Ottawa and even London. Delegations to the Canadian capital did not succeed in moving a federal government which, despite its fiduciary responsibility for Aboriginal peoples, was not eager to strain the relationship with its Pacific province by interfering with its control over the allocation of land within its borders. Eventually the Nisga’a sought out the possibility of obtaining “British justice.” At a large meeting in Vancouver in September 1909 representatives from virtually every native group along the coast of British Columbia drafted a petition to King Edward VII asserting their right to “an

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<sup>88</sup> Charles Perry, Metlakatla, to Secretary, Ottawa, 12 January 1912, LAC, Indian Affairs, Nass Agency, Correspondence and Agent’s Reports, 1910-15, vol. 1662.

<sup>89</sup> Dominion of Canada, *Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Year Ended March 31, 1912*, 263; Charles Perry, Metlakatla, to Secretary, Department of Indian Affairs, 12 January 1912, LAC, Indian Affairs, Nass Agency, Correspondence and Agent’s Reports, 1910-15, vol. 1662.

interest” in all the lands of the province and requesting that the king submit the issue directly to the judicial committee of his Privy Council for a decision on the legitimacy of their claim.<sup>90</sup> In 1913 the Nisga’a prepared their own petition for the judicial committee of the Privy Council with the help of Toronto-based lawyer and Anglican clergyman Arthur O’Meara. This document, which became known as the Nisga’a Petition, challenged the provincial government’s refusal to recognize native title and held up the principles embodied in the Royal Proclamation of 1763, against which the laying out of reserves in Nisga’a lands was a clear contravention.<sup>91</sup> The appeal to British justice alarmed both the provincial and federal governments, which worked to ensure that the case for title never reached the judicial committee of the Privy Council. 1927 saw a special joint committee of the Senate and House of Commons inquire into the case for title and find unanimously against its existence. To enforce its finding the committee also recommended that any activity relating to the forwarding of land claims be “discountenanced.” An amendment to the Indian Act created a new section that effectively shut down all legal activity in support of land claims by banning Aboriginal people from raising funds to prosecute their claims.<sup>92</sup>

In spite of their distaste for it, the reserve system became a part of Nisga’a life in these years. Opposition to its imposition and inadequacy led only to an unsatisfying

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<sup>90</sup> “B.C. Indians Appeal to King,” *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 2 October 1909.

<sup>91</sup> The petition was published shortly afterward as *The Nishga petition to His Majesty's Privy Council: a record of interviews with the Government of Canada, together with related documents* (Conference of Friends of the Indians of British Columbia, 1915).

<sup>92</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the land question in British Columbia see Paul Tennant, *Aboriginal Peoples and Politics: The Indian Land Question in British Columbia, 1849-1989* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990). Hamar Foster offers an assessment of the initial campaign of the Nisga’a and other native peoples of British Columbia for recognition of Aboriginal title in “We Are Not O’Meara’s Children: Law, Lawyers, and the First Campaign for Aboriginal Title in British Columbia, 1908-28,” in *Let Right be Done: Aboriginal Title, the Calder Case, and the Future of Indigenous Rights*, ed. Hamar Foster, Heather Raven, and Jeremy Webber (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007), 61-84.

royal commission that toured the province adjusting reserve boundaries but refusing to address the fundamental grievances of the Nisga'a and other Aboriginal peoples, while the first campaign to address these deeper issues resulted in Parliament effectively making such activity illegal. Nisga'a had little choice but to try to live within a system that along with other colonial processes worked to sever their connections to the land and their identity as Nisga'a. The desire of the Nisga'a to come to terms with the newcomers impeding upon their lives, to find some mutually acceptable arrangement that would achieve the balance on which coexistence could potentially thrive—whether expressed in the idiom of a treaty or otherwise—remained unsatisfied in this period.

A primary aim of this chapter has been to set the story of Christianization that follows within a much larger history of being Nisga'a that stretches, as Nisga'a often say, *hli daa la'ooy*, “since time immemorial.” The necessarily brief sketches presented here offer a perspective on change in Nisga'a culture, revealing that change is part of what it means to be Nisga'a. Transformations that occurred during what we might call the Nisga'a's long nineteenth century, to borrow a phrase coined by historian Eric Hobsbawm to describe another period in another place, were particularly intense but in an important sense not new.<sup>93</sup> Nineteenth-century Nisga'a were far from residents of some timeless abode. They approached pressures and opportunities with two objects in mind: the need to carry forward the most important aspects of their inherited culture—practices and principles whose efficacy had proven their worth—and the potential benefits to be

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<sup>93</sup> Hobsbawm explores this concept in his trilogy of nineteenth-century European history, *The Age of Revolution: Europe: 1789–1848* (New York: New American Library, 1962), *The Age of Capital, 1848–1875* (New York: Scribner, 1975), and *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987).

had from embracing new encounters with outsiders, be they human or more than human, that emerged with the ever-changing present.

## Chapter 3

# Mottled Daylight: The Coming of the Law and Heavenly Things

Much of the Christianization of Nisga'a society during the six decades examined in this study (1860-1920) occurred through the different contemporary civilizing projects of *lipleet* (missionaries), colonial and later government authorities, and the Nisga'a themselves. In the last few decades of the nineteenth century the Nisga'a and other Aboriginal peoples of the Northwest Coast commenced an earnest program to improve themselves by exploring and adopting aspects of Euro-Canadian culture. Anthropologist Michael Harkin has investigated how the Heiltsuk transformed themselves “from the most feared First Nation on the British Columbia coast to paragons of Victorian virtues of hard work, prosperity, and progress.” Harkin nonetheless argues that things were not as they appeared at first sight. Beneath this remade society “lay subtle strategies of resistance; in the end the dialogues [with Euro-Canadian society] were about power.”<sup>1</sup>

With respect to the Nisga'a, their engagement with Christianizing and civilizing projects was also about power. The power with which they were concerned, however, was that possessed by the K'amksiiwaa—one which, according to Nisga'a understandings, was not so easily classified as “political,” or for that matter,

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Harkin, *The Heiltsuks: Dialogues of Culture and History on the Northwest Coast* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), x.

“supernatural.” As beneficiaries of Txeemsim’s improvements to their valley homeland and a proud people who both feasted and strictly upheld their *ayuuk*, or laws, nineteenth-century Nisga’a knew much about the value of civilizing processes. Thus when they, like the Heiltsuk, embarked on their own “civilizing” projects and participated in ones intended for them by others, it was with the belief that the K’amksiiwaa world had much to offer that might be used to better their lives. During their active incorporation of aspects of the newcomers’ world the Nisga’a did not always clearly reject their liplet’s, or more generally the K’amksiiwaa’s, logic and authority, or see in their offers of assistance only a duplicitous attempt to subdue them and rob them of their lands. Rather, in pursuing these civilizing and Christianizing projects, turn-of-the-century Nisga’a were more likely to take their truth claims seriously and, where necessary, remind newcomers of the potential that lay in their increasingly shared ideals of law and Christianity if they were taken to heart.

### **“What is Your Knowledge (Ganwilxo’oskw)?”**

The enthusiasm that marked Nisga’a engagement with the different Christianities that were becoming available to them over the course of the nineteenth century cannot be adequately understood without reference to a cultural disposition that informed their stance. This orientation can be described as an openness to new knowledge that had the potential to improve life. One of my interviewees, the late Jacob McKay (Bayt Neekhl), pointed out to me the significance of this cultural priority in shaping Nisga’a responses to Christianity and new and initially foreign ideas and objects more generally. Like other Nisga’a with whom I spoke, he mentioned the Nisga’a’s reputation for dealing severely with outsiders who tried to muscle in on their territory, a recurring theme in the history of

a people inhabiting a valley rich in resources. Yet this was not the only Nisga'a response to the new and foreign. K'amksiiwaa in general, and lipleet in particular, were welcomed and shown hospitality. McKay's discussion of this contrast is worth citing at length for its articulation of a Nisga'a philosophy that was key to explaining their approach to Christianity:

Strange people had been seen at the top end of the Nass River, and strange boats that have come in: traders, fur traders, and then the big ships with tall sails. There are some beautiful stories about that. But the most intriguing point for me is, being as warlike, like any other First Nations at that time in our history, we repelled the Haidas, the invaders, invaders from the inlands, from the coast, and other directions in our history. And that's well documented. We didn't give an inch. So the Nisga'as are well known for that, that if somebody comes in and touches the women and children in any way, shape or form without express permission of the chieftains, they pay a heavy price. And yet when these strange people came into contact with my forefathers, they listened to them. They spoke a different way . . . and it was strange. They didn't understand it but they had interpreters, Tsimshian interpreters. They had traders, and a lot of our people who knew the . . . trade language. And they used those people to find out more. . . .

[F]irst what they want to know is, what can they offer us? What do you bring to better our lives? And this is the exact question that my grandfather expressed. He said very clearly, "What is your knowledge? What type of knowledge can we use? Can we use it? How do you make these big ships?"<sup>2</sup> When they saw the missionaries coming around in the lower Ank'idaa around Git'iks area there, they came in when they saw the people gathering on the shore. They knelt on the ice. There was about a foot of water on the ice at that time, and they started with a prayer before they came ashore to meet our people. And they asked for the chiefs through interpreters. They gave the chiefs some gifts, and all they asked in return was to be fed. And our people fed them, gave them dry clothing. And our people said, "Who are you? Where did you come from? What have you brought? Can we use anything . . . that you have?" Meaning in material, I guess, and intelligence, to better the lives of the Nisga'a, because that's one of the basic foundations, foundation philosophies of the Nisga'a, in that they have adopted the philosophy of *Sayt k'ilim goot*, the philosophy where it says, "Life, the secrets of a successful life, lies within education."<sup>3</sup> And that particular philosophy's, you know, expressed in many ways nowadays. But those forbearers of ours, they firmly believed that through education we can learn to make a better

<sup>2</sup> "Aguhl wilas ganwilxo'oskwhl daxyugwin?"

<sup>3</sup> "Ts'im ganwilaak'ils wil luu-sisgihl gandidils ts'im ganwilaak'ils."

way of life for everybody, for the Nisga'as, get along better, provide for your families of such.<sup>4</sup>

There was and is then, according to McKay, a very pragmatic—even opportunistic—dynamic within Nisga'a culture that shaped its response to that which lay outside it. In this view every encounter with the new or strange presented an opening. The key in such encounters was to be strong and develop an eye for what might bring benefit to oneself and one's people, as McKay explained elsewhere in our interview:

[T]he expectation of my forefathers is that when a stranger comes among us, he or she will be asked, "What—where have you been? What have you been doing?" to see if what she knows—he knows—will be helpful for us. In our spiritual lives, or our—well, the material side of things that we can use to make things a little easier for the families—that's always a search. That's number one in my training.<sup>5</sup>

Echoes of this stance toward the new and initially foreign can be found in Nisga'a *adaawak* (histories), particularly those that relate how a house came to acquire its crests. These stories of encounters with supernatural beings suggest an ongoing receptivity to new sources of supernatural power. Within them the new is depicted as a source of both risk and opportunity.

Arguably, this stance, or wager, informed Nisga'a responses to the range of options that were becoming available to them as their world and that of the K'amksiiwaa came into greater contact. Nisga'a were keen participants in building new economies with these newcomers, seeking out opportunities to partake in the fur trade and later the emerging capitalist economy, largely as waged labourers. The many changes of the Nisga'a's nineteenth century were dramatic, and correctly have been understood as corrosive of their cultural tradition. Yet when understood from the perspective of this

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<sup>4</sup> Jacob McKay (Bayt Neeqhl), interview by Nicholas May, New Aiyansh, 18 June 2008.

<sup>5</sup> McKay, interview.

philosophy they can and should be seen as themselves being part of the Nisga'a cultural tradition. Akin to their ancestors before them and descendants like McKay, nineteenth-century Nisga'a were on the lookout for new sources of knowledge, skills and wealth that would improve their lot. This orientation tipped them toward a path of active engagement with powerful newcomers, even as the K'amksiiwaa worked to turn their interaction into a constrictive embrace.

### **A Profusion of Promoters**

Nisga'a society became host to a plethora of Christian promoters in the decades after lay missionary William Duncan first visited the Nass in 1860, as Nisga'a both welcomed those offering new knowledge and themselves took up the task of promoting its diffusion through their society. The Protestant Christianities that missionaries and Aboriginal peoples began to import into the Nass Valley after mid-century quickly found local patrons. In the years leading up to the opening of the first CMS mission on the river in 1864, Nisga'a visiting Duncan at Fort Simpson and then Metlakatla made clear their strong desire to procure their own mission, and willingness to support the missionary if he came to them. Duncan noted these visits in his journal, including one of a Nisga'a chief and party to the fort in March 1861 who told the liplet that they were continually asking when he was coming "to teach about our good Father and to make our hearts good." To prove their eagerness the chief told Duncan they would provide him with food and firewood and take no pay, and that they were also willing to move to a new site and "leave off the heathen customs" if he came.<sup>6</sup> The recurrence of such requests by Nisga'a chiefs, which were repeated to Methodist ministers in the 1870s, raises the question of

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<sup>6</sup> Duncan, Journal, 7 March 1861, William Duncan fonds.

why they were so anxious to see these Christianities flourish among their people. From our vantage point, entrenched as it is in the aftermaths of British colonialism, it can be difficult to imagine how in these early heady days the advent of a Christian mission could hold the promise of real improvement in their lives for Nisga'a and other Aboriginal peoples. As Ashis Nandy has put it, this was the allure of modern colonialism to those colonized by it: the new vistas it opened up seemed to promise a better world.<sup>7</sup>

These would-be patrons aimed to secure a lipleet, or as their requests put it, a “teacher,” so that their people could be taught the knowledge he had to offer. This goal of acquiring access to new knowledge and expertise was in keeping with a chief's sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of his house. As with the new trade goods that had begun to flow into the valley less than a century before, chiefs strove to obtain direct access to new Christian teachings through K'amksiiwaa specialists versus being dependent on Tsimshian intermediaries for this knowledge. Some Nisga'a chiefs who wooed lipleet in these early years look to have viewed their arrival in the valley as an end in itself. Kadounaha was one such chief. While it was his invitation that led Duncan to first visit the Nass in 1860—the missionary's first trip beyond Fort Simpson's palisade since arriving three years earlier—and he found the chief “dancing for joy” when he finally came, Kadounaha did not see it personally necessary to join the CMS mission at Ankida'a when it eventually opened four years later. Though supportive of the mission, he nonetheless stopped short of the conversion the missionaries sought. His reasoning came to light during one long talk with the lay missionary Robert Cunningham.

Kadounaha explained that he wished to join the mission, but did not want to give up his

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<sup>7</sup> Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), ix.

place as a chief, highlighting a tension for chiefs who wished to incorporate the new knowledge that would run through the period of Christianization.<sup>8</sup>

In the Nisga'a's search for suitable teachers the whiteness of the lipleet was important. Amid these early years of Christianization native teachers, almost exclusively Tsimshian, outnumbered the few K'amksiiwaa that the Church Missionary Society could send to its North Pacific Mission—but there was a clear preference among the Nisga'a for the latter. One of the three men who opened the first CMS mission on the Nass River was the young Tsimshian Robert Dundas, whose fluency in Sim'alga<sub>x</sub>, or the Nisga'a language, afforded him a pivotal role in delivering sermons. Nisga'a strongly disliked listening to the Tsimshian preacher, some explaining to a puzzled Doolan that they would attend the service if he or Cunningham spoke, but that they would not come to hear Dundas.<sup>9</sup> Dundas's youth and probable lack of status likely factored into the negative response he received from his Nisga'a hearers, but his status as a Tsimshian appears to have been the most important. An example from another north coast people in these years supports this view. When the CMS proposed that the Tsimshian David Leask take up the Queen Charlotte Island mission, William Collison, who had opened the mission, explained that he would be of little use to the Haida, as they considered the Tsimshian “only equal to themselves and consequently would not listen to him.”<sup>10</sup> Like their neighbours, the lipleet's foreignness was key to the Nisga'a, an assurance that they had someone fluent in and connected to the K'amksiiwaa world and the knowledge it had to offer them.

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<sup>8</sup> Doolan, Naas River, to Duncan, 3 January 1865, William Duncan fonds.

<sup>9</sup> Doolan, Nass, 22 May 1865, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

<sup>10</sup> Collison, Metlakatla, 2 July 1878, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

As much as Nisga'a insisted that their lipleet be K'amksiiwaa, they also expected them to become part of their society. While the records left behind by missionaries who served in the Nass often depict agents of two Protestant missionary societies eager to stake out native locales across the north coast ahead of each other, they also tell a story of Aboriginal peoples connecting themselves to "the tribe of the White man far away," as the chiefs of Aiyansh put it in a letter to the Parent Committee of the CMS in London.<sup>11</sup> We only know of one case where a lipleet was formally adopted into a tribe (*pdeek*), and this occurred through a misidentification of shared kinship. Yet this example nonetheless demonstrates the willingness of the Nisga'a to incorporate these new religious specialists into their society. Robert Tomlinson's son and daughter-in-law later related the story, which began when their father was an intern in Dublin and had marked all his clothing with a black dove to distinguish it from that of others. A boy living at the mission house in Gingolx was astonished to discover this crest on one of the lipleet's shirts while doing the laundry one day. He ran to his house to tell his family that the missionary was also a Raven. Soon a "whole troupe of Ravens" was at the mission house, where the chief ascertained through Tomlinson's replies that he was indeed a fellow Raven. At a subsequent feast the Ravens publicly recognized his status as one of them. Nor did they take this newfound kinship lightly; several times this chief saved Tomlinson's life, not allowing him to be touched.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Chiefs and men of Aiyansh, address "To The Chiefs, Wise men and Saints of the tribe of the White man far away," translated by James B. McCullagh, [8 March 1887], CMS fonds, C.2./O.2.

<sup>12</sup> See Robert Tomlinson [Jr.], interview by Imbert Orchard, Ketchikan, 1955-59, BCA, and Roxy Tomlinson, interview, for different versions of this story. Tomlinson's status as a Raven may have helped to save him from harm in at least one recorded instance. Although he arrived on the upper Nass several years after the event, in McCullagh's telling of Tomlinson's controversial trip to Gitlaxt'aamiks with lumber to build a schoolhouse in December 1878 Txaatk'anlaxhatkw saved the missionary from the malevolent intentions of the chief presiding over a meeting with him through his timely intervention, *Red*

Whereas the kinship status of other missionaries who spent time on the Nass is less clear, what is unmistakable is the attachment Nisga'a developed to particular K'amksiiwaa promoters who worked among them. The strength of these connections became most patent when a lipleet left. Keeping a lipleet was no easy task. The missionary societies that tried to keep their stations staffed tended to view their "agents" as interchangeable, and moved them around according to their own priorities. Individual lipleet also had their own preferences and aspirations which, in an organization like the CMS that spanned the globe, saw men and later women migrate between missions as distant as Ceylon, Uganda and the North Pacific, often in search of a "suitable climate." Perhaps more so than their predecessors given advances in transportation, the nineteenth-century missionaries who came to the Nass Valley were translocal figures, circulating among the outposts of a globalizing religion. In this sense they were no different from the other K'amksiiwaa who drifted in and out of the valley.<sup>13</sup>

All of this movement frustrated Nisga'a whose lipleet left after they had just seemed to settle into a mutual working relationship. Nowhere was this more evident than at the Gingolx mission, where villagers went through a number of missionaries in short order after 1879. In that year Robert Tomlinson left to pursue his dream of opening an agricultural mission inland with the Gitksan after twelve years' residence with the villagers. As Tomlinson prepared to depart the people requested a meeting, at which speech after speech was given expressing concern that the village would decline if he left,

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*Indians I Have Known* (London: Church Missionary Society, n.d.), 6. T̓xaatk'anlaxhatkw was not only sympathetic to the new teachings but also a Raven chief.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Doolan, the first resident missionary on the Nass, embodied this kind of movement across sometimes widely different localities. Doolan returned home to Bristol after his father's death in 1864 to fulfill a promise to his mother. Dissatisfied with parish life in East London, he soon found himself working as a missionary again, only among a largely Roman Catholic population in Seville, Spain, Doolan, Hazelwood House, Romeford Road, Stratford, Essex, to Duncan, 3 February 1872, William Duncan fonds..

for they had determined that his replacement, Henry Schutt, “was not fit to manage the place.”<sup>14</sup> Tomlinson agreed to stay on to ease the transition but Schutt came and went, as did a number of successors, none staying for more than a few years. By the time William Collison was assigned to the station in 1884 the Gingolx villagers’ discontent was unmistakable. Only a few young men came to help him with his luggage, leaving behind on the dock what they could not carry—instead of the typical practice of the whole village coming out to greet the lipleet. At a meeting that followed the Gingolx asked Collison to promise to stay with them all his life, a commitment he delicately shied away from.<sup>15</sup> Collison’s long tenure—he ended up staying at Gingolx until his death in 1922—and no doubt his competence, seem to have been just the sort of qualities the villagers sought from a lipleet. Yet the habit of the Bishop of Caledonia after CMS missions were incorporated into a new diocese in 1879 of shuffling missionaries to where they were most needed worked against such relationships. When Collison left Gingolx on furlough in 1888 rumours began to circulate that upon his return the bishop planned to reassign him to another community. In a short but detailed letter to the CMS, Chief George Kinsadak listed every lipleet they had been given since Arthur Doolan twenty-four years earlier, observing that each had left before “finish[ing] his work.” The letter blamed the bishop for removing all the men who had been posted since his arrival on the coast and, noting the recent departure of some eight hundred Tsimshian from Metlakatla with

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<sup>14</sup> Tomlinson, Kincolith, to Duncan, 6 May 1879, William Duncan fonds. Tomlinson’s wife, Alice, also recounted this meeting in her journal, 25 April 1879, BCA, Alice Tomlinson fonds.

<sup>15</sup> Collison, Kincolith, 22 February 1884, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

William Duncan to begin a new life in Alaska free of Anglican interference, concluded with a warning that if Collison did not return the people of Gingolx might do the same.<sup>16</sup>

Despite Gingolx's troubles, exemplified in 1896 when the village flew its flag at half mast when it heard that Collison would not be returning to them, it was one of the more fortunate Nisga'a communities when it came to securing a lipleet. The village of Laxgalts'ap or Greenville had difficulty finding any missionary to stay with them after the co-founder and namesake of their Methodist community, Alfred Green, left in 1889 after twelve years' work there. A succession of religious K'amksiiwaa flowed through the village, never staying more than a few years, and by the turn of the century the Wesleyan Missionary Society was having difficulty filling the post. When the efforts by chiefs Arthur Calder and Moses McKay in Vancouver in 1904 to commit the Methodist Church to sending a missionary proved fruitless, CMS missionaries on the Nass River eventually yielded to the strong overtures Laxgalts'ap had been making to be converted into an Anglican village.<sup>17</sup> Upriver, the village of Gitwinksihlkw justifiably felt itself to be the most neglected of all the major Nisga'a villages by the two Protestant missionary societies that claimed the valley as their mission field. Both the Anglicans and Methodists deemed the village too small to warrant its own clergy, a calculation that seemed oblivious to what it meant for a community to have its own lipleet with church

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<sup>16</sup> George Kinsadak, Kincolith, Naas mouth, 30 January 1888, CMS fonds, C.2./O.2. Kinsadak held the Wolf chiefly name Gints'aadax, an anglicized version of which formed his surname on his conversion to Christianity, a common practice of the CMS on the north coast.

<sup>17</sup> McCullagh, "1905 Aiyansh Annual Letter from Revd. J.B. McCullagh, J.P. for private circulation among friends of his Work at Home," Bodleian Library. During his visit to Laxgalts'ap in the fall of 1891 J.F. Betts, the President of the British Columbia Conference of the Methodist Church attended a long council meeting in the mission house during which various speakers rehearsed the circumstances "where things began to go wrong." Betts replied that it was impossible to promise that missionaries would not be removed sometimes, and warned the village that if they did not try to act in harmony with the society and the Methodist Church the people who gave money to the mission every year would begin to believe that they did not want the Gospel, "Along the Line," *The Missionary Outlook* (April 1892): 53.

and school. Around the year 1910 McCullagh managed to secure an Anglican layman named W.A. Myers for the village. After a few years, however, he abandoned the work, attempting instead to try his hand as a settler by preempting part of the community's land.<sup>18</sup> Eventually in 1925 after years without a lipleet or church the village invited one of their own—a Gitwinksihlkw man named William Moore, who had not long before joined the Salvation Army. This was the beginning, as Moore's daughter Grace Azak explained to me, of the community's history as a Salvation Army village, a story just emerging at the close of the period of Christianization examined in this study.<sup>19</sup>

William Moore's introduction of the Salvation Army to Gitwinksihlkw exemplifies the critical work of Nisga'a and other native promoters in bringing new Christian knowledge and practices to the Nass Valley and beyond. As valued as the white lipleet were, the task of spreading the newly arrived Christianities was never solely in their hands. Promoters emerged in virtually every village almost immediately, individuals whose own enthusiasm for the new teachings quickly transformed into a sense of urgency that it be spread to others. Significantly, these native teachers brought the new knowledge to remote communities, often long before they were evangelized by lipleet. The role of Aboriginal promoters in interpreting the new religion to their fellows

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<sup>18</sup> The feeling of betrayal among the people of Gitwinksihlkw by Myers was palpable. Chief John Moore, for example, brought this grievance before the commissioners of the McKenna-McBride Commission when they were in the village on 7 October 1915, explaining "we quite believed in him to be a sincere and true man and he worked in our church for three years; we kept him in our houses for three years. We fed him, we boarded him, and our women did all his washing for nothing, and after all this was done for him he went down to Prince Rupert and made application for a piece of land belonging to us right nearby which he now occupies to our disadvantage. . . . Nearly every week we used to go down to him asking him to come back to us and work in our church and also give up living on that piece of land but he would not listen to us," "Meeting with the Kitwilluthsilt Band or Tribe of Indians on Thursday October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1915," BCA, Canada, Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for the Province of British Columbia (1913-1916), GR-1995.

<sup>19</sup> Grace Azak, interview.

has gained increasing attention from scholars in recent years.<sup>20</sup> Many of the earliest native evangelists were Tsimshian. Their coastal homeland placed them in a preeminent position when it came to contact with the K'amksiiwaa world, and their exposure to Christianities was no exception. Arthur Wellington Clah, who taught Duncan Tsimshian during his first days at Fort Simpson, was living in his Nisga'a wife Daaks's village of Gitlaxt'aamiks in the early 1860s, where he both traded and gave Christian instruction.<sup>21</sup> After their conversion at a camp meeting at Chilliwack in June 1873 two younger Tsimshian men, William Henry Pierce and George Edgar, were at the forefront in bringing Methodism to the north coast. Among the many communities to which they carried their new faith as "local preachers" for the Wesleyan Missionary Society were the upriver villages of Gitwinksihlkw and Gitlaxt'aamiks in the 1870s. Pierce can be credited as the first Methodist to arrive at the new Laxgalts'ap mission in 1877 after Nisga'a in the surrounding villages asked the society to open a mission among them.<sup>22</sup>

By the 1870s Nisga'a were equally involved in diffusing the newly available knowledge to other villages in the valley and those beyond. Some worked under the aegis of the two missionary societies active on the north coast, opening new mission stations in often remote locales. Joshua Harvey and his wife, Christians from Gingolx,

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<sup>20</sup> With respect to the north coast, see Susan Neylan, *The Heavens Are Changing: Nineteenth-Century Protestant Missions and Tsimshian Christianity* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003); Peggy Brock, "Two Indigenous Evangelists: Moses Tjalkabota and Arthur Wellington Clah" *The Journal of Religious History* 27, no. 3 (October 2003): 348-66.

<sup>21</sup> Weeks before Doolan and Cunningham opened the first CMS mission on the Nass, Duncan reported that Clah had come down to Metlakatla from Gitlaxt'aamiks bringing seven young men with him, in Duncan's words, "that they might witness for themselves the things of which they had heard him speak," Duncan, Metlakatla, 23 June 1864, CMS fonds, C.2./O. Our knowledge of Clah is rather rich owing to the fact that for nearly fifty years he kept a daily diary. See Peggy Brock, *The Many Voyages of Arthur Wellington Clah: A Tsimshian man on the Pacific Northwest Coast* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Pierce describes his opening of the Nass Mission at Laxgalts'ap in *From Potlatch to Pulpit: being the autobiography of the native missionary to the Indian tribes of the Northwest coast of British Columbia*, ed. Rev. J.P. Hicks (Vancouver: Vancouver Bindery, 1933), Chapter 4.

were two such workers. They evangelized the inhabitants of the remote Gitksan village of Gishgagass at the confluence of the Babine and Skeena Rivers for the better part of a decade. William Collison acknowledged their teaching as being largely responsible for the community's conversion to Christianity.<sup>23</sup> Other names recur in the historical record as significant players. A Gingolx man identified only as Arthur spent extended periods of time at the upriver villages of Gitlaxt'aamiks and Gitwinksihlkw, working at the intersection of the evangelizing impetus of his fellow villagers and CMS missionaries, and the repeated requests of chiefs in these villages for a resident teacher.<sup>24</sup> He appears to have moved down to Aiyansh with the nascent Christian community there, after some Nisga'a had broken off from Gitlaxt'aamiks and formed a settlement around an empty schoolhouse in 1879 (as we will see in Chapter Four). Arthur was likely instrumental in giving shape to the local Christianity that the lipleet James McCullagh found there upon his arrival in 1883. Patrick and Margaret, a couple also from Gingolx, were likewise active in these upriver communities, with Patrick reportedly conducting "hearty services" at Aiyansh between visits to Gitlaxt'aamiks for services and house-to-house visitations, while Margaret taught a day school at the former.<sup>25</sup> More examples could be given, but these few demonstrate the general zest for new knowledge among Nisga'a at this time.

A related phenomenon saw Nisga'a who had travelled to another village for Christian instruction returning home with great enthusiasm for sharing their new knowledge. Barney Derrick was one such individual. The Methodist missionary Alfred

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<sup>23</sup> William H. Collison, *In the Wake of the War Canoe: A stirring record of forty years' successful labour, peril & adventure amongst the savage Indian tribes of the Pacific coast, and the piratical head-hunting Haidas of the Queen Charlotte Islands, B.C.* (London: Seeley and Service, 1915), 302, 345.

<sup>24</sup> Tomlinson, Kincolith, Annual Letter, March 1879, CMS fonds, C.2./O; Collison, Kincolith, to Duncan, 23 April 1878, William Duncan fonds; Schutt, Kincolith, Annual Letter, 10 January 1881, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

<sup>25</sup> Schutt, Kincolith, Annual Letter, 10 January 1881, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

Green described Derrick on the occasion of his death in 1887 as “the leader of our little band of interior believers.” Upon his conversion some eight years earlier he had learned a few Gospel texts, bought a bell, then returned to his home village of Gitlaxt’aamiks. There he built a log house in which he held services, and being a poor reader managed to procure the assistance of a “local preacher” from Laxgalts’ap named David McKay. McKay helped the small group make a blackboard by mixing ash with salmon roe, on which he wrote the line “There is a fountain filled with blood” for the people to repeat over and over “till they could read and sing.”<sup>26</sup> The picture we get of these nascent Christianities is of their most rudimentary beginnings: a bell, a log house for a congregation to assemble in, and a preacher perhaps wielding a homemade blackboard with which to instruct. Yet as Peter Brown has argued for the Christianization of Europe, the “basic modules” of the Christianities spreading over the north coast at this time were relatively stable in their structure and travelled easily.<sup>27</sup> Through transferences like Derrick’s effort to set up the elements of his new faith in his home village, Christianities began to take root in the Nass.

Inclusion of a homemade blackboard in the Christianity Derrick attempted to bring home underscores how the great focus of these fledgling Christian communities—both the missions and more homegrown versions—was learning. The spread of Protestant Christianities through the valley that began in the mid-nineteenth century cannot be understood apart from their promise to open new knowledge with which they

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<sup>26</sup> Letter from Green, dated Greenville, 1 November 1887, in *The Missionary Outlook* (January 1888): 15. The line is from William Cowper’s hymn “Praise for the Fountain Opened.” Green does not mention Derrick’s village specifically as Gitlaxt’aamiks, but the distance he places it from Laxgalts’ap, twenty five miles, is similar to that given in his references to this village elsewhere. Green notes that the success of Derrick’s “little band” fluctuated, as “persecution” obliged them to move down to Laxgalts’ap for a time before returning, and some members “grew cold.”

<sup>27</sup> Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 15.

were entwined. Although physically unimpressive, the small log or frame schoolhouses that began to appear in Nisga'a villages in the 1860s were in these years more iconic of the "new way" missionaries offered than the more visually impressive carpenter Gothic churches that came later, the products of years of fundraising efforts and testaments to each community's growing faith. Lumber the people of Gingolx donated to begin a mission at Gitlaxt'aamiks in December 1878 was intended not for a church but a schoolhouse. As we will see, this building, which Tomlinson was forced to erect outside the village at a site called Aiyansh due to division in Gitlaxt'aamiks, became the nucleus of a new Christian community. Something of how closely Nisga'a identified the Christian missions with the instruction they offered can be seen in the name they gave to those who moved to them: "Gaschoolit," or "School People."<sup>28</sup>

The mission schools were an instance of a necessary overlapping of interests that, however partial or fraught with misunderstanding, ensured that the Christianities introduced to the Nass thrived. Through the efforts of numerous promoters schools were operating throughout the valley by the end of the 1870s, with some even receiving government funding. This last point reminds us that on one hand schools were key instruments in K'amksiiwaa attempts to assimilate Aboriginal peoples. Yet for the Nisga'a of all ages who worked to secure schools and attended them, they were something else. Nisga'a actively sought the knowledge the lipleet wished to impart. An image of the boy Ts'ak'aamaas racing downriver in a canoe with a friend from a feast in their village of Gitwinksihlkw upon the moment they heard news that two white teachers had arrived on the river is a compelling one. Doolan cited it in his first letter back to the

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<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Green, Naas River, 30 Sep 1884, in *The Missionary Outlook* (February 1885): 29; Green, Greenville, 11 Feb 1889 in *The Missionary Outlook* (May 1889): 79; McCullagh, Aiyansh, 8 March 1887, CMS fonds, C.2./O.2. McCullagh translates the term as "School-ers."

CMS after arriving on the north coast as an example of the Nisga'a's "anxiety" to learn "the Book," an eagerness whose motives he claimed not to understand but which he nonetheless embraced.<sup>29</sup> Interest continued as long as Nisga'a could be found without a school in their village. The ten young Gitlaxt'aamiks men who showed up at the Methodist mission in Laxgalts'ap in 1887 to ask for a schoolhouse, promising to do all the work if the missionary provided the material, were not atypical of Nisga'a youth at this time.<sup>30</sup>

As institutions intended to teach white ways, schools fit into a broader Nisga'a strategy of acquiring fluency in the K'amksiiwaa world, and of drawing from its evident power. This goal took on a new urgency beginning in the 1880s with the emergence of the "Land Question." The story of Frank Calder's (Wii Lisims) training that would see him lead the Nisga'a fight to have their land claims recognized in the twentieth century is well known, but perhaps exceptional only in the success Calder was able to achieve. At a meeting of the Nisga'a clans in 1919 to talk about their land claim struggle a number of chiefs compared the challenge before them to one of moving an immovable mountain. In reply Arthur Calder (Nagwa'un) held up his four-year-old son, Frank, and declared: "I'm going to send this boy to school where the K'umsiiwaa live. And I'm going to make him learn how the white man eats, how the white man talks, how the white man thinks, and when he comes back, he's going to move that mountain."<sup>31</sup> Although their motives were

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<sup>29</sup> In explaining to the CMS why he and Cunningham had left Metlakatla to found a new mission on the Nass Doolan noted that the people there had long expressed a desire for teachers, adding, "their desire for teachers from whatever motive it may arise, is exceedingly gratifying." Doolan, Metlakatla, 26 October 1864. Doolan, Journal, 22 March 1866, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

<sup>30</sup> Green, in *Annual Report of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Church* (Toronto: Methodist Mission Rooms, 1887), xviii.

<sup>31</sup> Sandra Martin, "Frank Calder, Politician and Nisga'a Chief: 1915-2006," *The Globe and Mail*, 9 November 2006. Calder's K'amksiiwaa education began shortly afterward, and included studies at the Coqualeetza residential school at Sardis, Chilliwack High School, and the University of British Columbia,

less articulated, in the decades before Nagwa'un's declaration other Nisga'a chiefs were placing their sons and daughters with missionaries, a practice that seemed to become part of their larger disciplined training for future leadership roles.

## Schools

Education in K'amksiiwaa ways simultaneously empowered young Nisga'a students and gave them a different, more critical stance toward their culture. In more than any other sphere of their engagement with European newcomers, schools presented nineteenth-century Nisga'a with the challenge of finding a fine balance between their desire to be open and access new knowledge that could improve their lives, and the need to shield themselves from teachings that threatened to undermine and destabilize Nisga'a society. This became evident already within the short life of the first CMS mission on the Nass, during which the missionary Doolan operated a day school. The young men closest to the lipleet exhibited a marked hostility to Nisga'a practices discountenanced by their teacher. Ts'ak'aamaas, for example, the young boy whom Doolan came to regard as a son, adamantly refused his parents' attempt to have shamans try to heal him when he developed an illness that eventually killed him, threatening to kick the healers if they came near him.<sup>32</sup> Radical stances of mission students toward many aspects of Nisga'a life included a seeming indifference to responsibilities associated with their rank, and even for the *haw'ahlkw* (taboos) surrounding *halayt* (supernatural) objects. Doolan

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where he earned a degree in theology. Evidence of this Nisga'a strategy can also be found in more recent times. In Andrew Robinson (GalksiGaban), "*NihlAdagwiy T'gun Adaawaks GalksiGabin* (Here Is the Story of *GalksiGabin*): A Modern Auto-Ethnography of a Nisga'a Man," (master's thesis, University of Northern British Columbia, 2008), Robinson recalls in his childhood his *giits* (great-grandmother) telling him that because he looked like the K'amksiiwaa, he "could learn their ways and make life better for our people," 1.

<sup>32</sup> Doolan, Journal, 7 March 1866, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

recorded a puzzling exchange that occurred during school hours one day between the chief Gints'aadax and a student named Aksheelan. The chief came into the school to summon Aksheelan to a meeting of the chiefs, but according to Doolan Aksheelan refused to leave, "saying there were plenty of chiefs without him."<sup>33</sup> Gints'aadax's response was not recorded, and it is difficult to gauge how the young man's dismissive reply would have been received. We do know, however, that Gints'aadax was irritated during this sacred winter season that a number of *sigits'oon* (halayt carvers) had been telling the missionaries about their ceremonial work. The *sigits'oon* were an elite group of skilled artists who worked under a code of secrecy to assist chiefs in designing and operating the special mechanical masks and other objects used in their halayt performances. Accordingly, Gints'aadax "threatened to take away the breath" of those divulging the secrets of their craft. Doolan also mentions at least two *sigits'oon* selling their tools to the lay missionary Robert Cunningham, both of whom endured a great deal of censure for doing so.<sup>34</sup>

Mission students were well placed to be at the vanguard of the changes occurring in Nisga'a society in these years. Many of them came from its upper ranks. The place of the *sigits'oon* in nineteenth-century Nisga'a social structure is unclear, but Audrey Shane suggests they may have held an "intermediate" social status between chief and commoner.<sup>35</sup> Names we have of students who attended mission schools over the period of Christianization reveal that many were of *hlguwilksihlkw* (princely) status. People of

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<sup>33</sup> Doolan, Journal, 5 December 1864, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

<sup>34</sup> Doolan, Journal, 18 November 1864; 27 January 1866; 9 February 1866; 17 February 1866, CMS fonds, C.2./O. For a discussion of the *sigits'oon* in Tsimshianic society more generally, see Audrey P.M. Shane, "Power in Their Hands: The Gitsonk," in *The Tsimshian: Images of the Past, Views for the Present*, ed. Margaret Seguin [Anderson] (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), 160-73.

<sup>35</sup> Shane, "Power in Their Hands," 160.

this standing were in “direct line” to assume the mantles of leadership of their respective houses as chiefs and matriarchs. They already held names, and through a rigorous course of training were on track to take on even more weighty names.<sup>36</sup> The above-mentioned boy Ts’ak’aamaas was one such prince, being the nephew of the powerful Eagle chief Agwii Laxha at Gitwinksihkw. Most if not all of the young men who were taken into the mission house at Aiyansh in the 1890s, referred to in the sources as “McCullagh’s boys,” were also of this rank. These men, notables being Paul Mercer and Charles Morven, later struggled to balance the seemingly conflicting leadership roles of being ordained clergy and accepting the powerful chiefly names they were in line to hold.

A distinct shift in the training of these young men appears to have occurred after the Nisga’a secured mission schools in their villages. Nephews who stood to inherit titles went through a grooming process from their earliest days called *Luu gip gibihl ts’muxwthl*, or “feeding wisdom into the nephew’s ear.”<sup>37</sup> As the term suggests, this work was done by uncles, the present holders of chiefly titles, into whose houses nephews moved after puberty to facilitate their training. When princes began attending mission schools, with some boarding at the mission houses, a significant portion of this process moved outside the *wilp* or house, the *lipleet* now taking a role in raising the new leaders. For these youth Christianity now formed a key part of their training, much as the attainment of different degrees of *halayt* in the secret societies had for earlier generations.

## Mission Experiments

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<sup>36</sup> Boston, Morven, and Grandison, *From Time Before Memory*, 49. Princesses and princes, together with matriarchs and chiefs, made up the highest rank within Nisga’a society.

<sup>37</sup> Nisga’a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga’a Study*, vol. 3, *Nisga’a Society* (New Aiyansh, BC: Wilp Wilxo’oskwahl Nisga’a Publications, 1995), 30.

Among the many meanings the Christian missions held for both the Nisga'a and lipleet who built them, their potential as vehicles for the transmission of useful K'amksiiwaa knowledge into Nisga'a society was never far from the minds of either party. The zeal Nisga'a displayed for missions in the latter half of the nineteenth century should be seen as part of a more general experimentation with new ways presented by the growing K'amksiiwaa world around them, in which they were engaged during these years. As we have seen, when Nisga'a were helping to found missions in their valley they were also busy with other new pursuits, such as travelling north to participate in gold rushes and flowing south in greater numbers to work in canneries and other places in need of their labour. A few years after his arrival in 1883 McCullagh articulated a complaint that he and other lipleet would repeat many times over the coming years, namely that every summer the bulk of his would-be congregation disappeared. In McCullagh's view "the novelty and gaiety of life at these places, rather than the need of employment, offer the inducement."<sup>38</sup> There was much truth in this observation. Although Nisga'a bought an increasing number of their provisions and other goods, the abundant resources of their valley to which they retained significant access meant that they did not need in any strict sense to sell their labour. Yet for the Nisga'a, as for other Aboriginal peoples in British Columbia, their summer trips to places of work served a vital cultural as well as economic function, providing opportunities to interact with and acquire knowledge from other peoples and the K'amksiiwaa world.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> McCullagh, Aeiyanish, Nass River B.C., 4 June 1886, CMS fonds, C.2./O.2.

<sup>39</sup> Raibmon, *Authentic Indians*, discusses the many functions that annual migrations to sites of labour served for Aboriginal peoples in nineteenth-century British Columbia, and concludes that "[t]he annual migrations of Aboriginal people to the hop fields were part of a complex strategy for dealing with the challenges presented by colonialism and for exploiting its opportunities," 115.

Something of this engagement with the newcomers' world, of how Nisga'a could experiment even playfully with the different ways of being that coursed from a situation of cultural encounter, can be seen in the volunteer companies that sprang up throughout the Nass Valley and in other north coast villages at this time. One of the best accounts of them was given by Charles Barton, a member of a Nisga'a-Tsimshian delegation to Victoria in 1887 to press the provincial government for a treaty. The delegation had an audience with Indian Reserve Commissioner Peter O'Reilly and Premier William Smithe. At the meeting the latter defended the reserve policy and general state of tutelage of Indians in the province, explaining that eventually, when the Indians came to be like the whites, they would enjoy the same freedoms. To demonstrate how the Nisga'a had already realized this, Barton revealed how he had started a volunteer company among the boys in Gingolx, explaining that

we are doing this just to show the Indians the whites' ways, and they are very fond of it. We did not get up these companies to fight, or anything of that kind, but just to amuse the people. And all the Indians are astonished to see them that way; and perhaps the whites would be astonished to see these Indians too. And the same way in Fort Simpson. There are several companies trying to imitate the whites in Greenville; and this is the very reason we see that we ought to be free like the whites, that it is not impossible for Indians to do anything if they have the show; but we have no show.<sup>40</sup>

These volunteer companies were but one facet of a larger process of experimentation taking place among the Nisga'a at this time, dialogues with the K'amksiiwaa world that could astonish native and white observers alike with the Nisga'a's capacity for transformation.

For a number of Nisga'a, Christian missions held out this same potential for living differently. One effect of interaction with K'amksiiwaa was the relativizing of

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<sup>40</sup> British Columbia, *Report of Conferences*, 260.

contemporary Nisga'a cultural practices. Lipleet disapproval of feasts and halayt activities undermined the hegemony of these practices, as did the alternative way they proposed that did not seem to need them. The three new Christian villages created in the dozen years beginning in 1867 all reflected this growing division within existing communities, and the willingness of some to follow a more radical path to incorporating K'amksiiwaa ways into their own. For example, Gingolx, the first new village, was conceived by the CMS lipleet and those who followed them as an "exodus" from the lower Nass villages, a biblical-like migration of those wishing to separate themselves and found a Christian community.<sup>41</sup>

Nisga'a who moved to the mission villages expected their lipleet to introduce innovation through their K'amksiiwaa ways, and generally work to ensure the wellbeing, and where possible improvement, of the community. The nearby CMS mission to the Tsimshian at Metlakatla had much to do with shaping the expectations Nisga'a who helped to found Gingolx had about their new village. Under the guidance of missionary William Duncan, Metlakatla was already becoming well known among both Aboriginal peoples and whites for the rapid transformation in Tsimshian material life occurring within it. This was due in no small part to Duncan's pursuit of commercial opportunities and introduction of industrial technologies. On founding Gingolx the missionary Robert Tomlinson, despite his initial misgivings, followed Duncan's lead and opened a store which conducted a steady trade. After three years Tomlinson's lack of business acumen could no longer be ignored, and he closed the store with a large debt. The loss of this store weighed heavily upon those at the Gingolx mission, as was apparent to Tomlinson

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<sup>41</sup> On the first Sunday after the lipleet and the Nisga'a who accompanied them landed their rafts at the site that would become Gingolx, for example, Doolan preached to those in attendance "on Abrahams [sic] call to leave his native land," Journal, 16 June 1867, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

when the people of Gingolx spent the following Christmas at Metlakatla. As he explained in his annual letter to the Society, “while [the visit] tended to strengthen the hearts of those who had really given themselves to God, [it] tended to depress the hands of those who were still bent on worldly gain by affording a contrast between Metlakatlah, with its large and well-arranged store, and their own village without one.”<sup>42</sup> A number of drownings in the ensuing years led the Gingolx to press on Tomlinson the “absolute necessity” of having a store at their village, and he grudgingly reopened this seemingly indispensable part of the mission. Fortunately for the members of the Gingolx mission Tomlinson proved much more capable in terms of introducing medical and industrial innovations to the village. In 1871 Tomlinson put his medical training to use by opening a small hospital. When he left the mission later that decade, support among the people of Gingolx for his projects was such that they threatened to desert the CMS unless his successor, Henry Schutt, continued to operate them.<sup>43</sup> Nor were these views unique to this coastal mission. McCullagh arrived at the Christian community assembled at Aiyansh to find the expectations of the upriver Nisga’a “totally at variance” with his own. As he put it, they expected him “to provide them with a livelihood; to increase their importance or the importance of their village, to keep a store for their benefit and to give them credit.”<sup>44</sup>

Despite such differences, Anglican and Methodist liopleet who came to work in the missions on the Nass generally shared with their Nisga’a charges a strong interest in introducing a broad array of features of K’amksiiwaa culture in addition to their Christianity. Through these men the Nisga’a obtained a class of religious specialists who

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<sup>42</sup> Tomlinson, Kincolith, Annual Letter, 1 May 1871, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

<sup>43</sup> Ridley, Metlakatla, 20 September 1880, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

<sup>44</sup> McCullagh, Aeyansh, Nass River B.C., 4 June 1886, CMS fonds, C.2./O.2.

saw themselves as offering the “simple Gospel of Christ,” as Tomlinson put it. Being Evangelicals, they were suspicious of rituals and formality. The materiality of their faith instead found expression in the civilization they imagined would spring forth from the teaching of the Gospel.<sup>45</sup> Ordination was generally a low priority for these lipleet, with some declining to take the step altogether. McCullagh eventually did become an ordained priest, but in addressing his perceived reluctance to do so made clear where this role stood in his understanding of the task before him, explaining, “I did not become a missionary with a view to ordination, but rather to work.”<sup>46</sup> Though the CMS did not see “Industrial Missions” as an integral part of their work, they did concede that they were useful in places “where occupation for converts is hard to obtain, or where, as in the case of some uncivilized races, habits of industry have to be formed.” In the eyes of the missionaries who came to the Nisga’a the Nass was one such place.

Accordingly, lipleet and Nisga’a experimented in these missions with new innovations as part of the latter’s “civilization.” Lipleet knowledge of some arts of civilization included many gaps, which required study and improvisations to bring new ways to the Nisga’a. Tomlinson, for example, had seen but two circular sawmills in his life, “and then only for a couple of hours.” With the help of a group of villagers the mill gradually took shape, with “shouts of triumph and amazement” as piece by piece the large water wheel and machinery came together.<sup>47</sup> This achievement reminds us that regardless of the different priorities Nisga’a and their lipleet conveyed to the new Christian villages they built, areas like the importation of K’amksiiwaa knowledge that

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<sup>45</sup> See Ridley’s description of Aiyansh after it was rebuilt using lumber from the new sawmill in *Snapshots from . . . The North Pacific: Letters Written by the Right Rev. Bishop Ridley (Late of Caledonia)*, ed. Alice J. Janvrin (London: Church Missionary Society, 1903), 108-14, for an articulation of this view.

<sup>46</sup> McCullagh, Aiyansh, 19 February 1890, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

<sup>47</sup> Tomlinson, Kincolith, Annual Letter, 12 March 1877, CMS fonds, C.1./M.10.

promised improvements to their lives provided a common ground, a shared goal around which they could come together. The differences were real, and in part were reflected by missionary endeavours that fell flat. Like the Nisga'a the missionaries who came to the valley could dream up fantastic projects rooted in the idea of mission and improvement. Among these were Tomlinson's large flat-bottomed boat that would collect sufficient oolichan and salmon for all villagers and bring them to the mission for processing, and McCullagh's grand "Aiyansh Settlement Scheme," which he doggedly promoted at every opportunity.<sup>48</sup> Both projects failed; they were too peripheral to Nisga'a interests, changing as they were. Yet despite these differences there were many more projects—from printing presses to sanitation improvements and towering church spires—where Nisga'a and the promoters of different Christianities concurred in this period.

### **Different Paths of Christianization**

While the creation of new Christian villages facilitated these experiments, the settlements also contributed to the divisive dynamic of Christianization as it occurred on the Nass. By removing from existing Nisga'a villages those interested in becoming Christian or benefiting from what lipleet had to offer, the missions helped facilitate a sharper polarization of society into two often antagonistic camps. For although the Nisga'a shared the broad cultural priority of acquiring useful new knowledge, there was no consensus when it came to the question of how the opportunities placed before them by the arrival of different Christianities might best be negotiated. Nisga'a responses

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<sup>48</sup> Tomlinson envisioned that this boat, based on the canal boats of his native Ireland but aptly named *Kingfisher*, would enable most villagers to remain home and thus work "to weaken that roving restless spirit which is one obstacle to civilization," Tomlinson, Kincolith, to Duncan, England, 30 April 1870, William Duncan fonds. With respect to his plan for a European-style village with houses no longer oriented toward the river, McCullagh optimistically wrote, "I dreamed dreams for the Indians and fed them with my idea until they, too, began to dream the same dream," in Moeran, *McCullagh of Aiyansh*, 95.

throughout the period of Christianization examined here often suggest the presence of a greater number of ways of integrating the various aspects of Christianities into their culture than missionary pressure to see the choice as a simple dichotomy would allow. Picking up one's house and moving it to a mission, as some families did when the Tsimshian Methodist teacher William Pierce arrived at Laxgalts'ap to open the mission in 1877, was a level of commitment not everyone was willing to make.

The different levels of interest among Nisga'a in pursuing the new knowledge offered by the lipleet were at times a source of tension within existing villages. Attempts to construct a schoolhouse struck sparks more than once among the intricately layered interests to be found in nineteenth-century Nisga'a villages. Of the two incidents for which we have documentation, clashes over a schoolhouse were not straightforward conflicts over whether or not to Christianize. Nonetheless, moves within Nisga'a society toward missionary offerings introduced new and potentially divisive factors into the matrix of Nisga'a life. One incident occurred in December 1878 when the Gingolx lipleet Robert Tomlinson brought a raft of lumber from the mission's new sawmill to the upriver village of Gitlaxt'aamiks with the intention of building a schoolhouse. Opposition from some in the village forced Tomlinson to abandon his plan, and instead of taking the lumber back to Gingolx with him he stopped at a site two miles downriver known as Aiyansh and erected the schoolhouse there. The specific nature of the opposition is unclear, but there is evidence of a power struggle between chiefs at Gitlaxt'aamiks at this time, and of this division being exacerbated by differing responses to the changes presented by the Protestant Christianities and to Tomlinson personally. On one side was the Wolf chief Sgat'iin and on the other was another Wolf chief,

K'eexkw, along with the Raven chief Txaatk'anlaxhatkw. While Sgat'iin's predecessor had greeted the missionary William Duncan warmly on his second visit to the river in 1860 and exclaimed enthusiastically that the Nisga'a were to call on the name of Jesus now, the holder of this name in the late 1870s was establishing himself as an opponent of any attempt to have his people evangelized. Yet both K'eexkw and Txaatk'anlaxhatkw were keen to have a lipleet and a school, and proved willing to abandon their village for these, as we will see.

Just over a year later another incident involving the construction of a schoolhouse took place in Gitwinksihlkw, the next village downriver. Here an Eagle chief named Naaws had been hosting a school connected with the Methodist mission in Laxgalts'ap for a number of years. In the spring of 1880 Naaws attempted to refurbish his house with the help of Laxgalts'ap missionary Alfred Green to make it more suitable for church and school, drawing forth a determined opposition. When Green refused to stop the work two chiefs took hold of him by each arm and tried to pull him away. Their motivation, as they later presented it to the Justice of the Peace in Fort Simpson, was that all of the villagers present at the time were opposed to the construction, and that they did not consider Naaws to have the right to grant Green the privilege to change his house into a school.<sup>49</sup>

Such pressures within Nisga'a villages at this time, and significantly the presence of new Christian spaces, propelled those more interested in engaging with some of the new possibilities presented by the arrival of Christianities, and more generally the K'amksiiwaa, toward the missions. Once the superintendent of Indian affairs in British

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<sup>49</sup> R.J. Hall, Fort Simpson, to Israel Powell, Victoria, 14 June 1880, LAC, Indian Affairs, Central Registry, vol. 3741, file 29096.

Columbia, Israel Powell, decided that there could not be a school in Gitwinksihlkw if the majority were not in support of it Naaws decided to leave his village and move to the mission at Laxgalts'ap.<sup>50</sup> Naaws, or Job Calder as he came to be known after he left his name behind and was baptized, was not the only one leaving Gitwinksihlkw at this time. A few years later four young men who had been attending the mission school in Laxgalts'ap were obliged to leave the village after they refused to participate in the practices of the winter ceremonial. One of them, Sieoxe, wrote a letter to Green that suggests the sadness some had at being forced out of their home village. In the brief note Sieoxe told his teacher

I send this few words to you to let me tell you about my heart. I got a little sorrow now, because the people talk about me every days. Them people don't want me to live on the Kit-wan-silth. They want to send me down to Greenville now. Dear friends, I hope you will call my name in your prayer that Jesus help me. I am very weak now, sir. Tell all my friends, let them call my name in his prayer that God helps me.<sup>51</sup>

Tomlinson's decision to put up the rejected schoolhouse two miles below Gitlaxt'aamiks provided a similar if nascent Christian space to which those in favour of having a school soon moved. Within a year Txaatk'anlaxhatkw, recently baptized as Abraham Wright, and K'eexkw, himself baptized Daniel Lester, had moved down to Aiyansh from Gitlaxt'aamiks. When McCullagh arrived some three years later he discovered a small but growing Christian community clustered around the schoolhouse. Others moved in these years too, drawn by attractions they saw in the missions on the river. The powerful Eagle chief Mountain and the Wolf chief Nagwa'un, baptized Victoria Calder, moved to Laxgalts'ap soon after it opened, and the founding of the first Christian village, Gingolx,

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<sup>50</sup> "Statement of Job Calder," Naas River, B.C., November 26th, 1888, in Methodist Church of Canada, *Letter from the Methodist Missionary Society to the Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs respecting British Columbia Troubles: With Affidavits, Declarations, Etc.* (Toronto, 1889), 72-3.

<sup>51</sup> Sieoxe, Kitwansilth, 31 October 1884, in *The Missionary Outlook* (April 1885): 61. Original spelling.

in 1867 had drawn off those willing to follow the missionaries from the lower villages. Through these movements a distinct polarization of Nisga'a society began to occur.

If the movement of some Nisga'a into three new and distinctly Christian villages in the dozen or so years after the founding of Gingolx was not an inevitable outcome of Christianization, it nonetheless was a development that gave a distinctive shape to this phenomenon. The creation of new mission villages was not a policy of either Protestant missionary society working on the Nass. William Duncan's move to Metlakatla to isolate his Tsimshian followers from the negative influences of Fort Simpson and the K'amksiiwaa more generally was rather an exception than the norm; most CMS missions on the north coast took root in preexisting native villages. The Missionary Society of the Methodist Church similarly tried to plant its missions in existing villages. Nisga'a were Christianizing, and as we will see, continued to Christianize, within their old villages. Yet the emergence of these distinct communities seems to have well served the desire of some Nisga'a and their lipleet to embark on a path of more radical engagement with K'amksiiwaa ways. This development of new communities whose inhabitants to some degree had set themselves apart from kin and former ways was both reflective of and helped to entrench the differences between Nisga'a over how they might respond to what the newcomers had to offer. The establishment of discrete missions contributed to a growing sense among all Nisga'a that the incorporation of new knowledge from the K'amksiiwaa was an either-or choice, however much lived lives may have belied this dichotomy.

What we might call the first phase of Nisga'a Christianization, then, was characterized by the emergence of an important new division through Nisga'a society,

namely that between “Christian” and “heathen.” Baptism of all remaining “heathen” into the Church of England in 1905 began a second phase of Christianization under a new dynamic. A few years before this development the Department of Indian Affairs’ *Annual Report* noted the partition, observing that “[t]he Indians of Naas River divide themselves into professing Christians and professing heathens.” To clarify the latter it explained, “The pagans call themselves ‘heathens’ after the name given to them by the Christian Indians and some of their early teachers. This name ‘heathen’ at first meant opprobrium; but it has crystallized into meaning a cult or ‘ism’ of which the pagans are quite proud.”<sup>52</sup> This report hints at the antagonistic relationship that could exist between these two camps. Villages around the Laxgalts’ap mission enacted a law forbidding all preachers from giving sermons in their communities, and also disallowing villagers from attending church at Laxgalts’ap or elsewhere. For its part the council at the Methodist mission made its own bylaw “that they should not allow any one of them to go and see the dance, Potlatches, and medicine-man or see the gambling,” as a Gingolx man explained in a letter to the editor of Victoria’s *Daily Colonist*.<sup>53</sup>

As these laws suggest there developed a sense of rivalry between the Christian and pagan villages. Competition—for members, for status—was especially sharp between villages that had been one before the process of Christianization split them. McCullagh initially approved of the division of upriver Nisga’a he found that had the Christians living apart in Aiyansh, but experience soon convinced him it was a hindrance to his work. In an early report back to the CMS McCullagh wrote that with the Christians living as a separate community

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<sup>52</sup> Dominion of Canada, *Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Year Ended June 30 1902* (Ottawa: S.E. Dawson, 1902), 258.

<sup>53</sup> Jas. H. Pollard, “An Indian’s Letter,” *The Daily Colonist*, 1 March 1889.

all evangelistic effort is regarded by the heathen as attempts to destroy their village and break up their families and is therefore unacceptable; while the influence of the Christian life is lost. . . . Under this separation system the one ambition of the Christian community is to increase their numbers bad or good to make a vain show of any kind as a set off to the custom still adhered to in the heathen camp.<sup>54</sup>

The aggressiveness of Christians in mission villages like Aiyansh was no doubt in part driven by fervour for their new religion, but may have also been a cover for a degree of insecurity. By removing themselves from their former villages the neophytes had left much behind. Many of the familiar practices and symbols that had affirmed their identity and place in society and the larger cosmos—most obviously the feasting and associated regalia—had to be abandoned in accordance with the new Christian life they had embarked upon in the missions.

Not surprisingly the Aiyansh chiefs Wright and Lester at times felt the need to prove themselves, to justify their break and the validity, if not the superiority, of the path they had chosen. When McCullagh first arrived at the budding Christian settlement at Aiyansh there was a bumpy adjustment period as these largely self-fashioned Christians and the lipleet had to adjust to one another's expectations. Soon Wright led the villagers in what McCullagh called a "worship strike," assembling for worship one Sunday but showing their displeasure at his reforms to their service by refusing to stand, kneel, sing or pray. McCullagh's announcement that he would be closing the mission and returning to the coast and probably England in the battle of wills that followed prompted the elderly Lester to pay the new lipleet a diplomatic visit. Lester opened his heart to McCullagh, giving a number of reasons why he should stay, but one was particularly revealing of the new community's sense of itself and its relation to those it left behind:

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<sup>54</sup> McCullagh, Aeiyanah, Nass River B.C., 4 June 1886, CMS fonds, C.2./O.2.

It is said among the bad ones that you have come here in the power of the Great Spirit, and they expect to see you very strong. But if you leave us now, will it not be because your heart is weak? And the bad ones will rejoice and say of us: ‘Where is now their God?’ They will think God has cast us off. That will be bad, sir, very bad. And we who are of the Kingdom will be humiliated and put to an open shame. And what will the servant of God have gained by that? Nothing, sir, nothing at all.<sup>55</sup>

It was important that both the lipleet and the people of the Kingdom had strong hearts as they set upon this new path. The “bad ones,” namely the heathen back at Gitlaxt’aamiks, were watching this experiment with the new ways, apparently ready to rejoice at its failure. Years later the villagers interpreted their unlikely success in bringing a boiler up the river for their sawmill after a nearby stream proved insufficient to power it as another vindication of their course in light of the criticism of their neighbours. “Now let the heathen hold their peace,” an elated Wright declared, “it is evident to the whole world that God is with us.”<sup>56</sup>

Such defensive responses demonstrate how Nisga’a who remained outside the mission villages could show as much contempt for their kin at the missions as the latter did for them on some evangelizing campaigns. Among their playful songs used at feasts and other occasions, the Gitlaxt’aamiks composed one poking fun at McCullagh’s grand plan for laying out a village oriented away from the river.<sup>57</sup> Yet despite the development of this rivalry and sometimes antagonistic relationship we would be misled if we followed the missionaries in seeing those outside the mission’s orbit as “enemies of truth” or members of an “anti-progress party.”<sup>58</sup> Regardless of their branding as

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<sup>55</sup> McCullagh, *Red Indians I Have Known*, 22.

<sup>56</sup> Moeran, *McCullagh of Aiyansh*, 98.

<sup>57</sup> Moeran, *McCullagh of Aiyansh*, 95.

<sup>58</sup> These terms were used by Tomlinson, Kincolith, Annual Letter, 1 May 1871, CMS fonds, C.2./O. and McCullagh, Fishery Bay, Naas River, 19 April 1897, BCA, Attorney General correspondence 1872-1937, 1950, GR-0429, Box 4, File 1, respectively.

“heathen,” and the embracing of this identity by some, the non-Christian Nisga’a should not be imagined as a bloc set against the Christianities taking root around them, or unappreciative of the benefits to be had from incorporating attractive aspects of K’amksiiwaa life. They shared the receptivity to new ways that was part of the Nisga’a cultural tradition. Significantly, they were also changing, including—as we will see in Chapter Four—Christianizing. At a council meeting of the chiefs in one non-mission village held to address the issue of a Christian heir to a chieftainship who refused to make the potlatch requisite to taking his title, a chief stood up and opened a paper, from which he read “or pretend[ed] to read” the following authoritative decree on the matter: “Any person coming to this village for the purpose of settling must do so by making a potlatch. . . . And any person found causing excitement [sic] in this place shall be cast forth, thus saith the great lawyer’s law and the government and the Queen.” Non-Christian Nisga’a were also open to borrowing useful signifiers from colonial repertoires to buttress their own priorities.<sup>59</sup>

Yet for all their complexity the Nisga’a who took up the heathen identity in this period were cast in a mould only partly of their making. Their emergent identity as their society Christianized stemmed from the efforts of missionaries and Nisga’a Christians to give them one, and their own desire to define themselves. It would have been difficult for some reification of “heathen” customs not to have occurred after the arrival of Christianities—and the K’amksiiwaa more generally—undermined the hegemony they had enjoyed and singled them out for demonization. In passing bylaws and in other

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<sup>59</sup> McCullagh, “The Indian Potlatch,” *The Caledonia Interchange* (September 1900): 18. McCullagh cites this conflict, his version of which he based on a verbatim report of a complaint made by “W... F...,” a Christian Indian of Laxgalts’ap, to show why the Christian community was against the potlatch. He identified the village only as “Git...”

measures, the heathen villages were concerned with preventing their moral and physical integrity from being simultaneously atrophied by denunciation and loss of members. While not mired in tradition, these communities did become de facto defenders of ways discounted in the missions, and custodians of names and crests the Christians could not hold. The assemblage of pre-Christian cultural practices onto which they held, carried through their own eventual conversion and the many other revaluations that artifacts undergo during rebirth in new presents, would help to enrich the Nisga'a cultural matrix upon which the cultural revival beginning in the mid-twentieth century could draw.

As the existence of two distinct and often antagonistic communities became a reality on the Nass by the end of the 1870s Nisga'a on both sides attempted to bridge this potentially destructive chasm. Though social divisions were recognized as unavoidable and even useful in Nisga'a society—reflected in the Wolf clan that became too numerous in Gitlaxt'aamiks and thus divided so it would have guests from another clan to invite to its feasts—the sharp dualism of the Christian-heathen divide displayed none of the complementarity that could make it beneficial.<sup>60</sup> Two efforts stand out as having been particularly important in mending and reformulating the relationship between these two new camps on the river.

In December 1893 tension between the upriver villages of Aiyansh and Gitlaxt'aamiks peaked. Unable to convince their Christian neighbours to stop drumming during their weekly march along the “Gospel Road” that had been constructed into their

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<sup>60</sup> Matthew Gurney related this story of how the Wolf clan at Gitlaxt'aamiks became so large that it became necessary to divide it into two groups—the Gisk'ansnaat under Sgat'iin and the Gitwilnaak'il under K'eexkw—to the ethnographer William Beynon in 1954, Nisga'a Tribal Council, vol. 3, *Nisga'a Society*, 35.

village, the people of Gitlaxt'aamiks met this aggression in kind. An ugly confrontation unfolded one Sunday when the evangelists found their way into the village blocked. During the melee villagers with knives went for the drum, one evangelist was spit at while praying, and a halayt named Agaud attempted to grab the neck of a relative until the Christians fell on their knees and he appeared to lose control over his body, causing the villagers to flee in panic. According to McCullagh, the Aiyansh Christians returned in the evening "very much sobered and subdued, desirous of their own accord to give up the drum."<sup>61</sup> A conciliatory effort soon followed this rupture, as each village hosted the other to a feast. Through apologies and other statements the chiefs affirmed their unity—which ran from their common ancestors to their shared reserve and missionary—despite their contemporary existence in two distinct villages. In this spirit of reconciliation the two villages agreed to a compromise: the Gitlaxt'aamiks promised to give their best attention to the preaching of evangelists who visited their village on Sunday mornings in exchange for an end to drumming.<sup>62</sup>

Downriver Nisga'a around this time also reached a similar understanding between Christians and non-Christians in the name of unity, or at least peaceful coexistence. In what the Gingolx missionary Collison called "an unholy alliance," some of the Christian chiefs of this village hosted a feast, to which they invited all the non-Christian chiefs of the lower river. At one point in the feast Christian and heathen chiefs each took one end of a long rope slung over a beam then tied them tightly together as a symbolic gesture of

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<sup>61</sup> James B. McCullagh, "Progress Among the Nishga Indians: Extracts from the Rev. J.B. McCullagh's Journal," *Church Missionary Gleaner* 22, no. 255 (March 1895): 37.

<sup>62</sup> James B. McCullagh, *Further Extracts from Rev. J.B. McCullagh's Journal, From Thursday, June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1893, to Sunday, March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1894* (Ilfracombe, UK: J. Moore, 1894), 8. McCullagh noted that a deputation from Gitlaxt'aamiks had visited him shortly before this incident to propose this compromise, but despite his interest Chief Abraham Wright and the other Christian evangelists equated such a move with surrender.

their desire to be joined. Finally, the Christians presented their guests with a red banner embroidered with the word “Peace,” a token of this commitment to a more harmonious relationship across a relatively new divide.<sup>63</sup>

These efforts were not unique. Running below the radar of the historical record that noted numerous flashpoints were efforts by Nisga’a to mitigate differences, to find ways for the inhabitants of the Nass to exist across their new difference. McCullagh hinted at the existence of such efforts when he remarked to his readers back in England that it had been a long time since he had seen the kind of persecution and hatred that came from the Gitkateen, the Nisga’a of the lower Nass, when their upriver kin cut down a number of totem poles in 1911. “There must be cleavage,” he concluded, “but hitherto the Indian has not been able, nor willing to stand for cleavage; he will turn his Christianity into a farcial [sic] compromise with the world, as represented by the carnal minded members of his tribe, rather than be separate and the Lord’s Own.”<sup>64</sup>

The religious divide was further mitigated by other contemporary developments. The 1884 potlatch ban, which only began to be enforced on the Nass toward the turn of the century, increased an appreciation among both Christian and non-Christian people on the Nass that they were Nisga’a. Similarly, the growing realization over this period of Christianization that their lands were under threat worked to smooth over new religious differences. To the extent that they came to interact with other Aboriginal peoples from across British Columbia at worksites and other places of association, and to understand that they too were experiencing similar colonizing pressures, Nisga’a also came to know themselves as Indians. By the early years of the twentieth century all Nisga’a were

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<sup>63</sup> Collison, *Wake of the War Canoe*, 343.

<sup>64</sup> James B. McCullagh, “Another Chapter of History from the Valley of Eternal Bloom, Journal of Aiyansh Mission from Sept 7<sup>th</sup> 1910 to March 1911 and later, Aiyansh, Nass River B.C.,” 50. CMS fonds.

“under instruction,” attached to a mission village by baptismal record if they had not yet relocated their houses there. Strains from disparate responses to the question of how to incorporate Christianities and other aspects of the K’amksiiwaa world continued, but now from within the new Christian fold.

### **“Fixed” in their Progress**

Beginning in the early 1880s with the surveying of reserves along the Nass, Nisga’a began to find themselves “fixed” in their ability to progress. Two of the three new Christian villages that the Nisga’a would build with their lipleet had barely commenced when Indian Reserve Commissioner Peter O’Reilly made an unannounced late-season visit to the valley in October 1881, laying out some reserves by talking to the people he found home and then leaving just as quickly. Growing uncertainty over the status of their land weighed on Nisga’a efforts to improve their lives, as Charles Barton explained to Premier William Smithe in 1887 as part of a delegation to Victoria:

Some of the Indians now are able to be like a white man—are almost like white men, only they are not allowed to be yet. This is the very reason that I have come myself; and I am very glad to see you and speak to you that we are every day growing, growing, and trying to be like white men; but the way we are fixed now we don’t know the land is ours, and have not got anything to show that it is. We are not free on the land; we cannot build on it; we are liable to be removed, as we have heard, the way things are now.<sup>65</sup>

The government’s response when it came was even more troubling. As a result of the delegation’s visit the provincial government sent a commission to the north coast the following year. When Nisga’a at Laxgalts’ap asked Commissioners Cornwall and Planta

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<sup>65</sup> British Columbia, *Report of Conferences*, 260.

for a treaty to divide the land between themselves and the government, they instead read from a book that stated the Nisga'a had had no land for twenty years.<sup>66</sup>

Testimony given by Nisga'a to the McKenna-McBride Royal Commission nearly three decades later when it visited the Nass villages as part of its provincial tour to readjust reserves reveals the great extent to which Nisga'a felt themselves hindered in their progress during these years, by uncertainty over the status of their land as well as the imposition of legislation like the Indian Act. In Gitlaxt'aamiks, just as the villagers were beginning to engage with new K'amksiiwaa ways the land question thwarted their progress. As Chief Andrew Naas explained to the commissioners:

You have seen for yourselves the tokens of early days of the old Chiefs that have gone away when you paraded with us here to-day – it is not many years that we turned [sic] around to follow the word of God and ever since that time we have been able to follow in the new way and clean up our village – it is the same here – when we started we made a beginning to follow the right way when the white men came in and took up all the land belonging to us and we were not able to get all the material we needed and that is the real start of the land question – From that time we gave up improving our village because it took up practically all the money we had to pay for the so called land question as we had seen that the Government was disposing of all our lands.<sup>67</sup>

Around 1910 an influx of settlers about the upper villages had put a stop to a number of efforts. Chief John Ksidiul explained that Gitlaxt'aamiks had started to put up a community building “after we became civilized” but had to abandon it, as well as completion of their partially completed church, because the land on which they had built their sawmill was taken up by a homesteader.<sup>68</sup> A number of chiefs made the connection between the land and resources of their valley and their ability to progress. They

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<sup>66</sup> “Statement of Charles Russ (an Indian),” Naas River, B.C., Nov. 27th, 1889, in Methodist Church of Canada, *Letter from the Methodist Missionary Society*, 64-5.

<sup>67</sup> “Meeting with the Git-lak-damiks Band or Tribe of Indians on Saturday October 9<sup>th</sup>, 1915,” BCA, Canada, Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for the Province of British Columbia (1913-1916), GR-1995.

<sup>68</sup> “Meeting with the Git-lak-damiks Band,” Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for the Province of British Columbia.

explained to the commissioners that Lisims, the Nass, was like a “bank,” a source of wealth that had been the basis of their wellbeing in the past and would again be the foundation upon which they would improve their lives as they employed new ways from the K’amksiiwaa. The “bank” of the Nass was now connected to the K’amksiiwaa. In requesting monetary compensation for lands lost Chief Naas assured the commissioners that they would not take any received money away, as “after we get it it will have to go back to the white people soon because we will have to spend it.”<sup>69</sup> Indeed, the transcripts reveal both how the Nisga’a were changing as well as what they were eager to do if given the freedom. Lands being taken were not only trap lines appropriated by telegraph stations. Homesteaders had pitched their tents in gardens and built wood piles on turnip patches. Nisga’a had also been producing for the market economy through activities such as preparing berries to sell for money, “which they again turn into clothing.” Like the settler population growing around them in the upper villages where fertile patches of land existed, Nisga’a had discovered that there were many places on their land “just ready for the plow.” The crops they had grown on their small reserves proved this, although here too when they tried to sell them they found white people hesitant to buy them, which they suspected was because they had been grown on a reserve.<sup>70</sup>

Nisga’a compared their new condition to being “like slaves,” a degraded status they knew well from their traditional social order. At the bottom of society, slaves occupied the opposite end of the continuum from “real” beings like chiefs and matriarchs, a state of powerlessness. As Charles Morven explained to the commissioners in Aiyansh,

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<sup>69</sup> “Meeting with the Git-lak-damiks Band,” Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for the Province of British Columbia.

<sup>70</sup> “Meeting with the Aiyansh Band or Tribe of Indians at Aiyansh on Friday October 8<sup>th</sup>, 1915,” BCA, Canada, Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for the Province of British Columbia (1913-1916), GR-1995.

living on a reserve at the pleasure of a government that now owned it was “as though we were in a fence and could not get out and instead of being free like men we are slaves.” The people of Aiyansh, having been forerunners among the Nisga’a in pursuing the new way, seem to have been especially disillusioned by the civilizing process. In an effort to gain title to their lands they had tried to play by the K’amksiiwaa’s rules. They had accepted the allotment of their lands, fencing off individual plots on the promise that after five years they would be recognized as theirs. Yet when the villagers applied for titles after the time period had passed they learned that they could not be given title, that their land was still only a reserve. This was when, as Morven put it, “the hearts of our people went smash.”<sup>71</sup>

The growing realization among Nisga’a that the path of civilization and improvement they had been tracking was in fact leading them to a state more akin to slavery led to a reevaluation of their missionaries. At the Communion Service held on Ash Wednesday in Aiyansh in 1911 one verse of the Anglican recitation seized hold of Chief Timothy Derrick. Following McCullagh into the vestry afterward he asked the liplleet to explain the meaning of “Cursed be he who moveth his neighbour’s landmark.”<sup>72</sup> Having heard McCullagh’s answer Derrick “flamed into a passion,” asking him, “what does the government of the Christian Whiteman mean by over-staking all our lands, as though we were not in existence?” Unfortunately McCullagh did not record his answer, but from Derrick’s reply it would seem he tried to defend the expansion of the British Empire into Aboriginal lands. To Derrick the Israelites’ advance into the lands

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<sup>71</sup> “Meeting with the Aiyansh Band,” Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for the Province of British Columbia.

<sup>72</sup> The verse is from Deuteronomy 27:17, and along with other “curses” formed part of the Communion Service in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*.

God had promised them across the Jordan River was more just than the sneaky way the K'amksiiwaa appeared to be going about taking Nisga'a lands, for

they came openly on the warpath with their sword and their bow and their quiver. They fought as we fought when we took the country of Meziaden from the Tennes. But the Whiteman comes with his Bible, bowing and smiling and shaking hands all round. He says, "I want to buy and sell with you and do a little business." We say, "Good," and then when we are asleep and feel ourselves secure in the company of our heavenly brother, who has told us that we must not steal, he comes to us and says, "All this land belongs to my crown, I will just cut you out a little bit for a reservation." Is that right?<sup>73</sup>

There was a feeling amongst Derrick and other Nisga'a that their missionaries were really paving the way for K'amksiiwaa occupation of their lands. Talk of brotherly love had led them to let their guard down, only to wake up one day to find their valley crawling with "land stalkers" scouting out the best plots to stake off.<sup>74</sup>

A palpable change of attitude toward all lipleet occurred after the arrival of a wave of settlers around the upper villages in 1910. While Nisga'a were still interested in schools, including the new industrial schools, they refused any further assistance with them from the government until they had a treaty. The residents of Gitlaxt'aamiks and Laxgalts'ap were so unsupportive of new missionary teachers posted in their villages that they gave up and left the river in disgust. According to DuVernet, the bishop of the Anglican diocese, the "insolent" attitude of the Nisga'a in these villages was making it extremely difficult to get new men to stay with the work, and only longtime missionaries who spoke Sim'algaḡ were able to weather it. Yet the feeling of betrayal was perhaps most acute toward these men, who had lived with them for decades. Months after the

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<sup>73</sup> McCullagh, "Another Chapter of History," 18. CMS fonds.

<sup>74</sup> "In White Man's Way Indians Fight Case: Aborigines of the Naas Claim that Title in All Lands Are Vested in Them," *The Daily Colonist*, 19 June 1910. Nisga'a complained about "land stalkers" traversing the valley on a false pretence, such as searching for a lost friend, and accepting their hospitality, only to later reveal their true intent by making a preemption claim to land.

above-mentioned Commination Service DuVernet wrote that McCullagh had been branded a traitor, and had his life threatened by Nisga'a who believed he had let the K'amksiiwaa into their country.<sup>75</sup> The bishop was defending McCullagh to the secretary of the Department of Indian Affairs against reports that he and other lipleet were stirring up agitation over the land question. McCullagh, who was sympathetic to the Nisga'a's cause, and perhaps more importantly could see the corrosive effect of the uncertainty over their land on their commitment to striving for a "progressive ideal of life," had recently begun to publish the Nisga'a's views using the mission printing press.<sup>76</sup> In his defence he claimed that as their longtime interpreter this act was nothing new, but to the Nisga'a the pamphlets he helped to produce were likely an important test of where their lipleet stood, just as they would be a test of the truth claims of the civilizing project they had embarked upon with the K'amksiiwaa.

### **British Justice for the Oppressed**

In articulating their response to a Christianizing and civilizing project seemingly gone awry Nisga'a did not reject it, but rather appealed to the K'amksiiwaa to allow its promise to come to fruition. The apparent loss of their land, first to the Queen and then more alarmingly to driftwood men who gave no regard to their turnip patches or strict property laws as they staked over them, defied understanding in light of Nisga'a experience with both the newcomers and other outsiders before them. As Nisga'a

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<sup>75</sup> DuVernet, to Secretary, Department of Indian Affairs, 4 July 1910, LAC, Indian Affairs, Central Registry, vol. 7780 file 27,150-3-1.

<sup>76</sup> McCullagh, "Another Chapter of History," 15. CMS fonds. McCullagh's views on the land question were complex and defy easy characterization. They also changed, as suggested here. Two publications that particularly attracted the attention of authorities were Indian Land Committee, *Indian Protest Against White Settlers Coming into the Aiyansh Valley, Naas River, British Columbia* (Aiyansh: 1910), and "The Indian Land Question: Interview with Land Committee, Naas River," *Hagaga* (May 1910).

Charles Russ explained to his Methodist interpreters, “[O]ur people want a treaty, because they never saw such a thing before. We have all our old traditions about the laws of the past, but we have no story like this of one people taking the land from another without an agreement.”<sup>77</sup> Yet the Nisga’a had indeed begun to articulate a story to try to understand their novel situation. This story placed a treaty not at the end of a colonizing process that had led to disillusionment, but closer to the middle of an ongoing narrative of progress and improvement through following a “new way”—one obstructed from its development by inconsistencies. While modern in its trajectory, this story of the Nisga’a’s improvement was simultaneously very old. It was perhaps articulated most clearly by Chief Timothy Derrick in a speech he gave before the McKenna-McBride Royal Commission:

We don’t want any trouble in the settlement of our case – we want it to be done in peace and to be done in the new way; you have heard one of the speakers talking about the Rev. Mr. Duncan – it was while the people of this river were as it were blind that this thing happened. They didn’t know anything about the law or heavenly things when he came by the hands of the King and also by the missionaries that came to visit us and so we began to see daylight and some of our children also know that have been to school who have returned and are able to read. We have powers to think and our eyes are opened gentlemen the same way as yours are. You who are representatives of the Government – it was the Government who opened our eyes – and what man will come and close our eyes – it is impossible to close them and we want to follow the new way.<sup>78</sup>

Drawing on a powerful cultural metaphor, Derrick explained how the Nisga’a’s instruction in “the law and heavenly things” had brought daylight, opening their eyes to a new possible world. Like the daylight released when the trickster Txeemsim broke open over the Nass the container holding it, the useful things Nisga’a had worked to obtain

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<sup>77</sup> “Statement of Charles Russ (an Indian),” Naas River, B.C., Nov. 27th, 1889, in Methodist Church of Canada, *Letter from the Methodist Missionary Society*, 65.

<sup>78</sup> “Meeting with the Aiyansh Band,” Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for the Province of British Columbia.

from the K'amksiiwaa could not be taken back. It was impossible to close their eyes now that they had been opened to new powers like literacy.

If, as Derrick affirmed, there was no going back, if the Nisga'a were committed to following the "new way," then it was imperative that the uncertainty over land ownership that had obstructed their progress be made right. The imposition of reserves and subsequent grabbing of their lands without any negotiation had deeply offended a touchstone of Nisga'a culture, namely its concern for the proper holding and transfer of house titles and the lands, the *ango'oskw*, connected to them. In demanding a treaty Nisga'a proposed in a language the K'amksiiwaa could comprehend their longstanding practice of making public and transparent all claims regarding the establishment or transfer of property, which they practiced in their *yukw* (settlement feast).

The Nisga'a in their struggle turned to the language and logic of the civilizing projects they had participated in since the founding of Christian missions among them. They attempted to engage the K'amksiiwaa with the truth claims of language they had come to share in a critical test of their substance. Part of this approach was undoubtedly strategic: an appeal to the shibboleths of Anglo-Canadian culture, formulated with the aid of sympathetic lawyers, was difficult to refute. In a colonial context taking up the dominant symbols could be a means to achieve one's ends. Through her exploration of nineteenth-century notions of authenticity with respect to Aboriginal peoples along the Northwest Coast, Paige Raibmon shows how, for Aboriginal people living under colonialism, using the definitions imposed on them could be key to accessing the social, political and economic means they needed to survive.<sup>79</sup> Yet their appeal to British and

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<sup>79</sup> Paige Raibmon, *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth Century Northwest Coast* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005).

Christian laws and truth claims was more than simply instrumental. These ways were now also Nisga'a ways. The Royal Proclamation of George III in 1763, which declared the right of Indians to lands of theirs not ceded to or purchased by the Crown, became a principal Nisga'a text in a colonial world that seemed oblivious to it. In the pamphlet it produced with McCullagh the Nisga'a Land Committee explained why it was confident: "We believe our case to be strong because God hates injustice. We know He is on our side because we are oppressed. We can put our case into His hands, but the government cannot commit their policy to Him. God says, 'Cursed is he that removeth his neighbor's landmark.'"<sup>80</sup> Although they had only come across the Deuteronomy verse a few months earlier, it clinched a developing sense that the cosmos was on their side in their struggle for justice.

Nisga'a appeals to their fellow Christians for a "square White-man's deal"<sup>81</sup> was on another level a way of attempting to remind the K'amksiiwaa of who they were, or at least could be, at times. They had felt this other side of the newcomers in their offers of help, and drawn strength from it. In the first address of the men of Aiyansh to the "Chiefs, Wise men and Saints" of the CMS since they had sent McCullagh, they saluted the society for sending the *aam* (good) not only in news, but also in "life with mercy attached," explaining, "What is the name of a greater mercy than the healing of the sick and the caring for the afflicted? Our souls have feasted on the good of heaven and our bodies have drunk of the mercy of the Saints."<sup>82</sup> But they had also experienced

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<sup>80</sup> "The Indian Land Question," *Hagaga* (May 1910).

<sup>81</sup> "The Indian Land Question," *Hagaga* (May 1910).

<sup>82</sup> Chiefs and men of Aiyansh, "To The Chiefs, Wise men and Saints of the tribe of the White man far away," translated by James B. McCullagh, [8 March 1887], CMS C.2./O.2. McCullagh called this address "a capital model of an Indian speech," and translated it as literally as possible. He enclosed with it a version in Sim'algaḡ, using an orthography he developed.

deception, and within it saw suffering on all sides of the land question. Charles Russ of Laxgalts'ap told the Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs that the people knew Powell and O'Reilly "were troubled in their hearts."<sup>83</sup> Even the lipleet who lived and worked among the Nisga'a could sense that the K'amksiiwaa were straying from their moral obligations. McCullagh, as an Irishman with a love for "mother" England and its global mission, sensed in his racialized language that the white man, in avoiding the rigorously just dealing that was his hallmark, was at risk of moral declension. In the published preamble to his interview with the Nisga'a Land Committee McCullagh made clear the stakes involved: "Any discussion of the Indian question should be perfectly fair and square, and the same logic and rule of equity—the same standard of right which we claim for ourselves should be applied in it. If we cannot, or will not admit this, it seems to me we are not quite White."<sup>84</sup>

For Nisga'a trying to understand the inconsistencies they encountered only one thing was clear, namely that the K'amksiiwaa had trouble holding up the high standard of the very law, the King's *ayuukhl*, that they had brought to the Nisga'a and other Aboriginal peoples of what became British Columbia. In their response to this new threat Nisga'a began to employ the new civilizing tools they had added to their repertoire. Among the most potent of these were literacy, Christianity and the rights of British subjects, especially those rights that protected property. As with their older civilizing acts, Nisga'a looked to a new civilizing act—that of treaty-making with the K'amksiiwaa—to restore balance. Yet the daylight many Nisga'a spoke of with reference to civilizing and Christianizing projects suggests that there was also the hope of

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<sup>83</sup> "Statement of Charles Russ (an Indian)," Naas River, B.C., Nov. 27th, 1889, in Methodist Church of Canada, *Letter from the Methodist Missionary Society*, 65.

<sup>84</sup> "The Indian Land Question," *Hagaga* (May 1910).

something more. The optimism of many Nisga'a who spoke before government commissions hints at their belief that, just as Txeemsim's acts in the distant past and the institution of the potlatch had been boons, so the Nisga'a's full access to the new way held the promise of ushering in a new era marked by the creation of more favourable conditions of life than their ancestors had known.

## Chapter 4

### The Christianization of *Aam*

A key element of the Nisga'a's attempt to acquire K'amksiiwaa knowledge and power that promised to improve their lives was their interest in the Christian forms increasingly available to them after 1860. Nineteenth-century Nisga'a found much that was familiar in the Protestant Christianities that entered their valley. As important as such similarities could be to enabling any potential blurring with or transition into the new faith, arguably more important in tipping the people of the Nass toward a path of engagement was their recognition of alterity, of a strangeness that, when tied to the newcomers and their evident powers, signified that they might offer something worth acquiring and domesticating.

While important for enhancing life in their valley, Nisga'a receptiveness to the new also made them vulnerable to claims—largely from the missionaries—that much of their previous repertoire of supernatural connections needed to be abandoned if they were to benefit from the new religious forms. Some Nisga'a embraced this opportunity to break with their present for a radically different future. More commonly, however, Nisga'a experienced this kind of violent transformation as a difficult purging, a painful scraping down that was a necessary first step to acquiring Christian power. Although attempts to effect dramatic leaps into the new faith may be most visible to our eye, the

Nisga'a's Christianization entailed a diverse array of movements made in relation to Christian forms. Apart from these striking acts a quieter, more complex sort of Christianization also occurred. Propelled by a cultural disposition that opened them to the new, Nisga'a brought aspects of Protestant Christianities into their lives in diverse and creative ways, which almost always entailed interaction with their existing repertoire of religious forms. Religious change in the Nass at the turn of the century was far from the simple act of replacement that totalizing metaphors like conversion imply. The multifaceted way in which the Nisga'a moved into Christian forms—not least their marked ability to combine old and newer ways—underscores the amalgamated nature of their, and perhaps of every, Christianity. When taken together, these different moves contributed to the Christianization of *aam*, the reformulation of the Nisga'a's articulation of the “good” in a Christian idiom.

### **New Supernatural Connections**

The coming of different Western Christianities to the north coast presented fresh opportunities for connecting with supernatural power that the Nisga'a were quick to seize. Nineteenth-century Nisga'a enthusiastically engaged with new and unfamiliar Christian forms with an ease that speaks to both their ability to connect them to their existing religious framework and their capacity to change and accommodate the novel. Nisga'a interest in these religious forms was part of the larger attempt to acquire K'amksiiwaa knowledge and power that promised to improve their lives that we saw in the last chapter. We might think of the Christian forms flowing into the Nass Valley as a special subset of a much broader flow of new goods and ideas at this time, any one of which the Nisga'a might have seen as redolent with supernatural associations. The

Anglican missionary Thomas Dunn, for example, was “much amused” to see large mirrors fastened to two of the largest totem poles in Gitlaxt’aamiks on a visit to the village in 1883. Yet for the owners of the poles, the mirrors’ bright reflective surface clearly connoted the supernatural, and thus it was fitting to place them alongside the “real” beings carved on the pole.<sup>1</sup>

Nisga’a receptivity to many of the newly available artifacts and the supernatural associations they carried may also have been informed by their own concern that their religious practices be sufficiently universal, that they reflect the cosmos. Taken as a whole, the fulsome repertoire of accumulated crests belonging to the different Nisga’a houses mirrored the known powers of the cosmos. Yet the Nisga’a also knew that this repertoire had the potential to be filled out more completely, through the discovery and acquisition of additional powers from new encounters. Such an open-ended understanding of the supernatural made it difficult for the Nisga’a to ignore new manifestations, and indeed, predisposed them toward engagement with the Christianities before them.<sup>2</sup>

Keeness for many of the Christian forms newly available to them found expression in an interest in baptism. Like Christianizing peoples elsewhere in the history of Christianity, nineteenth-century Nisga’a recognized baptism as a protective rite. During the illness that took his life Doolan’s student Ts’ak’aamaas was anxious to be

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<sup>1</sup> Dunn reasoned that the mirrors were “probably intended for the public use of the villagers,” Kincolith, 20 April 1883, CMS fonds, C.2./O. John Cove, *Shattered Images*, writes that the Nisga’a term for slate mirror, *na haun*, which literally translates as “Shining skin of fresh salmon,” connotes shininess, a supernatural attribute, 170-71. George T. Emmons, *Slate Mirrors of the Tsimshian* (New York: Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, 1921) offers an early ethnographic discussion of “Tsimshian” (including Nisga’a) stone mirrors. Emmons argues that these peoples rapidly discarded their stone mirrors for small and cheap looking glasses that traders began to bring to the area in the eighteenth century, 10.

<sup>2</sup> See Cove, *Shattered Images*, 121, on how among the Tsimshianic-speaking peoples crests collectively enabled an incorporation of all “being-powers” in the cosmos.

baptized. Doolan attempted to explain that baptism was “but a sign” of one’s profession of faith, to which Ts’ak’aamaas apparently replied that “he trusted alone in Jesus but his heart would be stronger if he was baptised.”<sup>3</sup> Instead of embracing Nisga’a enthusiasm for baptism Doolan’s successors continued to be wary in their administrations of it, leaving a need that was more willingly filled by Methodist missionaries when they arrived on the river in the mid-1870s. Within a few years of the arrival of the Methodist Missionary Society William Collison, a missionary not known for making hyperbolic statements, reported that “[w]ith but few exceptions they have baptized all the Indians at Fort Simpson and Skeena Mouth and on the Naas they are pursuing the same course.”<sup>4</sup> In welcoming the Methodists to the north coast the Nisga’a and their Tsimshian neighbours found *lipleet* (missionaries) whose willingness to administer baptism more closely paralleled their desire to receive it. In light of this changing economy of baptism the Anglican bishop William Bompas, reporting on the North Pacific Mission during his visit over the winter of 1877-78, advised that the practice of baptism be more widely extended.<sup>5</sup>

One new religious object the *lipleet* brought with them that attracted the attention of the Nisga’a more than any other was their Bible. In the *halayt* (supernatural) performance Eagle Chief Agwii Laxha staged for Duncan on his second visit to the river in 1860 “the Book,” as nineteenth-century Nisga’a called it, figured prominently. The *lipleet* had Sim’oogit Laxha’s book, the chief declared, and through his help they would learn about Chief of Heavens’ wishes for them. Compared to the richness of the

<sup>3</sup> Doolan, Journal, 15 April 1866, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

<sup>4</sup> Collison, Metlakatla, Annual Letter, 1881, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

<sup>5</sup> William Bompas, Athabasca, “Kincolith Mission Station, Report of Result of Episcopal Visit December 1877,” to Wright, Kincolith, 22 March 1878, CMS fonds, C.2./O.3.

Nisga'a's repertoire of sacred objects at this time—which consisted of a wide range of artifacts, including rattles, carved wooden masks with moveable parts, whistles, drums, robes and headdresses—the Protestant evangelical missionaries arrived with a relative paucity of their own to contribute. Material expressions of their faith had been pruned back, “purified” by the English Reformation they would have said, and they looked suspiciously upon the attempts of contemporaries in the Church of England to introduce practices that smacked of “ritual.”<sup>6</sup> Like a prism the Bible of the Protestant missionaries seemed to have concentrated all the supernatural power available to humanity between its covers, and the Nisga'a were quick to discern its revered place in the lipleet's cosmology. Yet Nisga'a interest in this hallowed object also stemmed from their larger curiosity about the marvel of writing and literacy that it embodied so well. Just as they had suspected their first missionary Doolan of writing Duncan to tell him at what price they would trade their furs on the Nass, the Nisga'a also grasped the new potential for direct communication with Chief of Heavens. The request of a woman who came to see Doolan and Cunningham one day during their first winter on the river is indicative of the possibilities for supernatural communication Nisga'a saw in writing. She asked how her daughter in Victoria was doing, and when the missionaries replied that only God knew,

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<sup>6</sup> When, for example, Charlie B. Robinson, an English supporter of the Anglican missions in the Diocese of Caledonia, mistakenly believed that McCullagh had asked for an “altar” for the Nisga'a community of Gwiñahaa, he threatened to “not move another finger to help foist ritualism on poor Indians.” The missionary attempted to reassure him of his lineage as an Evangelical, explaining that they needed a “Communion Table;” that they had refused a “very valuable” gift of a cross to place on it when the church was built; and that there were no “accessories” of any kind in the upriver churches. Charlie B. Robinson, Secretary, Caledonia Missionary Union, Wallington, Surrey, to McCullagh, 18 May 1912, and McCullagh, Aiyansh, to Bishop DuVernet, 27 June 1912, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

the woman requested they ask him, “by writing the question on some paper and putting it outside the house that he might see it.”<sup>7</sup>

Nisga’a approached the Bible from their own hermeneutic tradition for interpreting the sacred, which recognized the text as an object of supernatural power and authority. The liplet who brought their Bibles did not need to convince them of their inherent value as a new way of connecting with the supernatural. Reverence for and interest in “the Book” preceded the Nisga’a’s ability to read it themselves, and continued as they worked on translating its verses and digesting the meanings to be found in it. In reporting the first death since his arrival at the new Methodist mission at Laxgalts’ap in 1877, Alfred Green described an old man who had initially opposed him, but in his failing health had asked his children to bring him to the mission:

He was very anxious for us to be with him. He spent much of the time in prayer. Several times he asked for a Bible; I sent him one. The day before he died, I saw the Bible tied to the top of a stick about three feet long which was set in the ground near his head, I asked “why do you tie the Book there.” The old man answered, “I can’t read, but I know that is the great Word, so when my heart gets weak, I just look up at the Book, and say, ‘Father that is your Book, no one to teach me to read, very good you help me, then my heart gets stronger, the bad goes away.’”<sup>8</sup>

Before he died, the man asked Green to put his name in another new book, the class book. Downriver at the CMS mission of Gingolx the resident missionary Henry Schutt noted the unusual attentiveness with which his congregation listened to the Gospel message. “Frequently, after Service some of them will come into the Mission house,” he

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<sup>7</sup> Doolan, Journal, 1 January 1865, CMS fonds, C.2./O. Many Aboriginal peoples without writing recognized it as a powerful tool upon encountering European literacy, although Peter Wogan, “Perceptions of European Literacy in Early Contact Situations,” *Ethnohistory* 41, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 407-29, correctly points to the need for an ethnographic approach when interpreting European accounts of native responses. For the neighbouring Tsimshian, Neylan, *The Heavens are Changing*, 229, argues that even after a century of contact with Europeans, certain written objects, like the Bible, were considered halayt.

<sup>8</sup> Green, letter dated 8 February 1878, in *Missionary Notices of the Methodist Church of Canada* (May 1878): 296.

explained, “and ask to have the text again read to them, and to be retold some of the words they have heard, and while so doing we can hear them uttering the words ‘Ahm Matlask’ or good news.”<sup>9</sup>

It was with this great interest in accessing the aam to be found in the lipleet’s Bible that the Nisga’a made their own informal translations in the years before they began to work with the missionaries on publishing the scriptures in Sim’algax. Schutt again noted the “great eagerness” of his congregants in Gingolx to listen to the Gospel message in his report the following year, adding that many times during the week they were coming to the mission house “bringing texts and seeking for an explanation.”<sup>10</sup> Nisga’a concern with accessing the contents of the Christian Bible in this period conjoined with the sense of urgency among some Protestant missionaries like McCullagh that the book be translated. The sustained work of translating Christian scriptures into Sim’algax finally began in the mid-1880s through the efforts of both Collison and McCullagh, although the undertaking soon fell entirely to the latter given his unusual linguistic abilities. With the assistance of Nisga’a catechists, McCullagh translated the four Gospels, an Old Testament history, the *Book of Common Prayer*, as well as two grammars.<sup>11</sup> McCullagh’s description of the translation of *Epistle to the Romans* over the winter of 1893-4, in which catechists from the evening Bible class each offered their own translations, suggests the vital role of Nisga’a in this process, although the lipleet noted that they were “very much inclined to run off into side discussions, and have to be

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<sup>9</sup> Schutt, Kincolith, Annual Letter, 1 February 1879, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

<sup>10</sup> Schutt, Kincolith, Annual Letter, 3 February 1880, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

<sup>11</sup> Moeran, *McCullagh of Aiyansh*, 47. The *Book of Common Prayer* is a prayer book containing the words for liturgical service worship in the Church of England.

held down to the point with a firm hand.”<sup>12</sup> Aside from this great collaborative effort, the two parties also worked on their own to recast the Scriptures into Nisga’a words. While describing how after an exhaustive morning he would typically set aside his afternoon or evening for translating, McCullagh noted that “[t]here are, however, lots of interruptions, for Indians are always coming in with their Bibles, to have each one a certain text translated, explained and type-written.”<sup>13</sup>

Though assigning great importance to the Book, Christianizing Nisga’a were less clear about how this new source of power related to other connections to the supernatural realm they had acquired. In the different ways they answered this question Nisga’a were decidedly less keen about the prospect of abandoning all other means of communication than their *lipleet* were. When an elderly man opened Chief Agwii Laxha’s performance before Duncan on his second visit to the Nass in 1860 with the question, “Heaven is about to put away the heart (the way) of the ancient people, is it?” he gave voice to what appeared to be a troubling corollary of accepting the Book.<sup>14</sup> Having visited Duncan first at Fort Simpson and then the CMS mission at Metlakatla Nisga’a were aware of his demands that the Tsimshian give up their “Ahlied [halayt] or Indian devilry” as well as the practice of distributing property at their feasts.<sup>15</sup> Nisga’a attempts to explain that some of their older practices had also come from heaven had little effect on their *lipleet*. Nisgeel, a *halayt* healer, responded to McCullagh’s effort to convince him to give up his work by trying to explain “that God had delivered the secrets of their craft to them just as He had given the Bible and its laws to the white-man.” When McCullagh asked him how

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<sup>12</sup> McCullagh, *Further Extracts from Rev. J.B. McCullagh’s Journal*, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Moeran, *McCullagh of Aiyansh*, 161.

<sup>14</sup> Duncan, in “The Indians of British Columbia,” *Church Missionary Intelligencer* (April 1865): 114.

<sup>15</sup> This was the first of Duncan’s village rules. See “Laws of Metlakatla,” 15 October 1862, William Duncan fonds.

he knew that God had given the Nisga'a the halayt, Nisgeel "replied that part of the initiation ceremony was to go up to heaven to receive the 'naknok-amuk.'" The liplet then read a couple of verses from the Bible to the effect that no human had ever gone up to heaven, and they parted, their different views unchanged.<sup>16</sup>

While Nisga'a were accepting the Bible as a powerful new path to heaven there was for some a palpable narrowing of contact points with supernatural power. We can see this perception in the concerns of neophytes like Sarah, the wife of Daniel Lester (K'ee<sub>x</sub>kw), one of the chiefs who left Gitlaxt'aamiks to found the Christian settlement at Aiyansh. Lester spent his later years sitting by the fire, where he would compose his own hymns and sing them. His wife became alarmed at the practice, as Lester complained to McCullagh in search of clarification: "Behold, I pray to the Almighty Father, and I have made my prayer to sing, and I sing continually. But Sarah says I am breaking the law, because all hymns are made in heaven, and then handed down to the white man, who keeps them in a book; and if we sing anything that is not in the book, then we break the law." McCullagh assured Lester that the people on whom Chief of Heavens bestowed the power to make hymns need not be K'amksiiwaa, "for the Spirit can put a hymn into the heart of an Indian just as well," and after having him sing one of his hymns concluded that it was indeed from above.<sup>17</sup>

The Bible increasingly enjoyed the status of being the ultimate authority on Nisga'a religious practices. Schutt's successor at Gingolx, missionary Thomas Dunn,

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<sup>16</sup> McCullagh, C.M.S. Station Aei-yansh, Nass River, BC, to Revd. C.C. Fenn, M.A., Secretary C.M.S, Salisbury Square, London, 15 April 1885, CMS fonds, C.2./O.2. McCullagh spelled the shaman's name "Niskēl." It is unclear what precisely is meant by "Naknok-amuk," but translated literally it seems to suggest to listen (*amukws*) to spirits (*naxnok*). The specific verses McCullagh used in his refutation of Nisgeel's claim were both from the *Gospel of John* (1:18 and 3:13).

<sup>17</sup> McCullagh, *Red Indians I Have Known*, 23-4.

experienced some difficulty introducing the sacrament of Holy Communion. Resistance of the villagers stemmed in part from a warning from William Duncan, who in a growing rift with the CMS had cautioned them that shortly after introducing this rite the Society would introduce a collection and begin asking for money.<sup>18</sup> Dunn noted that one of the men who had most vigorously opposed the introduction had gone to every person with any knowledge of English in an effort to understand the meaning of the verses, and having satisfied himself, relented. This kind of authentication process seems to have shaped the villagers' path of Christianization more generally, as Dunn explained:

Now I have found that when the Christians here have read for themselves and clearly understand that any duty is taught in the Word of God, they always accept that duty. They have great reverence for God's Word, and if at any time I tell them that they ought to do so and so, or they ought not to do so and so, they ask, "Does the Bible say that?" I answer it does. Then they want to have it pointed out to them. When they have fully satisfied themselves that it is there, they make no further objections.<sup>19</sup>

As an arbiter of correct practices, Nisga'a looked to the Bible for validation of not only new rites, but also older ones. In Aiyansh, for example, Nisga'a Christians defended their *yukw* (settlement feast) by citing the expensive oils that Joseph of Arimathea used for the burial of Jesus' body after his crucifixion.<sup>20</sup>

Nisga'a adoption of the Bible as a litmus test of proper conduct occurred within a colonizing world in which power increasingly flowed through textual practices. In their negotiations with white newcomers Nisga'a quickly learned that words on paper, like the character papers or letters of reference they and other Aboriginal peoples travelling to cities in the south asked their missionaries to write for them, opened doors. Words on

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<sup>18</sup> Duncan's opposition to the introduction of the rite of Holy Communion was one of the main points of disagreement in the well-known conflict between himself and the CMS, which has been examined elsewhere. See, for example, Usher, *William Duncan of Metlakatla*.

<sup>19</sup> Dunn, letter dated 20 April 1883, in *Church Missionary Intelligencer* (July 1883): 443.

<sup>20</sup> McCullagh, "Another Chapter of History," 40. CMS fonds.

paper were a register the K'amksiiwaa seemed to respect, a fact reflected in the request of the chiefs and people of Gingolx that Indian Reserve Commissioner O'Reilly give them a "strong paper with the Queen's hand to it, so that [their] hearts may be strong" when they looked at it, knowing that no one would be able to take their reserve away from their children.<sup>21</sup> Within this changing context Nisga'a applied this powerful new technology to their own lives. When most of the upriver chiefs and some matriarchs accepted Chief Niisyok's challenge that they join him in cutting down their totem poles in early 1911, they bound themselves to carrying out their resolve by asking their lipleet to draw up a paper for them to sign.<sup>22</sup> Christianizing Nisga'a recognized the power written words could have over human action. In fact, they attributed the recent lapse in drinking that had led to this new conviction in part to the removal of the pledge cards from the church that had kept them sober.<sup>23</sup>

### **Self-Christianization**

Throughout the period of Christianization studied here Nisga'a made efforts to incorporate Christianities, or more specifically aspects of them, into their lives—a phenomenon that we might call "self-Christianization."<sup>24</sup> From our perspective these endeavours are most evident on the peripheries of missionary control, where they flourished in the space Nisga'a found to manoeuvre and engage with new religious forms

<sup>21</sup> Chiefs and people of Kincolith, to O'Reilly, 5 October 1884, LAC, Indian Affairs, vol. 11007.

<sup>22</sup> McCullagh, "Another Chapter of History," 49. CMS fonds.

<sup>23</sup> McCullagh, "Another Chapter of History," 35. CMS fonds.

<sup>24</sup> My use of the term self-Christianization and understanding of this facet within many historical instances of Christianization are indebted to discussions with Kenneth Mills, as well as his own exploration of this process in the mid-colonial Andes. See Kenneth Mills, *Idolatry and Its Enemies: Colonial Andean Religion and Extirpation, 1640-1750* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), and Kenneth Mills, "The Naturalisation of Andean Christianities," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 6, *Reform and Expansion 1500-1660*, ed. R. Po-chia Hsia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 508-39.

and practices as they saw fit. It is in such areas that we can better imagine what Nisga'a found attractive about the Protestant Christianities that had come to their valley, relatively free as they were from the interactions with lipleet that otherwise so profoundly shaped the course of their Christianization. Unfortunately, this Christianizing on the margins of missionary influence by its nature also placed it on the edge of the missionaries' view, upon which we are so dependent for our historical reconstructions. We are given only hints of what was likely a significant phenomenon in the Christianization of the Nisga'a and other north coast peoples. McCullagh describes, for example, his shock when he began to receive letters from young men belonging to a distant tribe. A year earlier while hunting they had met one of the missionary's students, and received from him a few copies of *Hagaga*, the occasional periodical McCullagh had started printing in Sim'algax<sup>25</sup>. Over the winter the young men had taught themselves to read and write at their village, substituting burnt sticks and pieces of split wood for pencils and slates. Using the few lessons in the periodical, they informed the lipleet that they had already "repented to God," and would be coming to Aiyansh for further instruction and baptism.<sup>26</sup>

The early years of the upriver Christian settlement of Aiyansh also offer us a window onto Nisga'a efforts to Christianize themselves. Here, in the four years between its founding by a handful of people who broke away from the nearby village of Gitlaxt'aamiks and the arrival of James McCullagh in 1883, a nascent Christian

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<sup>25</sup> These young men were likely Gitksan, given the apparent ease with which they were able to learn to read Sim'algax. Gitksanimx, the Gitksan language, and Sim'algax are closely related, and considered by some linguists to be dialects of the same language, although speakers of each tend to view these respective languages as separate. *Hagaga*, which McCullagh translated as "The Key," began publication in 1893 after the arrival of the mission press and offered articles on an eclectic range of topics, as well as lessons and exercises in Nisga'a grammar.

<sup>26</sup> Moeran, *McCullagh of Aiyansh*, 45. McCullagh wrote that the young men did come and stay at Aiyansh for some time, "and eventually became consistent Christians."

community emerged largely through Nisga'a efforts. This brief period presents us a rare glimpse into Nisga'a efforts to incorporate Christianities, or more specifically aspects of them, into their lives in a less supervised context at this time.

Aiyansh's creation as a new Christian community had its origins in a division between the chiefs of Gitlaxt'aamiks. The nature of this split is unclear, but receptivity to the Christianities circulating in the valley in the 1870s fell on either side of its fault line. Gitlaxt'aamiks was the target of evangelizing efforts from both the CMS and Wesleyan Methodists. Its location near the head of navigation on the river, where the grease trail to the interior began, gave it a strategic importance each society recognized in its bid to claim the Gitksan villages that lay beyond it for themselves. Tsimshian trader Arthur Wellington Clah resided with his Nisga'a wife in the village for a time in the 1860s, where he spent some of his hours proselytizing. In the late 1870s native teachers, including William Henry Pierce, another Tsimshian Christian promoter on the north coast, and a Gingolx man named Arthur conducted schools there. An evangelizing visit by lipleet Robert Tomlinson in December 1878, however, appears to have boiled up tensions simmering beneath the surface. Tomlinson came up bearing two canoes loaded with lumber donated by the Christians at his mission of Gingolx from their new sawmill, intending to put up a schoolhouse in the village. The accounts we have of this endeavour suggest that Tomlinson's audacity triggered a commensurate response from some in the village. According to the missionary's reconstruction of events, when he started to build "the heathen portion of the tribe" quickly stopped him. Returning downriver with the

lumber, Tomlinson stopped at the nearby spot known as Aiyansh and put up the schoolhouse there.<sup>27</sup>

Probably as Tomlinson had calculated, the empty schoolhouse became a focal point for those in Gitlax̱t'aamiks interested in the "new way." In his annual letter the missionary noted that several families had promised to move there the following summer. The preemption of the land on which the schoolhouse sat by a K'amksiiwaa settler appears to have served as the trigger that precipitated the formation of a separate Christian village. Raven chief Ṯxaatk'anlaxhatkw, now baptized Abraham Wright, tore down his house and moved to the site.<sup>28</sup> He was soon joined at Aiyansh by a few others, notably the Wolf chief K'eexkw. In the following years a small Christian community emerged around the schoolhouse. Two years after it had begun Collison noted that a recent addition of ten people had brought the growing population up to forty.<sup>29</sup> For their ministrations the settlers relied on the Gingolx native teacher Arthur, who moved down from Gitlax̱t'aamiks with them, and other Nisga'a evangelists from this older mission, including a couple named Patrick and Margaret. They also received the occasional visit from a CMS missionary when he was in the area, who provided them with objects like a flag or some texts. At first the CMS kept its focus on securing the larger prize, Gitlax̱t'aamiks. But as the settlement grew and head chief Sgat'iin showed little sign of relenting in his opposition they came to accept that Aiyansh should be the site of any future mission, and assured K'eexkw, now Daniel Lester, that his requests for a white

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<sup>27</sup> Tomlinson, Kincolith, Annual Letter, March 1879, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

<sup>28</sup> The story of Ṯxaatk'anlaxhatkw's move is told by McCullagh, *Red Indians I Have Known*, 6-8, and Moeran, *McCullagh of Aiyansh*, 26-9, drawing on the missionary's papers.

<sup>29</sup> Collison, Metlakatla, to Duncan, 4 October 1881, William Duncan fonds, noted this increase despite the apparent effort of an early settler to discourage Nisga'a from moving to Aiyansh by warning them that the government would tear down their houses and fine any who built on the site.

teacher would be met. This new settlement had essentially all the basic “modules” from which to forge a Christianity, if in rudimentary form: a congregation, a place in which to worship, and a clergy.<sup>30</sup>

When James McCullagh arrived on the north coast and took up his post as European lipleet for the new CMS mission of Aiyansh, he found a fledgling Christian community already in place. The Aiyansh Christians had developed a liturgy, which McCullagh described:

The Service commenced by singing a hymn in English (which could not be said to be understood) followed by a prayer by one of the men, in which he was encouraged or excited, I hardly know which, by a chorus of meaningless ejaculations on the part of those assembled; the prayer itself very often being nothing more than a few set phrases reiterated in various tones of voice; a second hymn, a prayer as before, then a sermon and a hymn to conclude; the movements of the congregation being regulated throughout by such order as Stand up. Sit down +c.<sup>31</sup>

Their service, in its rough outlines—the movements through prayers, hymns and utterances in different tones—echoed what one might have encountered in a contemporary Anglican parish church in Victoria or Britain, tying the new Aiyansh worshippers into a Christian communion that increasingly spanned the globe. Yet, as his unsympathetic description suggests, their new lipleet had little appreciation for this localization of Anglican worship service. Sensitivity to tampering with the liturgy appears to have been mutual. McCullagh’s ensuing efforts to reform their liturgy, to get his new parishioners to unite with him in worshipping in a manner “as an English congregation would do with their prayer books in their hands,” touched off a battle. McCullagh complained that Wright “seemed to think that I had come to Aiyansh to be taught by him instead of to teach him.” The chief soon organized a “worship strike”

<sup>30</sup> The notion of Christian “modules” draws from Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 14.

<sup>31</sup> McCullagh, Iyansh Upper Naas River, to F.E. Wigram, Secretary, 4 December 1884, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

against McCullagh, and backed down only when the lipleet announced he would be leaving.<sup>32</sup> This conflict marked the opening of a new chapter in the upriver Nisga'a's path of Christianization, for the addition of a strong-willed lipleet changed its dynamic.

Interestingly, the acquisition of a white teacher appears to have figured prominently in the Aiyansh settlers' imagination of their Christianity. In these early years Lester repeatedly reminded lipleet who passed through the settlement of the as-yet-unfulfilled promise that they would get a resident missionary. When McCullagh arrived the chief explained to him that before the Irishman was born he had prayed to the Great Spirit to send him to his people.<sup>33</sup> From Lester's perspective and probably that of others McCullagh was, despite his frequent attempts to dictate the shape their Christianity would take, part of the Aiyansh Christians' plan for their Christianization. Throughout the coming decades their self-Christianizing efforts would be dominated by interactions with their lipleet as much as with the other Christian forms they had acquired. They would continue to both accommodate and balk at his attempts to prune the "wild growth" of their budding Christianity.<sup>34</sup>

Evidence of self-Christianization, of Nisga'a engaging with forms of Christianity, can also be found in areas where they were more closely supervised by their lipleet, but we must look harder to find it. In these places it is more likely to be entwined with missionary actions and ideas, which tend to obscure our view. While Nisga'a efforts to self-Christianize were rarely independent from the evangelizing efforts of missionaries, we can nonetheless find in many of these engagements Nisga'a testing, processing and "trying on" so to speak the Christian forms before them. Occasionally the missionaries

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<sup>32</sup> Moeran, *McCullagh of Aiyansh*, 34-5.

<sup>33</sup> McCullagh, *Red Indians I Have Known*, 23.

<sup>34</sup> McCullagh, *Red Indians I Have Known*, 38.

who worked and lived on the Nass documented not only the subject of their sermons, but also provided some evidence as to how their Nisga'a hearers received them.

McCullagh's observation in 1910 that his sermons aroused "positive animosity" within his congregation, which "would sing and answer the responses freely, and then look daggers at the pulpit where the faithful mirror of God's word showed them what they really were," raises more questions than answers about Nisga'a reception, but in other cases the responses we have are clearer and suggest more than passive listening or visceral reaction.<sup>35</sup> On one occasion McCullagh came upon a group of Nisga'a in the street discussing a sermon he had just preached on the subject of faith. One of them was puzzled why the biblical patriarch Abraham's son Isaac could be counted among the biblical figures who had shown great faith. Another reasoned that he must have submitted himself to be sacrificed, explaining that in order for him to have packed all the cord-wood up to the mountain he must have been a strong young man who could have easily knocked an older Abraham over and fled if he had wanted. In fact, he speculated, it was doubtful the old man could have lifted him onto the altar. Isaac had to lay himself on it. "What work of faith did he leave undone?" he concluded, "there was nothing left for him to do after that, and therefore he was a sitting-down man all his life afterwards."<sup>36</sup>

Such illuminated readings imply that, although the path the Nisga'a's Christianization took was shaped by impositions from their liplleet, the religious changes it entailed were also woven through their own historically evolving assemblage of understandings and priorities. Nisga'a were not simply reactive to introduced Christian

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<sup>35</sup> McCullagh, "Another Chapter of History," 23.

<sup>36</sup> McCullagh, "The Nishga Indians of the Naas," *Church Missionary Intelligencer* (September 1915): 542. The biblical story of Abraham's attempt to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah, as a test of his faith by the Hebrew god Yahweh, is told in *Book of Genesis* 22.

forms, but approached them from what Sherry Ortner calls “a certain prior and ongoing cultural authenticity.”<sup>37</sup> There was a pragmatic quality to nineteenth-century Nisga’a life, which governed both actions and morality. Nisga’a believed their actions fit within a wider moral universe, in which the quality of those actions was reflected through a sympathetic understanding of causality. Successes as well as disasters—sometimes indicting judgements, such as the volcanic eruption that followed on the heels of a group of boys disrespecting salmon—were the ultimate arbiter of whether Nisga’a individually and collectively were acting appropriately.<sup>38</sup> There are indications throughout this period of Christianization that Nisga’a applied this pragmatic approach to their engagements with Christian forms. Observance of the Sabbath rose early on after people in the lower villages noticed that a number of men suffered accidents while working on this day. Doolan recorded that the Nisga’a began to call Sunday “the bad day” and avoided working on it for this reason.<sup>39</sup>

Nisga’a also took note when those who used new Christian forms seemed to have an advantage over those who did not. In December 1865 Chief Kadounaha and most of the party who had gone with him to trap martens perished after their canoe upset at sea. The only survivor was Cowdaeg, Kadounaha’s nephew and a student at the mission. That the chief and his nephew had called on different helpers in their distress was not lost on either the Nisga’a of the lower villages or their lipleet. “It has made a deep impression

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<sup>37</sup> Sherry B. Ortner, “Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, no. 1 (1995): 180.

<sup>38</sup> The story of *Ksi Baxhl Muhl* (“Where fire ran out”) is a well-known Nisga’a *adaawaḱ* (story) of the eighteenth-century volcanic eruption whose lava killed upriver Nisga’a and pushed the Nass River to the opposite side of the valley. A Nisga’a telling of this story by Roy Azak (Baxk’ap), in which the event is explained as the result of *axgoot*, or irresponsibility, can be found in Nisga’a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga’a Study*, vol. 4, *The Land and Resources*, 223-4.

<sup>39</sup> Doolan, Journal, 11 November 1865, CMS fonds, C.2./O. See also entries for 18 January and 4 March 1866.

on the people,” Doolan noted, “the fact that Kadounaha trusted to the ‘leemy’ to save him, and Cowdaeg on God and the former was lost, and the latter saved.”<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, Nisga’a understood the epidemics that frequently visited them during this period in moral terms, which were increasingly articulated with regard to their degree of commitment to their new faith. By 1915 the worst of these epidemics was behind them. Their population was now growing, the reason for which Chief Timothy Derrick readily explained to the commissioners of the McKenna-McBride Commission who visited his village in that year: “When the people could see their way and know the laws and know what is good and what is wrong, why they went to where it was good, and they stopped all these wicked ways and when they did why of course dying off was cut off as well and now there is an increase.”<sup>41</sup> In the difficult decades before this turnaround Nisga’a had been quick to note the generally lower mortality rates of people who resided or were treated at the missions. Residents of the Methodist village of Laxgalts’ap, for example, apparently drew the attention of their missionary Osterhout more than once to the fact that while several people had died in the nearby non-Christian villages during the winter of 1893, their mission had not lost a single person.<sup>42</sup> The outbreak of what McCullagh called a “very peculiar disease” in the final three months of 1910 sparked a crisis that prompted a heightened measure of introspection among the upriver Nisga’a. A death rate of on average one person per week led the people to speculate on a wide gamut

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<sup>40</sup> Doolan, Journal, 27 December 1865, CMS fonds, C.2./O. Doolan found it difficult to explain what Nisga’a meant by the word “leemy,” but offered that in English it meant “singing.” It may have referred to a type of spirit that could be summoned by singing, as Doolan noted here that when someone became ill and no other cause could be found, Nisga’a attributed it to the leemy that had entered the sick person’s body after some enemy had been singing about him.

<sup>41</sup> “Meeting with the Aiyansh Band,” Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for the Province of British Columbia.

<sup>42</sup> Stanley S. Osterhout, *Annual Report of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Church* (Toronto: Methodist Mission Rooms, 1894), xlix.

of possible causes, including government poisoning of medicine to kill the Nisga'a and take their land, contamination of water from the nearby cemetery, the work of *haldawgit* or witches, the recent suspension of elders from giving the usual prayer in church before the sermon, and not least, McCullagh's readiness "to open up curses of Heaven upon them."<sup>43</sup>

McCullagh in turn offered his own explanation for the sickness, citing the resurgence of the yukw in the valley in the previous two years. Never one to mince his words from the pulpit, the lipleet told his congregation "you have chosen death, and God is giving you death."<sup>44</sup> The rebuke was directed at the settlement feasts over the deceased that the residents of Aiyansh had been holding in the wake of the recent spate of deaths, a practice they were supposed to have given up on joining this Christian settlement, and which had never taken place within its limits. When these few tumultuous months had passed the people of Aiyansh settled back into their church, but not before being readmitted individually as penitents, a step McCullagh felt was an appropriate response to this outbreak of heathenism. Yet the effects of the epidemic and the return to feasting they had prompted continued to ripple through the upper villages. During the Wednesday evening Church Army meeting in Aiyansh shortly afterward, the Gitlaxt'aamiks chief Niisyok "electrified the assembly" by announcing that he was going to cut down his totem pole. If his decision was unexpected, it nonetheless appears to have articulated a widespread sentiment among the upriver Nisga'a that if they did not sever themselves more completely from the heathen practices that continued to beckon

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<sup>43</sup> McCullagh, "Another Chapter of History," 32-7.

<sup>44</sup> McCullagh, "Another Chapter of History," 31.

them they would bring upon themselves the kind of devastation they had seen during the recent epidemic. As Niysyok explained it:

I see where we are, my eyes are opened, except some man of leading position come out against the evil that has enslaved us, and cut it down, our last condition will be worse than our first when our ancestors went about the forest clad in the skins of wild animals. I have therefore decided to come out on the side of Christ, and my first step is to cut down my totem pole. Never again shall I make an offering for the dead or participate in a death feast. No man has talked to me about this, but the Spirit of God has put it into my heart this day. I now challenge any man who says he is true to come out with me and cut down his totem.<sup>45</sup>

By the following Sunday most of the chiefs and matriarchs of Aiyansh and Gitlaxt'aamiks had joined Niysyok in his resolution, pledging to renounce the yukw. The movement culminated in a bout of pole cuttings in the latter village. Death in numbers like the upriver Nisga'a experienced in the autumn of 1910 signified an imbalance that needed to be rectified. Less clear in these years was whether feasting and pole raising, practices that had been so effective in bridging death's rupture in the past, were not, as McCullagh claimed, in fact contributing to their high mortality. No resolution to this and other questions about pre-Christian practices would be reached during this period, as Nisga'a remained ambivalent about leaving behind these older ways.

It is tempting to see in the felling of the remaining totem poles at Gitlaxt'aamiks a few years later in 1918 a similar pattern of renewed religious resolve in response to a traumatic event. In this case the destruction was visited upon Aiyansh, the Christian village. November 1917 saw an unusually strong autumn flood breach the riverbank and completely destroy the mission.<sup>46</sup> Only a couple of weeks before McCullagh had

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<sup>45</sup> McCullagh, "Another Chapter of History," 48-9.

<sup>46</sup> One of my interviewees in New Aiyansh, recalling this event, told me that after the flood the Gitlaxt'aamiks asked their kin at Aiyansh, "Why are you flooded out yet you've accepted Christianity?" George Williams Sr. (Ksdiyaawak), interview by Nicholas May, New Aiyansh, 14 September 2007. This question suggests the degree to which this event may have undermined the community's sense of being on

delivered a condemning sermon, in which he protested against those who he felt were doing all they could to convert Aiyansh into a heathen village. He was particularly grieved that the new town hall his congregants had built was being used for settlement feasts.<sup>47</sup> The destructive flood that followed on the heels of this latest return to feasting sparked a reunification of the upriver Nisga'a who had been split into two villages by the arrival of Christianity, as well as a religious revival that saw the last of the poles removed from the old village. McCullagh's biographer Joseph Moeran writes that the people of Aiyansh "accepted [the flood] as an act of discipline intended for their good, and as a warning to discard the drink evil which had been the cause of their moral deterioration and religious backsliding." Those who resettled at Gitlaxt'aamiks came with "the resolve to abjure that which had so nearly been their spiritual undoing."<sup>48</sup> Nisga'a today often find it difficult to understand the apparent willingness of their ancestors to part with aspects of their culture as they Christianized. Pressure from their lipleet was certainly an important factor, but on its own it was perhaps not enough to convince Nisga'a of the need for this path. Such external influences entwined with a prior logic used by the ancestors that they employed to discern the moral quality of both their actions and the events that impeded on their lives. At times, drastic actions could appear as the best way forward.

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the right path, including their recent decision to begin feasting yet again. Conversely the destruction of the Christian village by flood may have been interpreted as discrediting Christianity, but the Gitlaxt'aamiks' own Christianization at this time and the events that followed suggest that upriver Nisga'a did not take this view from the event.

<sup>47</sup> McCullagh published this sermon, given on 8 November 1917, as *A Call to Repentance and Hope* (Aiyansh: 1917). The missionary's choice of image for the cover, a scene depicting Jesus driving merchants from the temple as described in *Gospel of Matthew* 11:13, was clearly meant to draw a parallel with the Aiyansh villagers' use of their new town hall for holding settlement feasts.

<sup>48</sup> Moeran, *McCullagh of Aiyansh*, 213. The conviction that the totem poles had to be removed does not appear to have been unanimous among upriver Nisga'a, however. Wolf chief Ksdiyaawak related to the anthropologist Marius Barbeau in 1927 that "[t]he people at one time had a fit . . . and chopped down the totem poles. They did not want anybody to keep them up. They cut down ours too. They later burnt them up," Marius Barbeau, *Totem Poles*, vol. 1, *According to Crests and Topics*, 448.

## Familiar Christianities

James McCullagh may have believed that the “mountain” of Christianity was entirely new to the Nisga’a, just emerging from heathen darkness as they were, but nineteenth-century Nisga’a found much that was familiar to them in the K’amksiiwaa’s knowledge of the heavens.<sup>49</sup> Much of the Nisga’a’s Christianization occurred through their adoption of Christian ideas and practices that were recognizable to them. These included practices like baptism, fasting, prayer, singing, marriage and the observance of *haw’ahlkw* (taboos). While each of these practices diverged to some extent from earlier Nisga’a understandings, they contained enough overlap to become points of convergence between older ways and the new Protestant Christianities. A number of Christian rules resonated with Nisga’a concerns about purity, for example. Doolan noted the Nisga’a practice in the 1860s of hunters keeping their guns and nets outside the house when women were menstruating, out of a belief that a woman’s contact at this time with tools used by a hunter was dangerous.<sup>50</sup> Grace Nelson (Axdii Kiiskw), an elder in Gingolx, told me that the lipleet William Collison “taught the ladies how to conduct themselves when they’re on the holy place,” referring to the sanctuary at the front of the church. “[E]ven if a woman is pregnant” she explained, “she’s not allowed on there yet. That’s what we heard amongst our mothers in the village. You had to be perfectly clean to go on the holy place.”<sup>51</sup>

Some aspects of the Christian cosmology introduced by the lipleet paralleled nineteenth-century Nisga’a understandings of the world so closely that Nisga’a appear to

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<sup>49</sup> Moeran, *McCullagh of Aiyansh*, 62.

<sup>50</sup> Doolan, Journal, 1 June 1865, CMS fonds, C.2./O. The anthropologist Viola Garfield noted this taboo among the Tsimshianic-speaking peoples, *The Tsimshian Indians and Their Arts*, 40.

<sup>51</sup> Grace Nelson (Axdii Kiiskw), interview by Nicholas May, Gingolx, 28 August 2007.

have viewed them as but new tellings or reiterations of familiar concepts. The two worldviews shared a fundamental structural divide between the earth and a realm above known as *laxha* (sky or heaven) that was the ultimate repository of supernatural power. Both understood light to be a principal quality of this supernatural power as it traversed the gap between realms. In preaching on the New Testament text within which Jesus describes himself as “the light of the world,” McCullagh noted that this topic “to an Indian has an interest which few other subjects possess.” He explained that for his hearers this biblical passage echoed their own story about how the world was initially in darkness before Txeemsim stole the daylight from Chief of Heavens.<sup>52</sup>

Indeed Christianizing Nisga’a often drew on a shared metaphor of light to describe the coming of Christianity to their valley. Several speeches given to Alexander Sutherland, the General Secretary of the Methodist Missionary Society, when he visited Laxgalts’ap in late 1885 as part of a larger tour of British Columbia, attest to the central place of light in the Nisga’a’s understanding of Christianity, and how their use of it bridged their transition into their new religion. In his address Niisgabook, described as “a blind man, not a Christian,” related to the Secretary how “Chief Mountain called for a new lamp, and it came; but sometimes it is almost put out. The sun comes over one mountain, then over another and another. So the sun is coming to us, and soon all will have the light.”<sup>53</sup> A chief named William Jeffers used the idiom of light to even greater poetic effect in offering a history of how Christianity was changing them:

For a long time we were very deep in the bad and in darkness. So were all the villages. But God’s Son came and brought the light, and we took it, and began to

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<sup>52</sup> James B. McCullagh, “Autumn Leaves: An account of a trek to Meziadin and back, September – October 1906,” *Aiyansh Notes* (1907-8).

<sup>53</sup> General Secretary [Alexander Sutherland], “Notes of a Tour among the Missions of British Columbia II,” *The Missionary Outlook* (November 1885): 169. Niisgabook appears here as “Nispuck.”

work for God. We have had two leaders, Mr. Green and Mr. Crosby, who have been lifting up the light. Mr. Green came here where the darkness was so great, and we are beginning to see the light. A rent in the cloud over the mountain enables us to see a little. A few years ago we could not have said this. All were in darkness.<sup>54</sup>

Inside these and other speeches made throughout the period of Christianization Nisga'a drew on deeply engrained cultural metaphors of light to articulate the religious renaissance they were experiencing with the coming of Christianity. Through so doing one senses that they were telling a familiar story, offering a new telling of the coming of light and its promise to make life better for them.

The Christian God brought by the Protestant missionaries is an example of a Christian form that blended easily with preexisting Nisga'a ideas of the supernatural, and in this way, facilitated the process of Christianization. Nineteenth-century Nisga'a showed a familiarity with the Christian supernatural that startled some of the lipleet who began working among them. In September 1860, during William Duncan's second visit to the Nass River, the Eagle chief Agwii Laxha staged a halayt performance in his upriver village of Gitwinksihlkw in honour of the missionary's visit. Desiring not to offend his guests Duncan grudgingly attended, but noted that he chose not to return the "many kind glances" given him so as to make clear that he was there against his will. Despite Agwii Laxha's assurances to the contrary Duncan was in fact shocked by the performance, albeit for an unexpected reason. Afterward he described it in his journal:

Presently an elderly man came from behind the curtain, holding a long rod in his hand. He solemnly paced the floor in front of the curtain for a little time, and then said, in a strain of inquiry, "Heaven is about to put away the heart (the way) of the ancient people, is it?" A voice replied that it was even so. He then said something about the book and myself, which I could not catch, as these Indians have a dialect of their own, which differs in some respects from the Tsimshian. This sounded so strange that I began to feel interested.

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<sup>54</sup> General Secretary [Alexander Sutherland], "Notes of a Tour," 170.

Presently the chief, Agweelakkah, appeared from behind the curtain. He was dressed in his robes, and held a rattle of a peculiar shape in his hand. He had a thick rope round his neck of red dyed and undyed bark, twisted together and tied into a rose, which rested on his chest. His dress was pretty and becoming. He first turned towards me, and said something which I cannot recall; and then, putting himself into a beautiful attitude, with one hand stretched out and his eyes directed towards heaven, in a solemn voice he thus addressed God—“Pity us, great Father in heaven, pity us. Give us thy good book to do us good and clear away our sins. This chief (pointing to me) has come to tell us about thee. It is good, great Father. We want to hear. Who ever came to tell our forefathers thy will? No, no. But this chief has pitied us and come. He has thy book. We will hear. We will receive thy word. We will obey.” As he uttered one of the last sentences a voice said, “Your speech is good.” As I gazed and listened, I felt as I can scarcely describe how, for I was by no means expecting to witness what I had.<sup>55</sup>

Here and in other instances nineteenth-century Nisga’a made it clear that they understood the Christian God to be Sim’oogit Laxha, or Chief of Heavens. As we have seen, the Chief of Heavens, as a supernatural being and grandfather of the culture hero Txeemsim, was a significant fixture within Nisga’a cosmology. Agwii Laxha’s performance before the first lipleet to visit the river was a harbinger of the way Nisga’a in coming decades would frame new Christian ideas about a powerful supernatural fatherly figure who resided in heaven within the context of their own stories about Sim’oogit Laxha. For the Nisga’a, the Christian God’s various meanings were rooted not only in sanctioned evangelical messages about him, but in their own understandings of the role of Chief of Heavens in Nisga’a history.

A chief in the sky appears to have already been a fixture in Nisga’a cosmology at the onset of the story of their Christianization examined here. Some scholars of the Tsimshianic-speaking peoples, of which the Nisga’a are part, have expressed skepticism about the existence of such a figure before contact with the K’amksiiwaa. John Cove, for example, notes that his first reaction to the concept was skepticism, “since it smacked of

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<sup>55</sup> Duncan, in “The Indians of British Columbia,” *Church Missionary Intelligencer* (April 1865): 114-5.

missionary influences,” although he could only conclude that its “validity,” by which he meant its pre-contact existence, was “difficult to assess.”<sup>56</sup> The earliest recorded versions of *adaawak* (histories) make numerous references to Sim’oogit Laxha, but again we cannot assume that these accounts were immune to Christian ideas and concepts that were working their way through Aboriginal societies on the Pacific slope well before the arrival of the first lipleet.

What seems more clear is that the Nisga’a had a number of ideas about supernatural power, many of them associating it with daylight and ultimately the sun or sky. The sun was important for the Wählingiat, the Nisga’a ancestors, who had several names for it, including K’am Ligil Hahlhaahl.<sup>57</sup> With reference to the Tsimshianic-speaking peoples more broadly, Marjorie Halpin argues that one can find running through mythological contexts and ritual action the idea “that power in its pure or generalized aspect is the light (heat) or potency of Heaven (which is personified as the Chief of Heaven or Chief Sun),” even though it more commonly appeared refracted into myriad physical personifications.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, pre-Christian Nisga’a may not have understood their world in such a systematized way. While we may not be able to ascertain how well rooted the concept of a Chief of Heavens was in nineteenth-century Nisga’a cosmology, the important point to keep in mind is that Nisga’a ideas about the supernatural were always changing. Any zero-point baseline against which to measure the changes we seek to understand has been drawn through a world in flux. By 1860, the beginning of our

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<sup>56</sup> Cove, *Shattered Images*, 108, footnote 2.

<sup>57</sup> See Nisga’a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga’a Study*, vol. 1, *Nisga’a Origins*, 8-10, for discussion of the importance of the sun to the Wählingiat.

<sup>58</sup> Halpin, “‘Seeing’ in Stone,” 28.

period of Christianization, Sim'oogit Laxha was well entrenched as a supernatural figure in the Nisga'a world.

Whatever his origins, the pre-Christian Sim'oogit Laxha was distinct in a number of ways from the Christian God that Nisga'a came to understand him to be in this period. Although located above the clouds that coalesced around the highest mountain peak at Magoonhl Lisims—the headwaters of the Nass River—which meant it required some effort to reach, Chief of Heavens' home was nevertheless connected to the valley. This home, or the vast open country of laxha more generally, was a source of supernatural power in Nisga'a cosmology, as Txeemsim demonstrated when he returned there and stole the container holding daylight.<sup>59</sup> Shamans in vision quest experiences and, after the introduction of secret societies, initiates, travelled to heaven where they received power. Yet, as if in reflection of his far-off abode, Chief of Heavens was a distant figure who had little to do with everyday life. More than one story records his annoyance when the noise of human beings below disturbed his rest.<sup>60</sup> A number of adaawaḱ relate how he might be summoned to take pity on the Nisga'a when they were in distress. If Chief of Heavens was slow in offering help, it was not an unknown practice among Nisga'a to shame him with insults, the utmost being to call him a “great slave.”<sup>61</sup> In the 1980s Roy Azak (Baxk'ap) related a history concerning a canoe party that was caught in a violent storm as it was coming around Cape Fox. Convinced they were about to perish, the chief called out to Sim'oogit Laxha, asking him to “[I]ook upon us and save us for we are about to die

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<sup>59</sup> Nisga'a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga'a Study*, vol. 1, *Nisga'a Origins*, 60.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, the story “Rotten Feathers,” related by Sim'oogit Sagawaan in Gingolx in 1894, in Nisga'a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga'a Study*, vol. 2, *Nisga'a Clan Histories*, 42-5.

<sup>61</sup> To call a person a slave, a person devoid of social status or freedom, was perhaps the greatest insult in Nisga'a society, and there is much evidence that this idea continued into the period examined here. Duncan noted the use of this insult among the Tsimshian shortly after his arrival on the north coast, “First Report of Fort Simpson,” February 1858, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

all alone.” An answer came in the form of whales, who put the canoe between them and carried them to the safety of the shore.<sup>62</sup>

Indeed, as Baxk’ap noted in telling this story, Chief of Heavens often used animals as messengers to teach the Nisga’a, and it was to the different types of beings in the world below, each with their respective powers, that Nisga’a most often looked for sources of supernatural power. Long before they began to weave Christianities into their lives, Nisga’a understood power to be diffuse, available in its many forms. The shaman, in her or his individualistic quest for helpers, provides perhaps the best example of the seemingly limitless number of sources from which power could be obtained. In her overview of Tsimshian halayt practitioners Guédon notes that shamans included among their helpers all kinds of animals, astronomical bodies, phenomena, objects and other entities.<sup>63</sup> Chief of Heavens, then, resided above a world brimming with diffuse yet very tangible powers.

Both Nisga’a and their lipleet used the phrase Chief of Heavens to describe the Christian God. This borrowing of a pre-Christian concept was one of the few instances where missionaries capitalized on the many aspects of Nisga’a cosmology onto which Christian ideas might be fixed. Like Duncan before him, McCullagh had been surprised to find upon his arrival on the Nass the Nisga’a “acknowledging the existence of God as a Spirit.”<sup>64</sup> Within his numerous translations and publications he frequently substituted God with “Chief of Heaven” or even the expression “Simoigit Lakha,” a translation that would have clearly encouraged nineteenth-century Nisga’a, many of whom had already

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<sup>62</sup> Baxk’ap [Roy Azak], in Nisga’a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga’a Study*, vol. 3, *Nisga’a Society*, xviii.

<sup>63</sup> Guédon, “An Introduction to Tsimshian Worldview,” 157.

<sup>64</sup> James B. McCullagh, *The Aiyansh Mission, Naas River, British Columbia* (London: Church Missionary Society, 1907), 10.

reached this conclusion, that the two were in fact the same.<sup>65</sup> Such semantic overlaps may have done much to facilitate the Nisga'a's Christianization, forming a common trunk upon which more patently different concepts might be grafted. McCullagh, for example, wrote that he found it very difficult to convey to Nisga'a the concept of God as an abstract being. Lacking a Nisga'a verb equivalent to the English "to be," the liplet eventually tried isolating the suffix "kw," used in Sim'algax to convey the sense of being. This provoked the following response, as he recorded it from an amused student:

Well, the talk is plain, but very absurd. There is no comprehension of the one who is talking, he is not to be seen; he talks as a man, but he does not live in any state or condition of life, it is a live man's talk unrelated to anything we can think of, see or know. It sounds like the talk of a mad person. The Indians could not talk like that. We never use words like that.<sup>66</sup>

Despite the strangeness of this exercise to the unnamed student, McCullagh wrote that he found his response to be a sound description of the nature and being of God. Here and presumably elsewhere, mutual references to Sim'oogit Laxha could bridge gaps that in places ran deep between understandings of the supernatural.

With encouragement from liplet and other promoters of the Christianities taking root in the valley, and the arrival of new Christian forms like the Bible, utterances from God, the Chief of Heavens, took on a more important role in everyday Nisga'a interactions with the supernatural. As Nisga'a became familiar with previously unknown aspects of Chief of Heavens made available to them in scripture and sermons, and learned about the supernatural power accessible through addressing him regularly, he acquired a new preeminence, moving to the foreground among the ways Nisga'a obtained

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<sup>65</sup> For examples of these usages, see James B. McCullagh, "1905 Aiyansh Annual Letter from Revd. J.B. McCullagh, J.P. for private circulation among friends of his Work at Home," Bodleian Library, Oxford University; Charles Gardiner Baskerville, "*Abba, Nigwaud*," transl. J.B. McCullagh (*Aiyansh Mission*, 1898), 29.

<sup>66</sup> McCullagh, *The Aiyansh Mission*, 31.

supernatural assistance. Familiarity and novelty appear to have intertwined here, reflected in the ease with which Nisga'a accepted the idea that Chief of Heavens had sent another offspring to help humanity, namely Jesus. Duncan was surprised by Nisga'a receptivity to his message yet again on his second trip to the Nass in September 1860 when he gave an address to those assembled around his tent to "set Jesus before them clearly." Describing it as "one of the most affecting meetings I have ever held," the lipleet explained that

The old blind chief [Sgat'iin] kept on responding to all I said. He was most earnest and zealous in exhorting the people to listen and obey the word of God. He continued uttering the name of Jesus for some time. "We are not to call upon stones and stars now," said he, "but Jesus. Jesus will hear. Jesus is our Saviour. Jesus! Jesus! Jesus Christ! Good news! Good news! Listen all. Put away your sins. God has sent his word. Jesus is our Saviour. Take away my sins, Jesus. Make me good, Jesus." This and much more he said in a like strain. It was delightful to hear him. The people sat very attentively, and many, like the old chief, often reiterated the name of Jesus.<sup>67</sup>

Scenes like this verge on missionary fantasy in their display of ecstatic response to evangelizing efforts. Yet here again they speak to a receptivity to new supernatural knowledge—and figures—that would characterize the Nisga'a's Christianization in the period just opening in 1860. As if in response to Sgat'iin's exhortations Nisga'a in the following decades developed the practice of making direct supplication to both God and Jesus. In prayers like those, for example, of Moses Wan asking that Chief of Heavens give him success with his fishing, or of Daniel Lester that God "[i]ncrease Thy people," Nisga'a began to understand Chief of Heavens as someone to whom they could directly apply for help with any kind of need.

Such prayers lent a new verticality to Nisga'a understandings of human-supernatural relations, shifting primacy to the relationship between the individual soul

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<sup>67</sup> Duncan, in "The Indians of British Columbia," *Church Missionary Intelligencer* (April 1865): 115.

and God above.<sup>68</sup> However significant this change, its importance could be overstated if we ignore, as the historical record largely does, how for many Nisga'a the different beings with whom they shared their valley continued to be present as sources of supernatural power, and danger. The world of the Christian Nisga'a did not become devoid of power as in some other Christianities.<sup>69</sup> In our interview, Jacob McKay explained to me how he had learned as a boy the necessary sweeps to make with his arms and feet to resist a *naxnok* (supernatural being) attack, from watching his father do just this when they came across a *sbi-naxnok*, or place where a *naxnok* spirit lies, while hunting on the flats below *Laxgalts'ap*.<sup>70</sup> Some older habits with respect to the Nisga'a's relationship with Sim'oogit *Laxha* also appear to have carried over. As Nisga'a had earlier occasionally hurled insults at Chief of Heavens when he was slow to help them in their distress, so as Christians McCullagh complained that in their "wonderful religious talk" his parishioners sometimes blamed God for their sins.<sup>71</sup> The God of the Christianizing Nisga'a was, then, as longtime missionaries like McCullagh understood, neither an entirely novel or familiar figure. He was, in fact, both.

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<sup>68</sup> Sergei Kan, *Memory Eternal: Tlingit Culture and Russian Orthodox Christianity through Two Centuries* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 408, notes a similar new emphasis among the neighbouring Tlingit on the universe's "vertical axis" after their adoption of Orthodox Christianity.

<sup>69</sup> Notably, the evangelical Christianity held by many of the CMS missionaries on the north coast. William Duncan articulated this contrast while camping on his way back to Fort Simpson from his second visit to the Nass in 1860. Enraptured by the starry night filled with devotions of song and prayer, Duncan reflected that "Heaven seems so near. The mighty works of God spread out and piled up on every hand seem as if listening to our devotions." Turning to the party of native neophytes who had accompanied him on this trip he recovered from this momentary blurring, writing "They may have praised too before, but only the works of God, never God Himself. And their thanks and gratitude though small have hitherto been spent entirely upon the gifts[,] never offered to The Giver," "Visit to the Nass River Indians," September 1860, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

<sup>70</sup> McKay, interview. Laugrand and Oosten, *Inuit Shamanism and Christianity*, xvii, find a similar continuity with respect to the Inuit of Canada's eastern Arctic, as people continued to observe a number of rules of respect, and meetings with non-human beings remained a common feature of hunting experiences after they adopted Christianity.

<sup>71</sup> McCullagh, *A Call to Repentance and Hope*, 4.

## Christianization without Conversion

Much of the Nisga'a's growing familiarity with Christian forms in the period studied here occurred informally, without an accompanying sense of conversion. The baptisms, testimonials and other performances of conversion looked for and recorded by lipleet may blind us to other ways Nisga'a were Christianizing. Again it is tempting to see particular Christianizing acts as steps toward some ultimate goal of religious conversion as the lipleet understood it, but if we look carefully there is evidence that Nisga'a frequently imagined these changes in other ways. Nisga'a could have adopted a practice without being aware it was Christian, or might have responded to an opportunity opened by a new Christian habit occurring around them without fitting their action into a larger trajectory that ended in a Christian identity. Doolan learned of this possibility when he found that the Wolf chief Gints'aadax was choosing Sundays to hold his feasts and related events. He suspected that the chief did this because he knew the missionaries did not like it, as an oppositional act. Yet when questioned about it Gints'aadax revealed a different logic, replying that he had moved his feasts because on Sundays "the people are clean and have their best clothes on."<sup>72</sup>

Doolan's rich journal offers numerous examples of the Nisga'a's engagement with Christian forms without necessarily understanding themselves to be converting. Written at a time when few Nisga'a had formally converted to Christianity, it suggests how quickly the people of the lower Nass became familiar with Christian practices.

Another Wolf chief, Hlidax, provides a compelling example of this, given his vocal

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<sup>72</sup> Doolan, Journal, 12 February 1865, CMS fonds, C.2./O. See also entry for 25 June 1865. An observation by McCullagh forty years later suggests a continuing association between the Christian sabbath and the practice of wearing special clothing. McCullagh gave the Sim'alga<sub>x</sub> word for Sunday as "Haneganotqu," and translated it as literally "dress up day," "1905 Aiyansh Annual Letter," 7. The contemporary Sim'alga<sub>x</sub> word for Sunday is *Haniisgwaaytkw*, meaning "day of rest."

opposition to the first mission. Doolan wrote of the chief that “a more wicked man than Claytha [Hlidax] is not to be found at Nass.”<sup>73</sup> Hlidax is perhaps best remembered for his successful attempt, by allying with the Eagle chief Mountain, to raise a taller totem pole than the Killerwhale chief Sii Sbiguut, and in so doing, to overthrow the hegemony of this clan over the lower Nass. In these and other conflicts he appears as an ambitious chief who readily turned to violence to forward his interests. The Wolf chief is mentioned in Doolan’s journal on several occasions speaking out against the lipleet, and yet his critiques never questioned the missionaries’ status as mediators of the supernatural or the view that they had a place in Nisga’a society. When Chief Kadounaha’s body was brought back to the village after he and most of his hunting party died at sea Hlidax was apparently “astonished” that Doolan did not pray over it, as he had seen priests do in the south. Based on this observation Hlidax reasoned that their missionaries were no good, and counselled the mission student Cowaikik to stay away from them “till the true teachers came.”<sup>74</sup>

Hlidax here appears to have joined many of his contemporaries in quickly absorbing the lipleet as officiants who could offer rites at critical times. One senses that the distinctions Doolan drew in trying to explain his course of action to Cowaikik, that he was different from the Catholic lipleet and that Kadounaha “had died a heathen,” would not have changed Hlidax’s understanding of his priestly responsibilities to them. A few months later the student Ts’ak’aamaas died, and Hlidax was again agitating against the lipleet, pointing out that Doolan had not put a white cloth over Ts’ak’aamaas’s face when he was placed in the coffin. Although generally opposed to the missionaries, Hlidax

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<sup>73</sup> Doolan, Journal, 17 November 1865, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

<sup>74</sup> Doolan, Journal, 3 February 1866, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

nonetheless held them to a high standard as their new religious specialists, expecting them to perform both older and newly introduced Christian rites for handling death.<sup>75</sup>

The difficult demand of missionaries that Nisga'a wishing to move to the missions renounce many of their customs helped to ensure that a significant amount of Christianization took place outside them. Evidence of Christianization in the older villages suggests that a wide swath of Nisga'a society was interested in or at least influenced by the Christian forms that were circulating in the valley. Eagle chief Agwii Laxha provides an example of this kind of growing familiarity with Christian forms outside the missions. Agwii Laxha was one of the chiefs who warmly welcomed William Duncan to the river in 1860, a stance toward the liplet that he maintained over the years even as he resisted their efforts to proselytize him. McCullagh described the chief as having "always been friendly to the missionaries themselves, but bitterly opposed to their religion, and one of the most vigorous supporters of heathenism."<sup>76</sup> Still, Agwii Laxha's support for "heathenism" does not appear to have precluded his interest in Christianity. This became evident when the chief had a conversion experience after falling ill while hunting on a mountain one summer. As Agwii Laxha described it, he managed to crawl to his little hut on a stream, leaving a trail of red snow behind him. Lying here, he "remembered Shimoigiat lakhage," and implored him to hold him up. Eventually a rescue party managed to bring him off the mountain, and McCullagh tended to him in the mission schoolhouse as he tottered on the edge of death for three more days before beginning to heal. Just how familiar this chief had become with Christianity while

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<sup>75</sup> Doolan, Journal, 9 May 1866, CMS fonds, C.2./O. Doolan claimed the practice of placing a white cloth or handkerchief over the face of the dead was an "Indian custom," done "that the dead person may not be ashamed when they meet the Great Spirit," and explained his omission was due to ignorance of the practice.

<sup>76</sup> James B. McCullagh, "Jottings," *Church Missionary Gleaner* 11 (November 1887): 176.

apparently resisting it became clear during his convalescence. McCullagh wrote that “[h]is first request upon gaining a little strength was that some leafy branches be placed around his bed and a few pictures of Scripture subjects that he had seen at the mission be hung upon them where he could see them.”<sup>77</sup> He then pleaded for those around him to sing a hymn and pray for him. The missionary cited this event as an example of “A New Life,” but what is more remarkable is the familiarity of this heathen chief and purported opponent of Christianity with Christian forms, a fluency we might not have learned about had he not experienced a brush with death on the mountain that triggered a sort of conversion more akin to what the lipleet sought.

We will never know why Agwii Laxha had resisted efforts to convert him. A hint of an explanation comes from a conversation the missionary Collison recorded. When Collison asked the chief why he did not follow his nephew Ts’ak’aamaas in becoming a Christian, Agwii Laxha gave the following reply: “Oh, I am not a bad man. Look at my hands; they are not dyed in blood—as some men’s hands are.”<sup>78</sup> Perhaps he did not see a need for the kind of conversion the lipleet wished him to make. No doubt there were also political considerations. More understandable is the dramatic conversion his near encounter with death prompted. Having survived his ordeal the chief nonetheless affirmed that Agwii Laxha was dead. “[H]e died on the mountain,” he declared, “with my own eyes I saw him die; his old life ended there.”<sup>79</sup> The prospect of an imminent death had a way of making the variety of conversion scripted by the missionaries appear as the less radical transformation. In the absence of such an experience, however, most Nisga’a who remained in non-Christian villages appear to have been content with the

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<sup>77</sup> Sheldon Jackson, *British Columbia* (N.p.: 1889), 409.

<sup>78</sup> Collison, *Wake of the War Canoe*, 77.

<sup>79</sup> McCullagh, “Jottings,” 176.

gentler, more organic absorption of attractive aspects of the Christianities that they were able to effect there. Within these villages one finds a different kind of Christianization, one that existed more comfortably alongside many “heathen” practices. Already at the end of 1893 McCullagh could write of the village whose inhabitants he had been trying to draw to the mission at Aiyansh, “It is not true that the Gitlakdamiks are Heathen any more. They believe in, and are convinced of the truth of the Gospel, many of them are praying secretly to God, but they cannot shake off the old habits and customs which bind them.”<sup>80</sup> In light of the other ways Nisga’a were finding to bring aspects of the Protestant Christianities into their lives, the type of thorough break demanded by the lipleet appears as but one of a number of ways of patterning this change, albeit a powerful one.

**“We must either change very much or become heathens altogether”**

Most Nisga’a felt that their acceptance of the Christian forms newly available to them did not require the kind of radical break with their existing ways that their lipleet were eager to achieve. They believed, and demonstrated, that older ways could be perfectly compatible with many of the new Christian forms. Many who engaged with the Christian teachings agreed that they held the potential to reform and improve both themselves and their society. Yet the choice put before them was between two starkly dichotomous futures, neither of which were appealing. Just how difficult it could be to chart a more moderate course of reform that embraced the benefits to be found in the new, but did not demand the wholesale repudiation of the old, is vividly conveyed in the words of a man identified only as George. McCullagh wrote that George had come to

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<sup>80</sup> McCullagh, “Progress Among the Nishga Indians,” 38.

him one day in a penitent spirit, after having planned to host several “death-feasts,” or yukw. When the lipleet expressed his surprise at this change of heart George launched into a lengthy explanation of why his flip was not that unusual, offering insight into how Nisga’a felt about the difficult choice before them:

Do you suppose we approve of the things we do? We do not approve. We hate the whole business; but we are so roped together as Indians that one drags the others down until we are all in. We know all the time that we are doing wrong; but it is very hard . . . where the Malasqu (preaching of God's Word) comes against us. I've come out of church sometimes and vowed I would never enter the building again, I felt so angry. Often after Service I have not been able to eat my food; it has stuck in my throat. Several times I have gone away into the bush and wept; I have said the vilest things I could think of against you. . . . Because you made us feel sore in our hearts . . . you shot at us from every side, you burned up every bush we hid behind, you left us no way of escape, we could find no excuse anywhere. The very things we said secretly in our hearts you told them to us openly before our face. We knew we were doing wrong, but we would not admit we were as sinful as you made us out to be. You made us feel that we must either change very much or become heathens altogether.<sup>81</sup>

George’s explanation articulated the awkward position many Nisga’a felt themselves placed in by their missionaries. The only door into the Christianities on offer involved leaving much of their present life behind. Should they not be up to this kind of change, the alternative was perhaps even less appealing. They would have to re-imagine themselves as outright heathens, with no interest in the new religion.

For those who did traverse the gap opened before them and yet were unwilling to give up everything their lipleet demanded, the adoption of new Christian forms could be a conservative movement, a way of changing in order to remain the same.<sup>82</sup> Some of these new forms in Nisga’a hands revealed their capacity to lend themselves quite nicely

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<sup>81</sup> Moeran, *McCullagh of Aiyansh*, 195-6.

<sup>82</sup> This possibility has been explored for Indians in colonial Mexico in Inga Clendinnen, “Ways to the Sacred: Reconstructing ‘religion’ in sixteenth century Mexico,” *History and Anthropology* 5, no. 1 (1990): 105-141, and William B. Taylor, *Magistrates of the Sacred: Priests and Parishioners in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

to serving familiar functions. Nisga'a adoption of memorial and other objects to replace totem poles is the best example of this phenomenon. The earliest evidence we have of this transformation comes from a feast that occurred in Gingolx near the end of 1892. A number of residents at the mission ordered three large marble monuments from Victoria, and Chief Mountain invited "both heathen and Christian" to attend a great feast at which one of the stones was to be erected in memory of a deceased relation. According to Collison, the resident missionary who recorded this "retrograde movement" and his attempt to subvert it, the practice of using stones as a substitute for poles had begun at the nearby Methodist Tsimshian village of Fort Simpson shortly before its extension to the Nass.<sup>83</sup>

Despite lipleet discouragement this practice spread throughout the Christian villages in the valley. In 1911 McCullagh noted that unlike neighbouring Gitlaxt'aamiks there were no totem poles in Aiyansh, "but the tomb-stones have been lately all erected as totems, that is to say, on the same plane and with the same glory as the old totems."<sup>84</sup> Their use at frequent settlement feasts held in Aiyansh and Gitlaxt'aamiks for those who had died in the epidemic the previous winter had confirmed their new function. During these difficult months for Nisga'a and their lipleet, McCullagh wrote of his distress from almost daily "honour for totems, honour for crests, grave-stones, erected with processional and musical honour." In a pledge the penitent leaders of the two upper villages afterward asked the missionary to draw up to help them commit themselves to reforming their behaviour, McCullagh was sure to include the promise not to "totemize

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<sup>83</sup> Collison, Kincolith, to CMS, 6 April 1893, CMS fonds, C.2./O.3. The anthropologist Viola Garfield noted in 1939 that the Tsimshian community of Port Simpson's totem poles had been replaced by marble and granite stones, and that the villagers had been raising flagstaffs as a substitute, using similar ceremonies, "Tsimshian Clan and Society," 212.

<sup>84</sup> McCullagh, "Another Chapter of History," 49.

the Christian grave-stone” or “glorify the erection of a grave-fence, flag-pole or lamp-post.”<sup>85</sup>

Christianizing Nisga’a embraced these new objects, of both Christian and more secular origins, for their potential to convey an older need, namely the commemoration of and proper settling over the deceased. As sanctioned forms they were useful to Nisga’a looking to bring this important practice into their Christianity, carrying meanings that outsiders did not easily appreciate. When McCullagh took up the cause of articulating a Nisga’a perspective on the land grievances to a K’amksiiwaa audience in 1910 he cited the meaning Nisga’a had invested in the grave-fence as an example of the need for whites to try to understand “the Indian point of view” in dealing with Aboriginal peoples. Construction of the Grand Trunk Railway just south of Nisga’a lands had disturbed interments of a native cemetery, and native demands for compensation had apparently seemed excessive to authorities. McCullagh explained to his white readers why they were not. In the Nass he had

often found the simple repair of an ordinary grave-fence to be beyond the means of those concerned. It cannot be done privately as we would do it. There must be a public feast, a public speech, and the rank and social standing of everyone present recognized by a suitable gift. Not only so, but the social status of the deceased determines the extent to which money and goods shall be distributed.<sup>86</sup>

The grave-fence had clearly become a more-than-ordinary object for the Nisga’a as they re-imagined themselves using the sanctioned objects available to them, investing them with a sacred meaning and function they clearly wished to keep. Indeed the familiar had

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<sup>85</sup> McCullagh, “Another Chapter of History,” 24, 49. For discussion of this phenomenon among neighbouring Aboriginal peoples, see Ronald William Hawker, “A Faith of Stone: Gravestones, Missionaries, and Culture Change and Continuity among British Columbia’s Tsimshian Indians,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 26 (1991): 80-101, and Margaret B. Blackman, “Totems to Tombstones: Culture Change as Viewed through the Haida Mortuary Complex, 1877-1971,” *Ethnology* 12, no. 1 (January 1973): 47-56.

<sup>86</sup> “The Indian Land Question,” *Hagaga* (May 1910).

found new expressions, and with them new possibilities. Before his death Chief Hlidax, for example, had a marble life-sized bust of himself carved, which was eventually placed over his grave—no doubt only after a public feast had been held and gifts distributed to those present.<sup>87</sup>

### **As a Snake Sheds Its Skin**

Notwithstanding these and other continuities, Nisga'a experienced much of their movement into Protestant Christianities as a painful scouring process, a scraping away of much that had connected them to their world. The impetus behind this process came from the lipleet, whose Christianity was distrustful of the capacity of material objects to be conduits to the divine and more generally demanded a break from the world.<sup>88</sup> Their faith in effect displayed a certain unease with being *in* the world, a view that the flesh cloaking the human soul was more a burden to the realization of its full potential than something that allowed it to participate in the world, a view expressed in pre-Christian Nisga'a mythology.<sup>89</sup> By this reckoning the Nisga'a's problem was two-fold: they were encumbered not only by the "neolithic darkness and superstition" of their heathenism, but also a larger attachment to the world.<sup>90</sup> Like the lipleet who would follow him Doolan

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<sup>87</sup> Collison, *Wake of the War Canoe*, 279.

<sup>88</sup> William Christian Jr., "Catholicisms," 260, has noted of Protestantism that it "has generally demanded a complete disengagement from the notion of grace invested in objects, images, or places," and that this uncoupling was a key way by which Protestants severed themselves from their Catholic roots, applied drastically in their proselytizing outside of Europe.

<sup>89</sup> John Cove, in his study of Tsimshianic mythology, notes that while all beings are depicted as sharing the same human physical form, non-humans have removable "second skins," a feature that gives them additional power, *Shattered Images*, 287.

<sup>90</sup> The phrase is from McCullagh, "Another Chapter of History," 50, but the view of the Nisga'a and their neighbours as being "neolithic" or belonging to an imagined distant human past was widespread among Protestant missionaries on the north coast. Duncan, for example, anticipating his readers' judgement that the progress of the Tsimshian at Metlakatla was slow, reminded them that "their nineteenth century is our first. We are in a land and amid a people resembling in many respects that land and those people the Romans saw in days of yore on becoming Masters of Britain," Metlakatla, Annual Letter, 29 January 1874, CMS fonds, C.1./M.9.

recorded this challenge in his writings. In January 1866 he reported hearing that some Nisga'a were looking to join the mission, only "at present, they say, they are too much mixed up with their own people. The things of the world have at present too strong a hold on their hearts, but if they are Gods [sic] children they will be brought to Jesus."<sup>91</sup> Missionaries who came to the Nass believed the great challenge to religious reform was pulling Nisga'a away from not only abominable heathen practices, but also kin and other worldly anchors. As McCullagh explained to his readers back in England near the end of the period of Christianization examined here, the Nisga'a's repudiation of their existing ways was but the beginning of a larger conceptual distinction they would need to make as Christians: "Unlike us, he does not distinguish the Church from the World, with the exception of *the* world of Indian paint and feathers which he has renounced; it is all one."<sup>92</sup>

This path of renunciation differed from the pattern of previous Nisga'a acquisitions of new supernatural power. The most recent influx of new religious practices and ideas into the Nass Valley, namely the *wii halayt* (secret societies) which appear to have arrived no earlier than the eighteenth century, had been acquired in a way that was largely additive to the existing religious repertoire. *Wii halayt* had reworked older ideas about supernatural power and how it might be accessed, but made no demand for a wholesale rejection of all that had preceded them.<sup>93</sup> Such an accommodation between new and old was in fact in keeping with the Nisga'a conception of the supernatural at the onset of their Christianization. Nineteenth-century Nisga'a, though

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<sup>91</sup> Doolan, Journal, 27 January 1866, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

<sup>92</sup> McCullagh, "Another Chapter of History," 50. Original emphasis.

<sup>93</sup> See Cove, *Shattered Images*, Chapter 4, for a discussion of these changes among the Tsimshianic-speaking peoples.

regarding their collective repertoire of crests acquired from supernatural encounters to be universal by representing the beings present in the cosmos, did not believe that they had exhausted all the supernatural beings—and thus potential helpers—they might encounter.

New encounters offered the opportunity to expand a house's connections with supernatural beings, and the arrival of the K'amksiiwaa appears to have presented new possibilities for such encounters. Anthropologist Marius Barbeau notes that many crests on the north coast arose from first contact with whites. The examples he gives come from neighbours to the Nisga'a, but might be considered indicative of an approach found across the north coast to new supernatural experiences. Barbeau relates the visit of a Gitksan party to a North West Company post at Bear Lake in the early years of the eighteenth century, where a number of unusual phenomena presented by this first engagement with the K'amksiiwaa provided an occasion fertile for the taking of new crests.<sup>94</sup> Chiefs took home a number of experiences that they adopted as crests after giving the appropriate feasts, including White man's dog, Palisade and Broad wagon-road.<sup>95</sup> Similar to their Gitksan neighbours, nineteenth-century Nisga'a also had the capacity to expand their repertoire to embrace additional points of contact with the supernatural, understanding that each new addition brought another layer to their being, enhancing the transformative powers available to house members.

For many Nisga'a the purging their move into Christianity required was akin to the difficult regimens they used for cleansing themselves in preparation for hunting trips

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<sup>94</sup> The qualities of being strange and unusual were in fact key hallmarks of potentially useful supernatural power for the Tsimshianic-speaking peoples, as Marjorie Halpin notes: "Indeed, it is the momentary eruption of the extraordinary that marks an experience as supernatural and worth adopting as a crest," "A Critique of the Boasian Paradigm for Northwest Coast Art," *Culture* 14 (1994): 11.

<sup>95</sup> Marius Barbeau, *Totem Poles*, vol. 1, *According to Crests and Topics*, 9-10. Barbeau offers these examples to support his tenuous argument that totem poles are an artistic development dating only from contact with Europeans.

or encounters with supernatural beings. These arduous practices, which included bathing in cold water, rubbing oneself with the prickly leaves of *wa'ums* (Devil's club), continence and the use of purgatives, made one more likely to be contacted by a supernatural being, or if a hunter, to get close to one's prey.<sup>96</sup> Nisga'a described the process of having the Gospel preached to them in ways that echo this spiritual discipline. A Gitlaxt'aamiks chief, who had developed the habit of retreating to a cellar excavated beneath the floor of his house when McCullagh visited on Sundays to preach, instead decided one week to sit with his family and hear the service. Afterward he asked the lipleet to stop a moment before leaving to hear what he had to say:

Chief McCullagh, no man ignores the fact; it is so, indeed it is rather so, that if there be peace to-day up and down this village it is owing to your presence among us. We are a hard lot . . . we are like an undressed skin, the perfection of hardness. But, by dint of scraping and rubbing, our women soften the hardest skins and make moccasins of them, soft and easy to wear. And so it is with us and you; you have been rubbing and scraping us with the *Malashqu* (Gospel) for many years, and I think we are beginning to feel it; I think we are getting softer. Therefore, do well what you do, chief; keep on scraping us and you will make moccasins of us yet for the Chief on High. My say is finished."<sup>97</sup>

Although he had avoided McCullagh's preaching of the Gospel, this chief came to understand and even appreciate it as performing a scraping and reforming that would make them acceptable to Sim'oogit Laxha.

The difficulty of leaving behind past relationships with supernatural beings to become Christian, as the lipleet demanded of converts, varied among the Nisga'a. Some Nisga'a moved into a new world where practices like feasting, displays of crests and any kind of halayt activity were discountenanced with apparent ease. Many of the early

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<sup>96</sup> McKay, interview.

<sup>97</sup> Moeran, *McCullagh of Aiyansh*, 133. The name McCullagh gives for this chief is "Hadagim-simoigit," meaning literally, "bad chief," which from the context appears to be the lipleet's name for him rather than his real name.

converts fall into this category, students like Cowcaeth and chiefs like K'eexkw and Mountain who became allies of their missionaries. In late 1879, when divisions were growing in Gitlaxt'aamiks following Tomlinson's attempt to construct a school in the village, Txaatk'anlaxhatkw, who would soon become Abraham Wright, wrote to superintendent of Indian Affairs Israel Powell about his "great trouble." Encouraged by the belief that they had Powell's support, chiefs Sgat'iin and Agwii Laxha were threatening to turn back any lipleet who attempted to visit. When making his case that missionaries should be allowed to come to his village, Txaatk'anlaxhatkw explained that "There are two chiefs, five men, seven women with our children here now who are tired of the old feast and dance, we want to know the new way."<sup>98</sup> As a Christian chief at Aiyansh Wright would later be tempted more than once to accept invitations to attend feasts intended to draw him back to Gitlaxt'aamiks. Yet for this chief and others like him a decisive break with existing traditions was an acceptable sacrifice in light of all that awaited them by pursuing the new way.

At least as many Nisga'a, however, experienced the demands of their new Christianity as a painful purification process, a scouring of their former selves. The acquisition of crests and real names, and their passing and affirmation at feasts, ensured an ongoing relationship between their supernatural source and human beneficiaries. Nineteenth-century Nisga'a understood that this relationship needed to be maintained, and kept up their feasts in the knowledge that its severing would result in a very real loss of power. Missionary writings express this feeling among converts of being stripped down to a basic state of humanness with all the vulnerability they understood this to

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<sup>98</sup> Chief Gap-Run-lah-atque [Txaatk'anlaxhatkw], Kitlah-tah-micks, to Powell, Indian Commissioner, 13 October 1879, LAC, Indian Affairs, Central Registry, vol. 3700, file 17071.

imply, albeit translated into a Christian idiom. A fire in Gingolx in 1893 that destroyed the newly completed church and many adjacent buildings brought to light one elderly chief's difficulty with shedding these relationships despite his Christian commitment. As the fire consumed the church the unnamed chief rushed into it with his daughters to rescue the stained-glass windows, toward the purchase of which he had contributed, but which had not yet been installed. He also lost his own home, however, and the resulting exposure he suffered hastened his death. When the chief lay dying he counselled his friends, telling them, "Do not grieve for the loss sustained by the fire. It has only purified us. I am ready to follow Jesus, naked if necessary."<sup>99</sup> Later the chief explained to Collison that when he had become a Christian some years earlier he had been unable to part with his dancing blanket and headdress. They had remained in a box, likely his *hoohlgan*, in his house at the mission.<sup>100</sup> He appears to have taken them with him to his former village to fulfill his obligations when his brother had died a few years earlier. Now the fire, in destroying these insignias of his chiefly office and supernatural relationships that went back in some cases centuries, had finally done what he had not been able to do. Drawing on this experience, the chief encouraged those gathered around him to see the loss as a kind of collective purification, making it easier for them to follow Jesus.

Christianizing Nisga'a also found the analogy of their conversion as a kind of death helpful in understanding their transformation. This was a particularly fitting

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<sup>99</sup> Collison, *Wake of the War Canoe*, 321. In an uncanny coincidence not lost on his congregation, Collison wrote that the morning before the fire he had been preaching on the Gospel text, "He will thoroughly purge his floor &c.," 3 September 1893, CMS fonds, C.2./O.3. For this text see *Gospel of Luke 3:17* and *Gospel of Matthew 3:12*.

<sup>100</sup> A *hoohlgan* is a special trunk in which a chief keeps his regalia, which is often carved and decorated with crests, Boston, Morven and Grandison, *From Time Before Memory*, 142.

description of the change in status effected by their often difficult decision to abstain from feasting in a society where this institution was central to social and political life. Converts who refused to participate in feasts resembled souls who had crossed over the river to the realm of ghosts and were unable to feast. Alfred Green, the Methodist missionary at Laxgalts'ap during the mission's first dozen years, described a Christian who was invited by his heathen relations to their house. The man went, but when it became evident that they were attempting to include him in a potlatch he resisted and tried to make clear how futile such efforts to take him back were, given his radically changed status:

If you were to bring a dead body into this house and put food before it, and put a spoon into its hand, would it eat? and if you put blankets at its feet, would it take them? No, no. It would not because it was dead. So, friends, you bring me into this house and you put food before me, and a spoon into my hands, and you put blankets at my feet; but I cannot eat, I can't take these blankets, because I am dead—dead to your old way. I used to live in it just as you do, but now I am dead to it all.<sup>101</sup>

Many of those who held high names within their houses, the chiefs and the princes set to succeed them, went through a similar death on joining the missions. The movement of ranked names among Nisga'a as they converted to Christianity, sometimes as individuals and at other times as house members under a chief, is a complex topic that deserves its own treatment elsewhere. What is patent is that there were Nisga'a with important names, or set to fill them, who left them behind when they moved to mission villages. Methodist liplet William Rush marvelled at how some Nisga'a Christians at Laxgalts'ap had given up "high positions" to come to the mission "and be nobody in particular." He explained that when a chief converted he "forfeits the right to his place of honour in the community; his word is no longer obeyed, and his seat at the village feasts

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<sup>101</sup> Letter from Alfred Green, Greenville, 30 March 1887, in *The Missionary Outlook* (July 1887): 111.

is given to somebody else.”<sup>102</sup> Perhaps the most common reason Nisga’a chiefs relinquished their names was that their new Christian life appeared incompatible with the requisite feast giving that came with holding them.

Most chiefs maintained a status as “chiefs” in the missions, their chiefly names commonly serving as their new Christian surnames. In many cases however there is evidence that their names remained in the non-Christian villages. This may have been especially true when most of the house stayed behind. Raven chief Txaganlaxhatkw was counted as “dead” after he tore down his house in Gitlaxt’aamiks and moved to Aiyansh, helping to turn it into a nascent Christian settlement. His name passed to his nephew, but he soon took the baptized name Abraham Wright.<sup>103</sup> Job Calder, the chief at Gitwinksihlkw who unsuccessfully tried to convert his house into a school and church, left his name behind when he moved down to the Methodist mission at Laxgalts’ap.<sup>104</sup> One notable case of a successor forgoing a potential chieftainship was that of Wii Muk’wilskw, an early resident of Aiyansh. Wii Muk’wilskw was the nephew of Wolf chief Sgat’iin at Gitlaxt’aamiks, and thus set to inherit the name of the foremost chief on the upper Nass at this time. Yet the young man’s participation in setting up both Methodist and Anglican Christianities on the upper Nass became an obstacle to his succession. Wii Muk’wilskw welcomed and hosted the first native teachers to visit Gitlaxt’aamiks, and when a number of chiefs broke away to found the new Christian settlement of Aiyansh he soon firmly planted himself there, landing on the opposite side

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<sup>102</sup> William T. Rush, “Lakalzap,” *The Missionary Outlook* (March 1902): 131.

<sup>103</sup> McNeary, “Where Fire Came Down,” 31.

<sup>104</sup> In a Methodist petition to Israel Powell, superintendent of Indian Affairs, a few years later, Calder introduced his statement with the words, “My name was Nouse. I was chief at the village of Kit-wan-silh,” *Methodist Church of Canada, Letter from the Methodist Missionary Society*, 71.

of the new divide from his uncle, Sgat'iin.<sup>105</sup> Shortly after his arrival in 1883 McCullagh wrote that Wii Muk'wilskw's tribe had gone to great lengths to induce him to return, but with no success.<sup>106</sup> Like the young chief Aksheelan whom we saw earlier refusing to leave school to attend a meeting of chiefs, in Wii Muk'wilskw's singular determination he also seemed to be saying that "there were plenty of chiefs without him."<sup>107</sup> His stubbornness reminds us that the many Nisga'a who were willing to go through this death to their known world did so seeing the potential for life on the other side, reborn as Christian Nisga'a.

Nisga'a who found themselves abruptly brought into the missions through the use of new colonial laws that were coming to be applied to their lives experienced a particularly acute kind of breaking from their past selves. Two events in which CMS lipleet used their authority as Justices of the Peace to bring Nisga'a into the missions stand out for their severity as well as efficacy in bringing large numbers of Nisga'a into formal Church membership. In both of these cases Nisga'a consumption of alcohol facilitated the conditions that led to a kind of conversion aiming to break with past ways. A large force of native constables from Metlakatla nabbed the Wolf chief Hlidax and twelve others at Fishery Bay in May 1876 and brought them, the chief "bound hand and foot," back to the mission for trial. Hlidax's offence, for which he had earlier received a summons, was importing alcohol from Victoria, an act he acknowledged doing "after an

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<sup>105</sup> Before taking this name Wii Muk'wilskw was almost certainly "Nahoogh," (Naauuk), the nephew of Sgat'iin, who invited William Henry Pierce to stay at his house when he first arrived at the edge of the village in the autumn of 1878, Pierce, *From Potlatch to Pulpit*, 33-4. In a petition the following year Txaatk'anlaxhatkw, the future Abraham Wright, noted that "The chief 'Naook' had the Methodist teacher live and teach school in his house the last two winters, and he asked Mr. Green last year to build a school house here," Chief Gap-Run-lah-atque [Txaatk'anlaxhatkw], Kitlah-tah-micks, to Israel Powell, Indian Commissioner, 13 October 1879, LAC, Indian Affairs, Central Registry, vol. 3700, file 17071.

<sup>106</sup> "An Indian's Prayer," *Church Missionary Gleaner* 12 (December 1886): 178. McCullagh spells the young chief's name "Muguiliksqu." Wii Muk'wilskw was baptized Paul Skoten.

<sup>107</sup> Doolan, *Journal*, 5 December 1864, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

old custom among them of treating their brother chiefs.”<sup>108</sup> These arrests, followed by a fine and short imprisonment, appear to have precipitated a movement into Gingolx. On the following New Year’s Day, the annual occasion when new members were formally admitted to the mission, three prominent Wolf chiefs from the villages of Git’iks and Ank’idaa, Hlidax, Gints’aadax and Kw’axsuu, along with many members of their houses, enrolled as settlers, adding thirty-eight names to the village roll.<sup>109</sup>

At the start of 1905 an “overhaul” of non-Christian villages on the Nass River prompted their inhabitants to formally commit themselves to abandoning their way of life and embarking on the path of Christianization modelled in neighbouring missions. During what Bishop DuVernet admitted may have seemed like “a strange mingling of the Law and the Gospel,” McCullagh, acting in his capacity as Justice of the Peace, spent weeks conducting raids to seize alcohol and distillation equipment and prosecuting offenders in Gitlaxt’aamiks, Gitwinksihlkw, Git’iks and Ank’idaa.<sup>110</sup> Within each village McCullagh’s administration of justice prompted movements of Nisga’a “to abandon heathenism and its vices” and to place themselves under instruction as catechists. In Ank’idaa, where a tip led to the discovery of twenty-four barrels of wine and spirits hidden inside a large spruce tree outside the village, McCullagh eventually got every individual owner of a barrel to step forward and mark it with chalk after threatening to charge the village as a whole. But before the lipleet could continue any further with the prosecutions a compromise was reached. “The leading Chiefs put on their robes,” McCullagh wrote, “and standing in the open street . . . publicly declare[d]

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<sup>108</sup> Collison, *Wake of the War Canoe*, 277. Allan Graham, Mathiesson’s, Nasse River, to Duncan, 17 December 1875, William Duncan fonds.

<sup>109</sup> Tomlinson, Kincolith, Annual Letter, 12 March 1877, CMS fonds, C.1./M.10. Tomlinson, Kincolith, to Duncan, 1 January 1877, William Duncan fonds.

<sup>110</sup> Frederick DuVernet, Metlakatla, 3 April 1905, CMS fonds, C.2./O.3.

the potlatch, Halaid, medicine cult, Tamanawas and other heathen customs at an end; then they came into the court room, and made the same declaration before me.”<sup>111</sup> When the dust had settled the prosecutions or threat of them had brought 170 Nisga’a into the Church of England, approximately one-fifth of the Nisga’a population.<sup>112</sup> A revival that broke out in these non-Christian villages immediately afterward led the remaining Nisga’a who had not yet joined the Church into the fold “by the dozen,” so that McCullagh could declare that there was not a heathen left on the river.

Use of the law to effect reformation of those Nisga’a who remained outside the Church in 1905, purging them of their discountenanced customs and the alcohol that had of late lent them a sometimes chaotic air, left them feeling cleansed and raw. One elderly chief washed his hands publicly before a large assembly, symbolizing in McCullagh’s view “his putting away as dross everything he had held in the world.” In the testimony offered at one of the Fishery Bay camps in the oolichan season that followed on the heels of these conversions, a Nisga’a man compared his experience to that of a snake, which, when it wants to shed its skin, squeezes itself between the forked branches of a small tree to peel off its old skin. “I am like that and the King’s law is the forked stick, which has squeezed off my old manner of life,” he explained, “and the Gospel has clothed me with

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<sup>111</sup> McCullagh, “1905 Aiyansh Annual Letter,” 58. The term “Tamanawas” appears in the 1885 amendment to the Indian Act banning the potlatch. It appears to have been intended to refer to a range of dances performed by potlatching Aboriginal peoples in British Columbia, many of which carried overtones of cannibalism. For a discussion of the challenges government agents had in applying this largely undefined term see Christopher Bracken, *The Potlatch Papers: A Colonial Case History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 167-9.

<sup>112</sup> Collison, Kincolith, to Baring-Gould, 9 March 1905, CMS fonds, gave this number of conversions from the movement, distributing them among the inhabitants of Gitlaxt’aamiks (50), Gitwinksihlkw (60), and Git’iks and Ank’idaa (60). DuVernet, Metlakatla, to Baring-Gould, 13 February 1905, CMS fonds, reported that the Nisga’a had a population of 750 at this time.

the new skin or covering of the righteousness of Christ.”<sup>113</sup> Yet old skins could be of help in the transition to the new. Significantly, the leading chiefs of Ank’idaa put on their blankets before going out into the street to declare an end to all heathen customs, then repeated their actions before McCullagh’s court. They would make this transformation, as they had others, as real-beings, clothed in the evidence of powers obtained from relationships that in some cases went back to the limits of memory, and which would perhaps be of help once more.<sup>114</sup>

As difficult as it clearly was for many Nisga’a to part with practices and objects proscribed by their lipleet, there were instances in which Nisga’a were more open to a disruptive type of conversion. During the period of Christianization explored here Nisga’a used the opportunities for changing themselves and breaking with their present that Christian forms offered to help bring about a variety of desired changes. The establishment of Anglican and Methodist missions on the Nass presented Nisga’a with a new and distinct space in the valley. Although they were not immune to consideration of Nisga’a laws and understandings of rightness, the Christian missions introduced a new authority to life in the valley. They became players in Nisga’a society, both introducing new structures and being employed by Nisga’a negotiating their own forms of inequality and asymmetry. Nisga’a made use of the promise of a split from their present circumstances that the missions held. Throughout the period of Christianization women and girls moved to the mission to flee unwanted or abusive marriages. One of my

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<sup>113</sup> Both McCullagh, “1905 Aiyansh Annual Letter,” 60, and Collison, Kincolith, to Baring-Gould, 9 March 1905, CMS fonds, recorded this testimony with its memorable imagery.

<sup>114</sup> Indeed, drawing on the traditional Tsimshianic concept of the “real” discussed in Chapter 2, this move into Christianity might aptly be described as a “real occasion,” one “in which real beings interact, altering the world,” Margaret Seguin [Anderson], *Interpretive Contexts for Traditional and Current Coast Tsimshian Feasts*, Mercury Series, Ethnology Service Papers no. 98 (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1985), 48.

interviewees told me a story about how her grandmother was “made to marry” a chief who already had a number of wives when she was twelve years old. The marriage became abusive, and on one occasion her grandmother was hurt after the chief threw her down the steps in the traditional house where they lived while she was pregnant. Word got out to McCullagh and he took her to the mission house, where she became a kitchen worker and received an education.<sup>115</sup>

The violence and disorder that often characterized the late-nineteenth-century potlatch, and the seeming impossibility of reforming it, convinced many Nisga’a that a draconian solution like the kind of break advocated by the missionaries was in fact necessary. When debate over the future of the practice of feasting had reached a new height on the Nass River in 1899, Moses Oxidan and three other chiefs from the lower villages around Laxgalts’ap decided to move to the Methodist mission. In their petition to the province’s Attorney General, the chiefs explained that they had championed the cause of the potlatch. After a winter season in which potlatches in the upper villages had been rife with alcohol accompanied by “dreadful” scenes, however, they had reluctantly come to the conclusion that the practice must stop. Hoping their people would follow their example the chiefs abandoned the potlatch, leaving behind, in the words of one chief Nathaniel Lai Robinson, “home, chieftainship, hunting-grounds and friends.”<sup>116</sup> Theirs does not seem to have been an easy step, but rather of the difficult kind made by chiefs using their best judgement to discern the most promising path forward.

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<sup>115</sup> Lorene Plante (Ksim Lax Miigunt), interview by Nicholas May, New Aiyansh, 8 May 2008.

<sup>116</sup> Moses Oxidan, Peter Kla-a-yu Calder, William Hymas, Nathaniel Lai Robinson, Fishery Bay, to Attorney General, 14 April 1899, BCA, Attorney General correspondence 1872-1937, 1950, GR-0429, Box 4, File 5.

At least some Nisga'a used the new Christianities before them to embark on a path of conscious personal reform. For these individuals, the desire to acquire transformative spiritual power made breaking from society a more acceptable, even necessary, act. Such a deliberate path mirrored that of the solitary spiritual quest undertaken by Nisga'a novices in search of shamanic powers, which also involved a withdrawing from social relations.<sup>117</sup> The Christianities offered by the lipleet, with their intense concern for the individual soul, were attractive to Nisga'a pursuing this type of transformation. Cowcaelth, who took the name Philip Latimer after he was baptized by Doolan in 1867, appears to have used his Christianity in this way. Like other students of the first mission Cowcaelth had been a *sigits'oon*, one of the skilled halayt carvers who assisted chiefs in making dramatic performances, before seeking instruction from Doolan. His attempt to change his life had been triggered years before the CMS mission began on the Nass, when he heard Duncan preaching at Fort Simpson. Cowcaelth's efforts to reform himself reveal a deliberate attempt to remove himself from the practices of his contemporaries. In May 1865 Doolan reported that Cowcaelth and his wife remained "perfectly sober" during a recent feast. His uncle had died, and as was his responsibility Cowcaelth distributed property at the settlement feast; but he also used the occasion to announce that he was finished, that he would be feasting no more. This new desire to separate oneself, to guard against the damage to one's soul that keeping the wrong company could have, was also reflected in Cowcaelth's intention to visit a friend in Victoria the summer after this feast. Doolan noted that he "does not want to go down

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<sup>117</sup> Marie-Françoise Guédon, "Tsimshian Shamanic Images," in *The Tsimshian: Images of the Past, Views for the Present*, edited by Margaret Seguin [Anderson] (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), 174-211, discusses the shaman's highly individualistic and idiosyncratic approach to obtaining and using supernatural power in traditional Tsimshianic-speaking societies.

with the Indians in their canoes,” but rather was willing to pay his passage if Duncan would let him travel in the mission schooner.<sup>118</sup>

Cowcaelth’s course against the currents of his society points to both the opportunities the fledgling Christianities presented Nisga’a as well as the support that missions could provide. In these early days the novelty of many of the new Christian forms provided readymade symbols with which to distinguish oneself from society, a utility that would diminish as they became naturalized in Nisga’a society. Similar to other solitary spiritual paths, the new Christian one nonetheless required support from mentors experienced in this art, and Cowcaelth found this in Doolan. He was one of a number of young men who “endured some amount of persecution” for his acts of separation, which included selling his sigits’oon tools and refusing to revenge a relative whose head was badly cut at a feast. Not surprisingly, Cowcaelth and his wife were first to erect a house beside the new mission house Doolan built.<sup>119</sup>

### **Nisga’a Christianity**

By the early 1920s, the end of the period examined here, the Nisga’a understood themselves to be, among other things, Christians. This identity, shared with others around the world, conveyed little of the amalgamated constitution of their new faith. The Nisga’a’s changing religious tradition now included aspects whose roots could be found in the Protestant Christianities that had recently come to their valley, and also in the layers of earlier understandings of the supernatural realm and associated practices. If Nisga’a were not necessarily conscious of the different origins of their practices in their day-to-day use of them, their ability to combine old and new ways nonetheless caught the

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<sup>118</sup> Doolan, Nass River, to Duncan, 12 May 1865, William Duncan fonds.

<sup>119</sup> Doolan, Journal, 2 May and 5 May 1866, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

attention of an observer who had an interest in keeping track of such things. In 1915 McCullagh explained that the Nisga'a were living and thinking "mixedly," implying, hopefully, that this was a transitive step on their way from Indian savagery to K'amksiiwaa civilization:

[T]he Indian's condition has changed—he is now beginning to think White, but has not ceased to think Red. Thus, as may easily be imagined, we find him, mentally, in a condition of contrariety with himself: on one matter he may think White; on another he will insist upon thinking Red; while not infrequently he will think mixedly, with the most grotesque results.<sup>120</sup>

McCullagh did not elaborate on these "grotesque results" other than to note that the Indian "cannot think White" about intoxicating drink, citing one person who asked him, "What is it made for, if not to get drunk on?"<sup>121</sup> Just how Nisga'a might combine old and new ways is suggested in a sermon McCullagh gave ten years earlier on the subject of "beating the air":

When a man goes off hunting and fishing a whole season and then returns to spend his hard earned dollars on a big feast or potlatch, he is beating the air; when you take great pains to learn a text of scripture, and are not careful to obey its precepts, you are beating the air; when a convert sets out on the new way, and still adheres to the old customs, he is beating the air; when a woman urges her husband to the building of a house and rooms and kitchen, like a "white" house, and then lives in it like a "cloutch,"<sup>122</sup> she is beating the air; when a chiefs [sic] nephew worships a dead ancestor more than the living God, he is beating the air; when you are a Christian, and at the same time keep your canoe always tied to the worldly side of the river, you are deceiving yourself, which also means beating the air.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> James B. McCullagh, "The Nishga Indians of the Naas," *Church Missionary Intelligencer* (September 1915): 540.

<sup>121</sup> McCullagh, "The Nishga Indians of the Naas," 540.

<sup>122</sup> From *Klootchman*, a Chinook jargon term for an Aboriginal woman.

<sup>123</sup> McCullagh, "1905 Aiyansh Annual Letter," 8-9.

During their Christianizing, as in other facets of their lives, Nisga'a combined aspects of the new forms before them with older priorities and dispositions in ways that may have appeared "for naught" to their lipleet but made sense to them.<sup>124</sup>

Mapping the changes and continuities through which the Nisga'a built their Christianity is no simple task. Both were present, often within one another. One senses at times how smoothly, even imperceptibly, the various new and old elements could come together to invest an occasion with a richness of meaning. The Service held for setting up the four corner posts of the new church in Aiyansh in 1896 was one such event. With echoes of earlier pole raisings, each post was hoisted up and then lowered into the ground to the accompaniment of both hymns and prayer, and once braced each chief drove in his spike before offering a prayer, after which they were declared "well and truly set up."<sup>125</sup> In choosing the name Holy Trinity for the new church McCullagh drew upon memories of his earlier time at Holy Trinity Church in distant Cheltenham. Yet for the Nisga'a who hoisted the church posts into place, their focus while doing so was the familiar one of localizing a new acquisition of supernatural power.<sup>126</sup>

New Christian forms were more likely to intermingle with older Nisga'a habits of relating to the supernatural than to outright replace them. When the Nisga'a took up the practice of feasting again after 1905 as a Christian people they brought the Christian supernatural into the feast hall, although this change had probably begun well before. In their prayers and other proceedings the chiefs adopted Chief of Heavens and Jesus as

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<sup>124</sup> In a related vein, Paige Raibmon, "Theatres of Contact: The Kwakwaka'wakw Meet Colonialism in British Columbia and at the Chicago World's Fair," *Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 2 (June 2000), writes about the ability of Aboriginal people to combine tactics to react creatively to Canadian colonialism, noting that the Kwakwaka'wakw "demonstrated an extraordinary ability to combine tactics that non-Aboriginal people found an incomprehensible and frustrating mixture of the 'traditional' and the 'modern,'" 186.

<sup>125</sup> McCullagh, *The Aiyansh Mission*, 52.

<sup>126</sup> Moeran, *McCullagh of Aiyansh*, 106.

powerful new allies who assisted them in their actions. The yukw as it developed in the early twentieth century reveals just how easily the Nisga'a's Christianity could exist alongside and even within supposedly incompatible pre-Christian practices. Again our evidence of Nisga'a practice comes through McCullagh's criticism:

Some men are such high and mighty chiefs that they imagine they are conferring a favour upon God by believing in Him. The only use they have for the Ahm of heaven is to make it contribute in some way to their own pre-eminence. They love Ahm (religion), they do whatsoever they list with Ahm and think that, because they tack on the name of Christ to it, the Lord is bound to stand for all they do and say.<sup>127</sup>

From another angle the chiefs' incorporation of the Christian supernatural might have been celebrated as an instance of successful grafting of the faith onto Nisga'a ways. Similarly the prayers that the same missionary heard Nisga'a making, which included in their petitions "a request that God might enable such and such a chief to perfect his labour," specifically the hosting of a potlatch, point to a mottled transformation that brought with it much from before.<sup>128</sup>

Christianization as it occurred on the Nass, without simple replacement of one set of forms by another, resulted in the commingling of ideas and practices in ways that ranged from seamless to exclusive and even contradictory. For all the similarities Nisga'a found between the new Christianities and their existing spiritual traditions, there were also seemingly incompatible aspects. Yet it would be a mistake to assume that their resolution was a priority or even necessary for the turn-of-the-century Nisga'a who lived with them. The Nisga'a showed themselves perfectly capable of living in different and even conflicting thought-worlds, and as John Cove's discussion of the three "analytically distinct views of humanness" found in narratives collected from Tsimshianic-speaking

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<sup>127</sup> McCullagh, "Another Chapter of History," 39.

<sup>128</sup> McCullagh, "Another Chapter of History," 39.

peoples by early anthropologists suggests, they were already familiar with this practice.<sup>129</sup> A number of my interviewees in passing mentioned examples they knew of reincarnation, suggesting that this pre-Christian belief was held alongside newer Christian ideas about life after death. In areas where older and Christian practices spoke to different concerns Nisga'a could hold them in a complementary way. The nineteenth-century Protestant Christianities from which the Nisga'a built their own did not share their preoccupation with maintaining balance with the other beings in their valley. Into this void Christianizing Nisga'a brought forward a wealth of wisdom acquired by their ancestors, reflected in the teaching of elder Eli Gosnell (Wii Gadim Xsgaak) in the early 1980s that "the first and foremost taboo of our grandfathers is: You must not ridicule the fish."<sup>130</sup> In studying the convergence of aspects of two initially separate religious traditions we risk seeing divisions where contemporary Nisga'a did not. Perhaps our dependence on the missionaries' eyes to see what was going on is partly to blame. Where the liplet limited his participation in Nisga'a mortuary rites to leading the Burial Service read from the *Book of Common Prayer*, Nisga'a who participated in the yukw beforehand, and who as members of religious organizations like the Church Army assisted the house of the deceased by performing various duties, were more likely to see all of these practices as one rite, which they increasingly came to call "Christian."

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<sup>129</sup> Cove, *Shattered Images*. The narratives upon which Cove bases his analysis are those collected by anthropologists William Beynon, Franz Boas and Marius Barbeau beginning in the late nineteenth century.

<sup>130</sup> Nisga'a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga'a Study*, vol. 4, *The Land and Resources*, 53.

## Chapter 5

### Revivals, Armies and Bands: Expressing a Nisga'a Christianity

Beginning in the 1890s the winter season in the Nass Valley became increasingly marked by the determined yet jubilant marches of evangelizing “armies” as they traversed the frozen river linking the villages that were their ports of call. If all went as planned a Church Army’s arrival would be a complete surprise to the targeted village’s inhabitants, who nonetheless would scurry about at the first sound of the approaching bass drum making preparations to host a visit that might last any number of weeks. During this time all other activities would be suspended as the visiting army, which essentially consisted of the inhabitants of one village, initiated a revival that both uplifted spirits and ensured little sleep.

Such *xhaykws*, or gospel trips, were not as novel a route to the sacred for nineteenth-century Nisga'a as the grey military-style uniforms, flapping banners and leading members' band instruments may have made them appear to some observers. The dark months between the last salmon run and the spring oolichan fishery had long been a season when the supernatural was particularly close to human beings dwelling in their winter villages. Evangelizing armies, in their movements between villages and embodiment of the way the supernatural could burst into the world of human beings

through loud, exuberant action, built upon pre-Christian foundations while changing them.

This chapter tells a number of interwoven stories in exploring the development of Nisga'a evangelism. In the main it tells a story about the transformation of the Nisga'a's sacred winter season in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Change was brought about less through outright suppression than a process of substitution, which included negotiation between the cautious tolerance of Christian authorities for religious excitement—in the hope it could be steered into orthodox channels—and a changing Nisga'a piety in which dual attraction to the familiar and novel informed their responses to newly available religious forms. Within this interactive process, then, lies a story of gain but also loss, of the reassessment of familiar and established ways that an encounter with the new brings, both as an invitation and more forcefully as something mandated. Woven into the rise of a Nisga'a evangelism we find another story thread, this one about the near impossibility of completely putting away the past, of the ways in which it might find its way into the present against efforts to leave it behind. Finally, in exploring the emergence of the Church Army on the Nass we follow a local version of a much larger narrative about the trans-Atlantic journeys of Christianities in the era of European colonization of the Americas, of the ways localization in the fertile religious soil of places like the Nass Valley infused Christian forms with new life as its inhabitants were themselves energized.

## **Religious Enthusiasm**

For nineteenth-century European promoters of different Christianities in the Nass Valley, the challenge of their evangelizing mission was not one of fostering interest in

Christianity. Nisga'a curious about Christian practices and anxious for a teacher could be found up and down the valley. Rather the more formidable task, from their perspective, was ensuring that the religion they bestowed flourished in "correct" or orthodox ways once in Nisga'a hands. As adamant as men like Tomlinson were that the "The simple Gospel of Christ" they presented was clear and straightforward in its message, they could not help but notice that Nisga'a reception of it nonetheless seemed to simultaneously contain more and less than they understood it to. The enthusiasm with which converts on the north coast could set upon aspects of their new religion led the CMS missionaries to take an extremely judicious approach to introducing the rituals of the Anglican faith. William Duncan famously delayed instituting the sacrament of Holy Communion among the neophytes of his mission for decades. No amount of pressure from his London superiors could convince him that his converts' understanding of the eating of the body of Christ would not be distorted by their memories of the cannibalism, symbolic or otherwise, that some secret society dancers were known to practise.<sup>1</sup>

Indigenous reception to different aspects of Christianity could not always be accurately anticipated, however. When the missionary Alfred Hall arrived at Metlakatla in the summer of 1877, Duncan, as he had done on previous such occasions, used the opportunity to travel to Victoria on business, leaving the mission under the new *lipleet's* (missionary's) charge. Hall gave a number of passionate addresses that seem to have sparked excitement among his native hearers. Late one night five men who entered the church to worship heard a murmuring. When a search after their prayers yielded no one,

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<sup>1</sup> This disagreement between Duncan and the CMS over the administration of the Lord's Supper to the Christian Indians of his mission was indicative of larger differences over the form of Christianity to be cultivated on the north coast. In 1887 most of the inhabitants of this mission joined Duncan in splitting from the CMS and moving to Alaska where they formed a new nondenominational "Independent Native Church."

they reasoned that the Spirit of God had visited their church, and accordingly awoke the rest of the village with this news. Later that morning sixty men in six canoes were dispatched to carry the news to neighbouring villages, including the Nisga'a mission of Gingolx to the north where it caused considerable commotion. The excitement escalated when six girls who had been roaming the bush all night returned and announced that they had found the cross of Jesus. Their discovery touched off a rush to see this miracle, and then rather spontaneously a procession formed to carry it back to set up in the church. Hall thwarted this plan, however, when he met the procession and snatched the wood, which Duncan later described as proving to be "nothing but a rotten branch of a tree," throwing it away. Eventually the movement died down, but not before the canoe party returning from nearby Fort Simpson reported having seen angels there, necessitating that Hall speak to all on the folly of expecting outward manifestations of God's presence.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most obvious differences to nineteenth-century observers between the Nisga'a Christianity that was beginning to take shape and its British antecedents was the abundance of religious enthusiasm to be found at virtually any religious convening. Christianizing Nisga'a embraced the opportunities presented by some denominations like the Methodists and Salvation Army for expressive, collective engagement, and sought them out where they were less likely to be found, such as in the Church of England. Missionaries and other churchmen newly arrived from Britain or the eastern Canadian provinces often remarked on this difference. "There is no necessity for coaxing these people out to the League," reported William Rush, the Methodist liplleet at Laxgalts'ap at

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<sup>2</sup> Several accounts of this movement exist, offering different perspectives from the CMS missionaries involved. See William Duncan, Metlakatla, to CMS Committee, 4 March 1878; Robert Tomlinson, Kincolith, to CMS Committee, 4 February 1878; Alfred J. Hall, Metlakatla, to CMS Committee, 6 March 1878; Henry Schutt, Metlakatla, to CMS Committee, 4 March 1878; and William Bompas, Metlakatla, 29 January 1878, CMS C.2./O.3.

the turn of the century, referring to the village's Epworth League. "They *go* as a matter of course – and there are no awkward pauses in their testimony meetings. When pauses *do* occur it is merely an indication that the members are out of breath."<sup>3</sup>

Efforts of the Anglican lipleet on the Nass in the 1880s to develop a liturgy for their congregations that hewed as closely as possible to the *Book of Common Prayer* placed new strictures on what could be considered legitimate religious expression in the mission churches of Aiyansh and Gingolx. In the growing tension between William Duncan on one side and Bishop Ridley and the CMS on the other, where Duncan's lack of translations of scripture was one of the sticking points, both McCullagh and Collison eagerly set about translating the New Testament and liturgy into Sim'algaḡ. McCullagh in particular was adamant that the "Word" would provide a check against the intensity of feeling and religious fervour to which the Nisga'a seemed prone. The restrictiveness of this new Christianity did not escape the notice of Nisga'a at the Methodist Laxgalts' ap mission, where more passionate expressions of faith such as those found in revivals were encouraged. Alfred Green shared the testimony offered by one of the "local preachers" in a class meeting after a winter outbreak of scarlet fever had killed many children. Within the preacher's expression of his joy lay an implicit critique of the Anglicanism of the neighbouring missions:

I am so glad I am a Methodist. I was never so pleased of this as at this time. There is good in the other churches I have no doubt, but they do not have the class-meeting, and if they are ever so happy they cannot tell it in the meeting. God has helped me very much while my child was sick . . . I thank God I am a Methodist, so I can open my mouth and tell you of my joy.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> William T. Rush, "Lakalzap," *The Missionary Outlook* (June 1902): 131. Original emphasis.

<sup>4</sup> Green, letter dated 14 March 1888, in *The Missionary Outlook* (July 1888): 109.

The ways in which Nisga'a embraced the expressive possibilities they saw in new Christian forms of worship that were becoming available to them frequently struck their lipleet as bordering on the excessive. Much to his dismay, McCullagh found that his congregation at Aiyansh would "roar like a moose" and shed tears copiously while praying during the service. Collective prayers were of equally "wild conception," with everyone presenting their own personal petition *alta voce*.<sup>5</sup> Religious revivals came to punctuate life not only in the village of Laxgalts'ap with its Methodist missionaries but also in the Anglican villages. Lipleet responses to the hearty appetite of their congregants for religion varied according to their personal inclinations as well as their sense of where the thin line between proper devotion and dangerous excess was to be drawn. For the most part, however, churchmen tended to cautiously welcome these signs of the Holy Spirit at work, tentatively following their neophytes into the waters of religious excitement and emotional exuberance in order to, as McCullagh put it, "make the best" of things and hopefully steer the faithful from the worst excesses. In the autumn of 1892 a revival ignited as Nisga'a and Tsimshian returned home for the winter, and continued to burn into the spring oolichan season. When reporting the large gatherings and open-air services the Methodist missionaries were almost apologetic. W.J. Stone explained, "It is true that excitement has been one of the features of this revival, but this could only be expected from a people of such an excitable temperament as the Indian." Another unnamed lipleet added that "the native Christians have been

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<sup>5</sup> McCullagh, *Red Indians I Have Known*, 38-9.

fools so long on the side of evil, they may well be permitted, without criticism, to be foolish on the side of good.”<sup>6</sup>

## A Changing Winter Ceremonial

Earlier understandings of the supernatural and its relationship with human beings gave roots to the religious enthusiasm with which many Nisga’a expressed their Christianity. The near impossibility that they would leave behind their existing religious repertoire as lipleet envisioned ensured a degree of continuity with new practices, even where changes appeared radical. Transformations the Nisga’a season of *haw’ahlkw* (taboo) underwent in the process of Christianization exemplify this pattern of continuity within dramatic change. At the time when the first Christian missionaries began to pass through the Nass most public rituals for engaging with the supernatural coalesced around one point in the year. Anthropologists refer to this grouping of different spiritual activities as the “winter ceremonial,” but nineteenth-century Nisga’a would have understood it as the season of *haw’ahlkw*. *Haw’ahlkw* translates into English as “something forbidden,” or as a verb, “to abstain,” and was an appropriate word for the careful, restricted behaviour required at the time of year when human beings lived alongside spirits as they settled into their winter villages. This close proximity also came with opportunities, as the spirits could be more easily engaged than at other times of the year.<sup>7</sup>

A significant portion of the winter ceremonial in the nineteenth century consisted of “power ceremonies” of the *wii halayt* (secret dancing societies), which only operated

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<sup>6</sup> *Annual Report of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Church* (Toronto: Methodist Mission Rooms, 1893), xliv.

<sup>7</sup> Boston, Morven, and Grandison, *From Time Before Memory*, 171; Garfield, “Tsimshian Clan and Society,” 297-98..

within these months. The principal aim of the wii halayt and other winter dances was to convey power, or *halayt*, to humans. Marie-Françoise Guédon describes the secret dancing societies among Tsimshianic-speaking peoples as being part of the “public formalized power quest,” which she distinguishes from the “individual solitary vision quest.”<sup>8</sup> Nisga’a did pursue halayt as individuals at this time, but a solitary path to a spirit helper was risky and there was no guarantee that contact would be made. Even aspiring shamans, who had yet to find their own spirit helpers, often needed the assistance of other experienced shamans to gain control of them. In contrast to this path, the power ceremonies of wii halayt and *simhalayt*, through which chiefs bestowed ancestral powers to house members, offered the initiate a ritual framework for the acquisition of power. A chief, acting in his priestly capacity, could “throw” his power into the initiate, or “dancer.” Having mastered his particular power, he could mediate the initiate’s exposure to it, ensuring the safe and predictable transmission of halayt.<sup>9</sup>

Determining the precise configuration of secret societies used by Nisga’a to acquire different levels of spiritual power at the onset of the period of Christianization is no easy task for the historian. The brushstrokes by which we depict the wii halayt must necessarily be both broad and tentative. There is a consensus among scholars that the names and organization of the different societies originated with the Heiltsuk people, whose home lies further south along the north coast around Milbanke Sound.<sup>10</sup> Yet in a pattern that would be repeated with Christianity, conveyance of these societies into the Nass Valley transformed them. Only some societies were maintained as organizations independent of kinship, while others came to the Nass as the private prerogative of

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<sup>8</sup> Guédon, “An Introduction to Tsimshian Worldview,” 143.

<sup>9</sup> Guédon, “An Introduction to Tsimshian Worldview,” 143.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Garfield, *The Tsimshian Indians and Their Arts*, 38.

families. Two societies appear to have been active among nineteenth-century Nisga'a, namely the Mitla and the Lotlem. The early-twentieth-century anthropologist Viola Garfield thought the Ulala, another secret society, was not transferred to the Coast Tsimshian as a society but rather a lineage possession, which may have been true on the upper Nass as well.<sup>11</sup> The Honanatl dance also existed on the upper Nass, perhaps too as a lineage possession, and together with the Ulala represented the highest possible levels of spiritual power, reached only by chiefs. Outside of these relatively new secret societies in the nineteenth century were at least two basic but important ceremonies, rooted in an older schema where participants received supernatural powers obtained by the ancestors. The *simhalayt* and *t'sikw halayt*, the ceremony at which children got their first spiritual powers, provided an essential level of spirit power and enabled Nisga'a to advance further, if inclination and wealth permitted.

These different societies and ceremonials that made their way into the Nisga'a season of *haw'ahlkw* continued to change, not only under the efforts of their practitioners to refine and perfect them but also in response to larger societal developments. McCullagh observed that at one time membership in the *wii halayt* "was composed only of chiefs and leading men, but now that articles of property can be acquired by any industrious Indian from European trading-posts and stores, it is open to every one who can give the required feasts and presents to the tribe."<sup>12</sup> Wealth was certainly necessary to enter the secret societies, and even more so to advance in rank; the greater access of individuals to wealth through trade may have led to a certain inflation in both

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<sup>11</sup> Garfield, "Tsimshian Clan and Society," 313. The activities of the Ulala, which was active on the upper Nass at the close of the nineteenth century, are described by McCullagh in his writings on several occasions.

<sup>12</sup> Moeran, *McCullagh of Aiyansh*, 55.

participation in and prestige to be derived from secret societies. There are tantalizing glimpses of other changes in the winter ceremonials, which valuable as they are raise more questions than provide answers. In the 1890 haw'ahlkw season McCullagh mentioned that this year the Ulala "made a lay figure, covered it with stiff dough, and ate that as a substitute for flesh."<sup>13</sup> The activities of the Ulala dancers, as the highest of the secret dancing societies, were perhaps the most shrouded in mystery. To what degree if any the dancers were eaters of human flesh seems to have been unclear to contemporary observers Nisga'a and non-Nisga'a alike, but there are indications they promoted this image and the general horror it provoked in the larger community. McCullagh's comment suggests some self-reform, perhaps in response to changing sensibilities. Yet in subsequent winters he reported participants biting and eating human flesh, generally from the arms of those in the audience. This great variability in the Ulala may not have been unique to the 1890s but does point to a measure of malleability in different ceremonials. Far from timeless rituals, the above evidence provides a picture of the wii halayt as responsive to other events and priorities, and even societal changes.

A number of insights into nineteenth-century Nisga'a conceptions of the supernatural are offered by exploration of the various power ceremonies that marked the sacred season of haw'ahlkw. In all of them power came from contact experiences with spirits, or *naxnok*. Unlike practitioners of the solitary vision quest, initiates in the secret societies obtained power indirectly through rites. Each wii halayt had its own repertoire of *naxnok* from which the initiate would be given a helper. Across the different power ceremonies the process by which the initiate gained power followed a similar pattern. Strong enough was the ritual potency Nisga'a ascribed to reenactment that by performing

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<sup>13</sup> Moeran, *McCullagh of Aiyansh*, 59.

a past supernatural encounter in its essentials the spirit could be summoned and enlisted as an aide to the initiate. Accordingly chiefs invested great effort into their performances, employing a cadre of highly skilled artists, the *sigits'oon*, to build and operate devices that would create the necessary illusions. The presiding chief had the spirit in question among his repertoire of helpers, and transmitted it by “throwing” it into the initiate. Possession exposed the initiate and those around him to perhaps the greatest danger of the ritual process. Seized by their new power, initiates characteristically lost the control they normally exercised over their actions, inviting a state of ecstasy or frenzy.<sup>14</sup> It was the task of the presiding chief to “tame” the candidate, returning her to normalcy after she attained this height. This basic acquisition pattern recurs throughout the various nineteenth-century Nisga’a halayt ceremonies. In it we see that brushes with the supernatural left one changed, often wild or possessed, and thus in need of taming. Using information given by “a man who had gone through the ceremony himself, but who is a Christian now,” Franz Boas wrote that the Ulala initiate, after a fit of biting those around him, had a heavy red cedar ring placed around his neck and was slowly led around the fire in a ceremony the Nisga’a called “making him heavy,” which kept him from flying off and becoming excited again.<sup>15</sup> Human beings could not survive without at least some supernatural help, and yet an excess of divinity had its own dangers; it could push the inexperienced initiate off balance as much as the chief endeavouring to master a higher level.

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<sup>14</sup> Garfield, *The Tsimshian Indians and their Arts*, 45.

<sup>15</sup> Franz Boas, *Tenth Report on the North-Western Tribes of Canada* (Ipswich: British Society for the Advancement of Science, 1895), 57. The informant was most likely the Eagle chief Mountain, resident at Gingolx when Boas visited in 1894. Boas mentions Mountain by name later in this report.

Halayt could be expressed in a potentially limitless number of forms for nineteenth-century Nisga'a. Apart from the various rituals designed to impart a degree of halayt, anyone endowed with a gift, once brought under control and given expression, could be considered a *Halayt* (powerful person). Any demonstration or representation of this ability was itself also referred to as halayt.<sup>16</sup> The liplet William Collison spoke of halayt's "hydra-headed divisions," but over the course of his thirty-eight years at Gingolx he did not likely count himself as one of them.<sup>17</sup> Yet nineteenth-century Nisga'a saw both the missionaries who came to their valley and the Christianities they brought as halayt.

Nisga'a who began to Christianize at this time were heirs to a spiritual tradition that included religious innovation. While not without its conservatism, not least in the way relationships established with individual spirits within lineages were passed on, Nisga'a religious culture was in other ways open-ended, receptive to the possibility of establishing new encounters with the supernatural and the benefits that might follow. This orientation expressed itself in the readiness with which originally foreign practices like secret dancing societies could be appropriated and repurposed to Nisga'a needs. It was also found, more poignantly, in the arduous quest of the shaman to find a personal spirit helper within the uncharted realms of the supernatural. The lack of rigid systematization noted by K'amksiiwaa observers permitted a flexibility that could accommodate new practices and beliefs without demanding a zero-sum abandonment of what was already onboard.

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<sup>16</sup> Guédon, "An Introduction to Tsimshian Worldview," 138.

<sup>17</sup> Collison, *Wake of the War Canoe*, 342.

Possible Nisga'a foundations on which to build Protestant Christianities lay everywhere to the interested eye, yet opportunities to capitalize on them were largely—but not completely, as we will see—overlooked by their K'amksiiwaa promoters. Before the lipleet left home their culture, and in some cases instruction received at missionary training colleges like the one operated by the CMS at Islington, had prepared them for the “darkness” they would find on distant shores. More remarkably, time, and in the case of men like McCullagh and Collison, decades spent among the Nisga'a, did little to nuance or alter understandings formed half a world away from the Nass Valley. It is a testament to the utter opacity of Nisga'a symbols and metaphors to these missionaries that a religious culture that conceptualized the cosmos in terms of light and its many refractions should appear over and over in their writings under the phrase “heathen darkness.” To be fair, this was a difficult beach to cross—a crossing made all the more challenging by the “low church” evangelical Christianity that the CMS missionaries carried with them.<sup>18</sup>

Men like Doolan and Tomlinson cast a suspicious eye on the symbols, rituals and metaphorical play employed by some within their own Church of England. The trickster Raven stood no chance with them, no matter how illuminating the light he carried in his beak. More esoteric meanings behind the Ulala initiate's craving for human flesh remained firmly hidden behind the intended shock of anthropophagy.<sup>19</sup> It was a most urgent and serious task which had taken the men who believed themselves to be bringing “the Word” to the Nisga'a so far from home. Duncan was not unrepresentative of those who followed him when on his first visit to the Nass he anxiously sat through Agwii

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<sup>18</sup> The metaphor is taken from Greg Denning, *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land, Marquesas 1774-1880* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1980).

<sup>19</sup> The place of the cannibal in the cosmologies of Aboriginal peoples of the Northwest Coast remains understudied. Stanley Walens, *Feasting with Cannibals: An Essay on Kwakiutl Cosmology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981) is one notable contribution.

Laxha's performance in his honour, eventually interrupting it to deliver a message that could wait no longer. The missionaries who came to the Nisga'a were on the whole serious men, unable to see the performative dimensions of their own recitations of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* while standing beside calico prints that depicted key scenes, let alone glimpse something similar occurring in the stories Nisga'a shared with them.<sup>20</sup>

Missionaries' criticisms of the "Alaid" or halayt generally did not distinguish between its different kinds, labelling the chaotic inverted social order created by *naxnok* dramatizations and the strenuous efforts of the shaman to cure her patient alike as "medicine work." Ironically their generalization spoke to the underlying unity of these different practices, each of which in their different engagements with halayt shared a sense of what Guédon calls "the participation of a human being in the realm of the sacred or at least the non-ordinary."<sup>21</sup> Over the course of his nearly four decades at Aiyansh McCullagh came to distinguish between the different dancing societies that occurred in the nearby "heathen" villages. In a paper he wrote to clarify the Indian potlatch to both fellow missionaries and government policymakers he even described the Mitla society or "Dancers" neutrally, calling it "a very simple dance affair, containing nothing objectionable from a moral point of view."<sup>22</sup> Beyond the Mitla, however, the practices of the advanced secret dancing societies were not for the faint of heart. The tearing apart of a dog by a Lotlem initiate with his teeth and the biting of flesh by those possessed by the "cannibal" spirit of the Ulala succeeded marvellously in striking fear and horror into the hearts of their observers at a world turned upside down, at moral and social boundaries

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<sup>20</sup> John Bunyan's Christian allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come*, first published in 1678, was a popular pedagogical tool among CMS missionaries on British Columbia's north coast.

<sup>21</sup> Guédon, "An Introduction to Tsimshian Worldview," 139.

<sup>22</sup> McCullagh, *The Indian Potlatch*, 11.

transgressed. Yet unlike the Nisga'a, who could look forward to the reestablishment of moral order with the potlatch that followed, missionaries were fixed in their abhorrence, determined that only Christianity could save them from such darkness.

Attacks on Nisga'a expressions of halayt by missionaries tended to follow two lines of criticism. One attempted to cast the halayt within the Christian supernatural as demonic. The other part of their critique consisted of attempts to point out to Nisga'a what they saw as the fraudulence of halayt practitioners. On the subject of Nisga'a expressions of the supernatural Christian missionaries had a particularly sharp empirical eye, in which the ventriloquism and mechanical orchestrations used by sigits'oon to create illusions of death and rebirth and phenomena like walking on water were proof of the underlying falsity of cosmological realities they invoked. Shamans were not excepted. In February 1894 McCullagh claimed that he had stopped the medicine woman he referred to as "Goaway's wife" from "plying her trade":

The next time she finds a song (sic) in a person's liver or lungs she has got to show (I had almost said sing) that song to me, or else go below, that is to say, she must call me to hear the song going on in the patient, or to feel the frog jumping about in his inside, or else be publicly condemned as an impostor!! She thinks these are very hard lines to follow, and that I am cruel to her. Poor old woman, I am sure I pity her very much, she has either seven devils in her, or is under some great delusion.<sup>23</sup>

Such criticisms and threats of public condemnation may not have undermined Nisga'a understandings of halayt, or even affected them in the way that the lipleet who launched them thought they would. Halpin in her discussion of the sigits'oon notes that the power shown was indeed achieved through simulation and artifice. Nonetheless, "the *ability* to manifest simulation was itself a manifestation of power."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> McCullagh, *Further Extracts from Rev. J.B. McCullagh's Journal*, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Halpin, "'Seeing' in Stone," 287.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the different halayt ceremonies that occupied the Nisga'a's winter season in the nineteenth century was the opening of schools at the Christian missions. Attainment of at least one of the degrees of halayt offered by the secret dancing societies was a prerequisite for the *k'ubawilksihlkw*, the Nisga'a of noble rank who were in line to become *simgigat* (chiefs) and *sigidim haanak'* (matriarchs), as well as for any other Nisga'a with the ambition and means to improve their social standing. McCullagh seems to have gained some understanding of this. "What the Universities and other noble institutions are in the estimation of the youth of England," the lipleet explained to his readers back home, "such are these customs in the estimation of Indian youths."<sup>25</sup> In attracting a number of *k'ubawilksihlkw* the mission schools appear to have presented young men from the Nisga'a elite with a new route to spiritual power as well as prestige. Ts'ak'aamaas, the young man who raced down the river from his village of Gitwinksihlkw in July 1864 when he heard that two K'amksiiwaa teachers were opening a mission, belonged to this princely rank, as did many other early students. Their training for this important role began at an early age, and it is not unlikely that in some cases their time at the mission schools may have been regarded by elders as a component of the larger process known as "feeding wisdom into the nephew's ear."<sup>26</sup>

Potential competition between the halayt ceremonies and new mission schools for the training of young men can be seen in the winter of 1864, months after the first mission on the Nass had opened. Whistles sounding around the lower villages in November announced to all that the spirits had returned and the season of *haw'ahlkw* was underway. Doolan noted in his journal the initiation of a girl into the Lotlem, describing

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<sup>25</sup> Moeran, *McCullagh of Aiyansh*, 59.

<sup>26</sup> Nisga'a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga'a Study*, vol. 3, *Nisga'a Society*, 30.

how she was paraded through the village three times wearing only a bear skin after a disappearance of some days. The party went to the beach where they “caught a dog, and tore it up and eat [sic] it.”<sup>27</sup> Wolf chief Gints’aadax was trying to induct a number of young men and women into an unnamed secret dancing society, but met with some resistance. One of them, a young chief named Aksheetahn whom Doolan also described as “an orphan,” declined Gints’aadax’s offer to be made a halayt, explaining that he “had promised Mr. Duncan to attend school” and that he liked being with the missionaries.<sup>28</sup> Not all of the young men who frequented the mission school that winter appear to have seen these respective types of training as mutually exclusive. One evening Niislisyaan, another Wolf chief, visited every house in Ank’idaa blowing his whistle by way of inviting all to the evening ceremonies. From the empty house he had rented Doolan noted that some of the young men who accompanied Niislisyaan often frequented the mission. The liplet felt that they were “much ashamed at our seeing them engaged in the work.” No doubt they knew how Doolan felt about the halayt ceremonials. Later this same winter Doolan noted how the recommencement of the halayt work was keeping some of the young men from school, but not all. Among those who did attend he found many faces with hints of paint that had not been completely washed off beforehand.<sup>29</sup>

That a number of sigits’oon joined the mission over the course of this first winter further speaks to the potential of the missions and their schools to offer a powerful new means to both supernatural power and prestige. As artists whose skills in musical composition and all that was required to successfully stage compelling demonstrations of halayt, the sigits’oon were seen to be in possession of strong supernatural powers. They

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<sup>27</sup> Doolan, Journal, 28 November 1864, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

<sup>28</sup> Doolan, Journal, 20 November 1864, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

<sup>29</sup> Doolan, Journal, 24 November 1864; 13 February 1865, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

were paid well by the chiefs who depended on their work, the details of which necessarily remained secret. While the winter ceremonial was beginning in November 1864 a sigits'oon named Cowcaelth, whom Doolan would later give the baptized name Philip Latimer, refused the requests of a chief that he work for him, even after the chief promised to pay him double what the lipleet were paying him as a carpenter.<sup>30</sup> Other cracks in the sigits'oon-chief relationship appeared over the course of the winter. In addition to the difficulty he experienced initiating some candidates, Gints'aadax was enraged to learn that some of the sigits'oon had been telling Doolan and Cunningham about their halayt work.<sup>31</sup> Things only got worse when in January a sigits'oon named Cowaikek sold his entire collection of tools used in halayt performances to the lay missionary Cunningham. Despite the anger and even persecution such a move provoked, another sigits'oon followed Cowaikek shortly thereafter by selling two whistles to Cunningham.

Why these sigits'oon would give up their powerful position within the halayt ceremonials and join the newly opened CMS mission at Ank'idaa is a question that bears no easy answer. Their own explanations, as they come to us through Doolan, offer some suggestions. Nearly two weeks after Cowaikek sold his tools the missionary wrote that he was "suffering for it." Replying to his detractors, the former sigits'oon told them "that soon, they will do the same as he has done, as they see the medicine people are only liars, and their work mere child's play." Cowaikek's response mirrored Doolan's critique. The response of a second sigits'oon, however, hints at something more. This man too was "in great trouble," but in response to the taunts of "being no chief" and destroying "the little

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<sup>30</sup> Doolan, Journal, 18 November 1864, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

<sup>31</sup> Doolan, Journal, 18 November 1864, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

pleasure they enjoyed during the winter in practising the medicine work” he replied, “that the medicine work had come amongst them from the Simcheans, who had abandoned it, and it was time for them to do the same and that he feared God more than man.”<sup>32</sup> This last retort reminds us of just how relatively new the wii halayt were to nineteenth-century Nisga’a. In the *longue durée* of their religious culture, the introduction of societies whose various activities had come to dominate the winter ceremonial was still within living memory. Despite its recent arrival, however, the wii halayt had clearly built on and been integrated with more deeply embedded Nisga’a ideas about halayt and how it might be engaged to human benefit. Cowaikek’s retort also speaks to the Nisga’a’s close relationship with their coastal Tsimshian neighbours at this time, and the influence of the arguably even more intense cultural changes they were experiencing.

### **Nisga’a Evangelism**

And yet despite such cultural barriers evangelism did not long remain the preserve of lipleet. Already in the early years of the Gingolx mission Nisga’a could be found taking their Christian faith to others. Tomlinson noted how a number of Gingolx Christians were in the habit of forming a party and visiting the lower villages during the summer and autumn, where they would hold services in a house lent to them by one of the chiefs. The season of *wiluusims*, when hundreds of Aboriginal people from all over the north coast gathered for weeks along the beach at Ts’imk’olhl Da’oots’ip (Fishery Bay) to harvest and process oolichans, provided an amenable setting for the evangelizing efforts of all kinds of Christian promoters. Later McCullagh described a typical Saturday evening at the fishery, where “here and there, throughout the camp, were to be seen

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<sup>32</sup> Doolan, Journal, 9 February 1864; 17 February 1864, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

parties of Native Christians holding open-air services.”<sup>33</sup> By the 1890s Nisga’a were using new village-based organizations to reach out and share their religious zeal with other villages—be they Nisga’a, Tsimshian, Gitksan or otherwise—within marching distance. In Nisga’a hands, however, evangelism was not the selfless act it was so often portrayed to be by the missionaries who came from afar and their hagiographers. Nineteenth-century Nisga’a discovered, or more precisely rediscovered in their taking up of evangelism, that collective engagements with the supernatural had a way of re-energizing all involved. No doubt they noticed this effect in their lipleet, in the way McCullagh for example could become so animated during a sermon that he would begin to unconsciously kick the pulpit. Some, like Tomlinson, knew about this power, if only at a subconscious level. When each day seemed to bring new signs of “unsteadiness and wavering” among his flock of Nisga’a Christians at the new mission of Gingolx Tomlinson became more depressed than he could ever recall. To “cure” his spirits he decided to embark on a missionary tour, “passing by those who were despising [sic] the truth to bring it to those beyond.”<sup>34</sup>

Churchmen in their reports marvelled at the energy and dedication Nisga’a exhibited when it came to evangelizing their neighbours. As an example of the favourable spiritual state of the Christians in his diocese, Bishop Ridley cited the people of Aiyansh and Gingolx, who were “zealous in extending the Gospel.” He explained: “A band of volunteer preachers from each place go among the Kitikshans [Gitksan] over the winter trail for a hundred miles each way at their own charges. No one sends them or pays them, nor have they any other object in going than to preach the Gospel. This tests

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<sup>33</sup> “In the North Pacific Mission,” *Church Missionary Intelligencer* (September 1893): 693.

<sup>34</sup> Tomlinson, Annual Letter, 1 May 1871, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

their devotion and self-denial in great reality.”<sup>35</sup> Such movements required little or no encouragement from lipleet, who often lost their own zeal long before their congregants. One of the larger recorded revivals on the Nass began in December 1882 at the Methodist village of Laxgalts’ap. It commenced in a Saturday evening Bible class, where prayers were made “for a greater degree of life and spiritual vigor” in the services. As the resident lipleet Alfred Green remembered it, a translated reading from the *Gospel of John* led his hearers to realize the Lord’s presence, a rising spirit that was buttressed by the surprise visit of a party from the mission at Port Simpson that promptly began preaching in the streets. Services of song and testimony started, and were perpetuated by the natives after the missionaries had gone to bed. The meetings continued for three weeks, during which time the celebrants barely slept. “Besides the regular services,” Green reported, “they would go from house to house, day and night. Marching through the streets, however cold it might be, and kneeling on the snow, pouring out their whole hearts in supplication and thanksgiving. Coming round the mission house at midnight, 2 a.m., and 4 a.m., singing—.” Consistent with previous such events, some participants “became anxious to tell others what God had done for them,” as Green put it, and a party of twenty launched on a trip the river on snowshoes, where over another three weeks they visited the upriver villages, marching through the streets singing, praying and giving testimony.<sup>36</sup>

The evangelizing trips Nisga’a began to launch in the late nineteenth century would generally begin as a revival in one of the villages. An eruption of the supernatural

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<sup>35</sup> Ridley, *Snapshots from . . . The North Pacific*, 112.

<sup>36</sup> Green, letter dated 23 February 1883, in *The Missionary Outlook* (June 1883): 94-5; letter continued in *The Missionary Outlook* (July 1883): 110. See also *Annual Report of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Church* (Toronto: Methodist Mission Rooms, 1883), xiv.

almost inevitably led to a burning desire to share this experience with another village. Revivals had a “contagious” quality as enraptured parties spread out by canoe or on foot from one community to another. The revival of the winter of 1882 followed what was becoming a classic pattern. This movement actually began just outside the valley, in the Tsimshian community of Port Simpson. Thomas Crosby, the resident Methodist lipleet, was away in Victoria when it started but returned in time to find it fully in progress, with the villagers “feeling they must carry good news to other tribes.” A party of twelve soon set off by canoe to the Nass, stopping first at Gingolx for a service and then Laxgalts’ap, whose residents ran from their houses and joined them in a “grand prayer-meeting” in the snow on their arrival.<sup>37</sup> Services and marches through the streets at all hours continued for three weeks, during which a party of twenty men from Laxgalts’ap in turn snowshoed to the upriver villages to share their experience.<sup>38</sup> Containing their enthusiasm within the confines of the village seemed to be an impossibility for Nisga’a who experienced it. With respect to the enthusiasm of the ancestors for evangelizing, one elder explained to me that the people “were so full of religion . . . they want to share it with others.”<sup>39</sup>

While Nisga’a found in evangelism an impetus for bringing people together through the long winter months, this new idiom also had its own logic. If the goal of Christian evangelism was to bring the “good news” of the gospel message to those who had not yet received it, the most obvious population in need of evangelization on the Nass in the late nineteenth century were those Nisga’a who lived outside the mission villages. On occasion the fervour of Christians in the missions and the desire to march turned

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<sup>37</sup> Crosby, letter dated Port Simpson, 20 December 1882, in *The Missionary Outlook* (May 1883): 75-6.

<sup>38</sup> Green, letter dated Naas River, 23 February 23 1883, in *The Missionary Outlook* (Jun 1883): 95; *Annual Report of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Church* (Toronto: Methodist Mission Rooms, 1883), xiv.

<sup>39</sup> Nelson, interview.

toward neighbours who had not yet embraced the good news of Jesus' saving power. During these trips the sharper, potentially antagonistic side of evangelism was made evident as these Nisga'a became players in the triumphalist Christianizing projects at work in their valley. One such encounter occurred in the 1894 oolichan season, when the Laxgalts'ap Band of Christian Workers, led by Arthur Calder and the missionaries Osterhout and Crosby, marched upon two large groups gambling in the village of Git'iks. As Crosby recalled the event:

We had been singing, "We'll fight, we'll fight," etc., so some of the heathen imagined we were really going to fight them. We drew near to the gamblers singing, "For the Son of Man is come to seek and to save," etc., they all the while rattling their gambling sticks, beating their drums as loud as possible so as to drown our voices, but still we sang on, the chorus rolling grandly forth, each mountain around helping by its echo to swell salvation's song, until the gamblers became confused by its volume and power, broke up and left the ground, going to their fellow gamblers who were still trying to hold forth at a little distance. Just then George, who carried the flag with "Come to Jesus" on one side and "Seek ye the Lord," etc., on the other, planted it as our standard right on the spot just quitted by the gamblers, after which we all kneeled down in prayer. By this time there were hundreds out to see the "fight." When we turned around and preached Jesus to them, soon the gambling party broke up, and drew nigh to hear the Gospel.<sup>40</sup>

Such encounters made patent the very real possibilities for explosive tensions on the Nass between fervent evangelical parties and the non-Christians who found themselves at the receiving end of their missions.

Both the potential for tension that evangelism brought, as well as mutual efforts to diffuse it, were exhibited in the relationship between the upriver village of Gitlaxt'aamiks and nearby mission of Aiyansh. The two villages had been one until Raven chief Txaatk'anlaxhatkw pulled up his house and moved it to the empty schoolhouse Tomlinson had erected on the flats downriver in 1878 after his attempt to build it in the

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<sup>40</sup> Crosby, letter dated Port Simpson, 17 March 1894 in *The Missionary Outlook* (May 1894): 70.

village met with opposition. T<sub>x</sub>aatk'anlaxhatkw had gone on to be baptized Abraham Wright, and as a Christian displayed a gift for preaching. Wright's enthusiasm for the conversion of the Gitlaxt'aamiks knew no bounds, but when he was in charge of the mission during McCullagh's absence on furlough the village closed itself to his overtures. Upon the lipleet's return village relations thawed, and at the missionary's suggestion the people of Aiyansh were soon building a broad-gauged road through the nearly three miles of forest that separated them from Gitlaxt'aamiks. This new link by land was appropriately named "Gospel Road," as every Sunday afternoon a party of Aiyansh Christians marched along it to preach the gospel from house to house in Gitlaxt'aamiks.<sup>41</sup> When the Ulala or "Cannibal" dance began in the village the following winter, the road opened the way for Christian intervention. Every day between New Year and March 10, when the tribes left for the spring fishery, a party of between forty and fifty marched along the road into Gitlaxt'aamiks "with banner aloft, singing and praying," where they held both indoor and outdoor meetings. A three-week cold spell when temperatures ranged between thirty and forty degrees below zero was not enough to deter their efforts.

Next winter the Aiyansh evangelists intensified their efforts. Their campaign was temporarily delayed by a flu epidemic in November, but when it eventually did launch it was with a new weapon in its arsenal: a bass drum. Only a few weeks into the season the Gitlaxt'aamiks sent a deputation to McCullagh asking that he put a stop to the open-air preaching, in return promising to, as the lipleet put it, "give their very best attention" to the preaching of the gospel in their own houses. McCullagh was open to this compromise, but Wright and the other evangelists would have none of it. When they

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<sup>41</sup> McCullagh, Aiyansh, Annual Letter, 20 November 1892, CMS fonds, C.2./O.3. McCullagh translated the road in his phonetic spelling of Nisga'a as "Genuk'lth Amet-lth malthashqu or The Road of Good Tidings."

marched into the centre of Gitlaxt'aamiks the following Sunday the scene was set for a showdown. A crowd blocked their way, while others brandishing knives rushed at the drum, the source of their ire. The drum somehow emerged unscathed from the melee, but neither side fared as well. Tensions peaked when the Aiyansh party got down on their knees and commenced praying for the villagers. A shaman named Hkseije spat four times on George Gozag, one of the evangelists, though remarkably the latter pretended not to notice and continued praying. This drop into prayer also ended the confrontation when another shaman, "Old Agaud," who was attempting to rough up a relative among the evangelists, began to tremble and then knelt with them—the sight of which led the villagers to retreat. Triumphant, the evangelists continued their tour, but it was a hollow victory. McCullagh recorded that they returned that evening "very much sobered and subdued, desirous of their own accord to give up the drum."<sup>42</sup>

This clash in the winter of 1893 between Aiyansh and Gitlaxt'aamiks over the use of the drum brought the communities, already divided once by Christianity, to a recognition of just how toxic their relationship had become. Inter-village rivalry was not uncommon in nineteenth-century Nisga'a society, but there seems to have been a mutual desire to repair the close ties between them that had clearly been strained. The vehicle for this reconciliation, as for so many important acts, was the feast. Its trigger was McCullagh's upcoming administration of the sacrament of Holy Communion. Anxious to receive it without troubled hearts, two Aiyansh chiefs decided to put an end to their bitter feelings by inviting the chiefs and headmen of Gitlaxt'aamiks to a public dinner, where they would apologize for the harsh words they had used in their clash.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> McCullagh, *Further Extracts from Rev. J.B. McCullagh's Journal*, 9.

<sup>43</sup> McCullagh, "Progress among the Nishga Indians," 37.

Gitlaxt'aamiks accepted the invitation, and two days later invited both the lipleet and all the male members of Aiyansh to a feast to be hosted by the head chief Sgat'iin. The event bore all the hallmarks of a feast designed to effect peace, save the *Wil swantkwhl mixk'aax* or Eagle Down ceremony, which may have been withheld in the interest of not giving offence to the Christian guests. Speeches that accompanied the first course emphasized that there was no need to hurry while eating, that all the guests were very well disposed toward one another, and that they were together in their ancestors' house. During the wait for the second course the chief Niysyok took the gesture of reconciliation further in giving a speech. He declared that those present were one people, living on one reservation with one "master" (a reference to McCullagh), and that although they were now living in two villages they were joined by the Gospel Road, "which was like a marriage ring." As at the Aiyansh dinner, the entire community blamed themselves for the conflict and expressed their desire that "to-night be the last of its remembrance." Finally, in a gesture clearly meant to complete the healing of the rift, the Gitlaxt'aamiks made a collection among themselves and then laid the money at McCullagh's feet on a mat, declaring it their contribution toward the new road.<sup>44</sup>

Although cast by McCullagh in his two accounts of it as a struggle between Christian and Heathen, the inter-village conflict and resolution of late 1893 were to their upriver Nisga'a participants more about the need to invoke limits on the rivalry and competition that were an expected part of their social life. Enthusiasm for drumming and marching and the vehement responses it triggered among those at the receiving end had tipped all off balance, such that they had lost the respect necessary for coexistence. The two feasts held in each village near Christmas can be seen as attempts to make

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<sup>44</sup> McCullagh, "Progress among the Nishga Indians," 38.

evangelism a reasonably manageable vector within Nisga'a society. Like the halayt initiates whose possession by supernatural power made them a danger in need of taming, the disorder and even strange behaviour evidenced in the melee served as a powerful reminder of the potential for chaos that lay beneath the feasting system. Shaman Hkseije stated through Niysyok that he had not been able to sleep since spitting at a praying man. This reality once again exposed, each side made conciliatory gestures toward the restoration of order. At the Aiyansh dinner the guest chief Niysyok from Gitlaxt'aamiks declared that henceforth everything in his village, from dancing and feasting to the sleighing of firewood, would come to a standstill on the sabbath so that the gospel could be preached to them all day long.<sup>45</sup> For their part the Aiyansh parties that continued to march the Gospel Road to evangelize their relatives appear to have left their drum behind. Naḡnok unleashed by this brush with evangelism had been controlled, and the benefits they might offer acquired.

## **Church Army**

The closing years of the nineteenth century witnessed an explosion of new evangelical religious organizations on the north coast as native peoples and missionaries imported and created different institutions for their respective villages. After his first two years at Aiyansh McCullagh established a Red Cross Association in 1885 "for open-air preaching among the Heathen." This association initially consisted of twelve male members organized under a captain, all of whom donned a badge featuring a small red Maltese cross, a throwback to McCullagh's early days as a British soldier stationed at Malta. On Sunday afternoons its members marched out to preach to the heathen beyond

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<sup>45</sup> McCullagh, *Further Extracts from Rev. J.B. McCullagh's Journal*, 14.

the mission, but closer to home their duties included providing “care and ministrations” should any male member of the mission become sick. Years later McCullagh set up a similar White Cross Association for women, only instead of evangelizing, which the lipleet evidently saw as a gendered activity, the women met for a weekly working party to make moccasins and other goods for sale to raise money for the church building fund.<sup>46</sup> In 1888 Tsimshian returning home to Port Simpson from Victoria set up their own Salvation Army. The Canadian branch of the organization did not initially know about this new detachment, and when an official finally visited the north coast in 1896 the movement was already well established. Driven in part by tensions in the community, the founding of the Salvation Army in Port Simpson and its popularity alarmed the resident Methodist missionary Thomas Crosby. Around the time that the Salvation Army arrived—it is unclear which came first—Crosby and other Methodist missionaries on the north coast organized Bands of Christian Workers in their respective missions. Both the name and idea were borrowed from an organization that Crosby had heard about a few years before, created by a Methodist minister from Ontario in his endeavour to interest young people in doing Christian work. In 1894 a branch of the Church Army began in Gingolx and soon spread to every other Anglican mission on the north coast. Before the close of the century Epworth Leagues, yet another Methodist organization, would appear in villages affiliated with that denomination.

Many of these new organizations bore the imprint of attempts by missionaries to contain and find acceptable expression for the religious enthusiasm of their congregants. Events on the Nass in the year leading up to the establishment of the Church Army in

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<sup>46</sup> James McCullagh, “A Transformed People: The Appliances of Civilization the Result of Evangelization,” *Church Missionary Intelligencer* (July 1896): 511.

1894 suggest just such an occasion of rising religious fervour threatening to spill over onto unorthodox ground if not carefully channelled by the lipleet. Over the course of the preceding year the Nisga'a had shown an increasing desire to preach. In the spring of 1893 a number of Nisga'a from the mission villages of Aiyansh and Laxgalts'ap arrived at the coastal mission of Gingolx to report that "a blessing had been vouchsafed" to their respective missions. The lipleet posted at Gingolx, William Collison, seeing that several of the young local men who accompanied them "had just abandoned sin and heathenism and had accepted Christ," decided to proceed carefully. After calling in the leaders and praying with them, Collison gave them some instructions to follow while they visited the village. Chief among them was that they were to respect the village's regular Services, being careful to attend and not hold meetings during their appointed time. A letter summarizing the spiritual progress of his flock found Collison comparing his more judicious approach favourably against Duncan's repression of the religious movement in 1878, noting how the visitors' zeal had stirred many in the village but that those things "which would have led to abuse and injury were restrained."<sup>47</sup>

Collison was almost certainly aware of the unrestrained zeal bubbling up elsewhere in the diocese at this time. Nisga'a and their neighbours were finding in the Salvation Army a fertile seedbed for new forms of religious expression. In 1893 Bishop William Ridley described what he saw as the "excesses" of a band of Tsimshian who had dubbed themselves "Shalwashin" and were roaming the diocese:

These poor things rave and foam at the mouth like mad creatures, and denounce all other preachers as leading the people into hell fire. It is a very anxious time because these frenzies are just like the old heathen medicine

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<sup>47</sup> Collison attributed many of the troubles that divided Metlakatla in the 1880s to Duncan's repression of the religious movement "without first discerning in it the work of the Spirit," Kincolith, to CMS Committee, London, 6 April 1893, CMS fonds, C.2./O.3.

men's, and seem to possess a fearful attraction for the least instructed. It is only at Metlakatla that they fail to make any impression. They come and rave until the small hours of the morning. I have offered them a well lighted and heated room free of charge for their manifestations, but they prefer the streets w/ their flags and torches and drums.<sup>48</sup>

The Shalwashins' teachings drew from Christian narratives in circulation on the north coast, but offered their own interpretation of them. They taught that Jesus' baptism was the beginning of his sufferings, for he was kept under water so long that when he rose above it he was stiff as a tree and frozen. Further, when he began to carry his cross, his mother had carried its butt end, as he was not strong enough to carry it alone.<sup>49</sup> While some of the Shalwashin leaders were open to the bishop's lengthy efforts to instruct them from the Scriptures, this did not prevent them from expanding upon his interpretations. After the Sunday Service at the church drew to a close during their visit to Metlakatla, the Shalwashins went out and preached Ridley's sermon over again, only with "sundry, emendations and lurid illustrations."<sup>50</sup>

It was in the context of these events that Collison was, as he put it, "induced" to form a branch of the Church Army in early 1894. The previous fall the inklings of another revival appeared out of the embers of a fire at Gingolx that destroyed the new church and much of the village. Interest in religion grew intense among the Gingolx people and began to spread to Christian and non-Christian encampments along the river. One senses a mixture of delight and anxiety reading Collison's account of daily services and prayer meetings continuing into the morning hours with scores of men and women preaching and praying outside. "Fearing some abuse might arise unless the movement

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<sup>48</sup> Ridley, Metlakatla, to Eugene Stock, London, 27 December 1893, CMS fonds, C.2./O.3.

<sup>49</sup> Ridley, Metlakatla, to Eugene Stock, London, 27 December 1893, CMS fonds, C.2./O.3. It is tempting to see the influences of a northern climate and a matriarchal society in these versions of the life of Jesus.

<sup>50</sup> Ridley, Metlakatla, to Eugene Stock, London, 23 December 1893, CMS fonds, C.2./O.3.

was properly directed,” Collison invited the leaders of the “unusual movement” to a public meeting, where he told them about the Anglican organization known as the Church Army. The lipleet pointed out that their preference for open air preaching and use of drums and other musical instruments were in accordance with Church Army regulations, and so offered to write to their headquarters in London to obtain the rules if they wished to establish a local branch.<sup>51</sup> No doubt to the missionary’s relief the Nisga’a agreed. Some fourteen young men of the newly minted contingent were admitted as an “Indian branch” of the Church Army at a special service. Philip Latimer, the former sigits’oon who years earlier had sold his halayt tools to the lay missionary Cunningham and who was now entering his sixties, was appointed First Captain. Immediately setting out on its first mission, the army rushed up the icy Nass River in midwinter to preach and evangelize at every encampment they found. When they reached the upriver mission of Aiyansh, however, they learned that a band there had also organized itself and set off only a day or two before to evangelize the Gitksan villages further inland.<sup>52</sup> They nonetheless toured for three weeks before returning down the river to preach to the hundreds gathered for the spring oolichan fishery.

The Church Army to which Collison wrote to obtain its rules was itself a nascent religious organization. He had perhaps only learned of it while back in Britain on furlough in 1885. This movement had begun in the early 1880s, only a dozen years before it was transplanted to the Nass, but in the very different circumstances of

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<sup>51</sup> Collison, *Wake of the War Canoe*, 325.

<sup>52</sup> Collison, although believing that “[t]he Indian of the North Pacific Coast is of a more excitable temperament than those of the interior,” still saw in this independent activity “the leading of the Holy Spirit.” The founding of the Anglican Church Army is described by Collison in his letter to the CMS of 1 June 1894, CMS fonds, C.2./O.3. The Aiyansh band was likely the Red Cross Association formed by McCullagh in 1885.

Victorian London. An Anglican curate named Wilson Carlile, anxious to extend the Christian gospel to the men and women in the slums around his parish church in Kensington, came to believe there was a place in the Church of England for religious enthusiasm and “new methods.” Carlile began marching these streets, using his cornet “as an effective aid for slum open-air work.” Despite distaste for it in many quarters of the established church the movement grew, and after a few years it was granted a licence, incorporating it as a legitimate wing of the Church of England.<sup>53</sup> For Anglican authorities the merit in its unorthodox methods seemed to be its potential for retaining within the church earnest working-class lay persons who might otherwise drift into Dissent. Indeed the religious climate of late-Victorian cities seemed ripe for movements that attempted to address the needs of the growing urban working class, and evangelistic “armies” were sprouting off spontaneously from the Church of England. William Booth’s Salvation Army, also founded at this time, became perhaps the best known of these armies, but unlike Carlile’s Church Army the established church did not succeed in containing its evangelical fervour within its folds. Across these new organizations lay men and women who enlisted themselves to do battle for Christ, making war against sin and the devil through open-air evangelism combined with social service.<sup>54</sup>

After its transplantation the Church Army spread rapidly to every Anglican mission on the north coast. In March 1897 Matthew Auckland, a self-described “native Zimshewan and Staunch Churchman,” confidently wrote the CMS Committee requesting aid for a vessel his organization could use to preach the gospel to the lost souls who lived

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<sup>53</sup> Edgar Rowan, *Wilson Carlile and the Church Army* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1905), 103.

<sup>54</sup> Myra Rutherdale, *Women and the White Man’s God: Gender and Race in the Canadian Mission Field* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002), 146. To my knowledge, a critical history of the Church Army has yet to be written.

in darkness around them, noting “We are sure that you have heard about the Church Army in Metlakahtla.”<sup>55</sup> Even without a boat eight members of the Metlakatla Army made their way to the Alert Bay mission on the northern tip of Vancouver Island, where they borrowed the resident missionary Alfred Hall’s steamer to preach in surrounding heathen villages. The eager participation of Hall’s parishioners in this evangelizing led him to form a branch of the Church Army for them. “I kept back this organization as long as I could,” Hall explained to London, “but eight members of the Metlakatla ‘Army’ visited last week and I thought it wiser to put myself at the head of it. If this movement can be controlled it must prove beneficial to the Mission.”<sup>56</sup>

Nonetheless, the Church Army movement did not become an instrument of clerical control over the laity. As the Nisga’a and their north coast neighbours embraced the Church Army they also made it into something distinctly their own. Each Army’s revival and evangelizing activities reflected the priorities of the village that constituted it. Following an initial “service-like atmosphere” in which someone would read from Scripture and several short sermons would be given, revival meetings began in earnest when the floor was opened up for singing, dancing and prayer.<sup>57</sup> Singing was often accompanied by the organ and tambourine, as well as the bass drum, which became a trademark of the Church Army on the north coast. Many of my informants in reflecting on the Church Army services emphasized the “freedom” they gave participants. A Church Army Hall was a place where “you could just let yourself go and praise God the way you want,” Grace Nelson explained. Worshippers could get up and move around as

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<sup>55</sup> Matthew Auckland, The Church Army in Metlakahtla, Metlakatla, to CMS Committee, London, 17 March 1897, CMS fonds, C.2./O.3.

<sup>56</sup> Alfred J. Hall, Alert Bay, to CMS Committee, London, 5 April 1897, CMS fonds, C.2./O.3.

<sup>57</sup> Williams, interview.

they felt inspired, and holler out the name of any song they wished to sing. Music reflected the jubilant spirit of these meetings, tending toward upbeat choruses. The Hall seems to have been an exception to the broad proscription against dancing in the mission villages, as Nelson suggested in describing the general spirit of revival that she saw in the early twentieth century: “Even the bishops got into it when—you should see their big gowns flapping when they jump around rejoicing. Oh, you could just *feel* the spirit. The roof just about lifted.”<sup>58</sup>

Contrasts drawn with the village Anglican church helped the Nisga’a I interviewed explain to me what the Church Army was like. When I asked Alice Azak (Sigidimnak’ Tk’igapks) to explain why there were “always two churches” in the Anglican villages she tried to clarify: “I don’t know if it was a different kind of thing, but with the Church Army, it was always a praising. You know, where you can dance and do things like that. But in the Anglican Church you have to be so straight, eh. Everything’s quiet, and you can’t even sneeze.”<sup>59</sup> Some Nisga’a made a direct correlation between the constraints Anglican forms of worship placed on their ancestors and the need for the Church Army. Jacob McKay shared with me how the elders, including his grandfather Leonard Douglas, told him that having to worship in the church, “and only in the church,” when they became Christian was “a real restriction.” This conflict led to the development of the Church Army, where

they were able to pray, sing songs and show the joyiness of their hearts out in public, when they were in Church Army service, whereas in the Church of England, it has always been a strict, no-nonsense way of worshipping. You know, you had to dress properly, comb hairs, comb—women use their kerchiefs or hats, and you can’t talk. The business that you have is between you and God. You can’t talk or look around. That was actually what they taught, and they

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<sup>58</sup> Nelson, interview.

<sup>59</sup> Alice Azak (Sigidimnak’ Tk’igapks), interview by Nicholas May, Gitwinksihlkw, 2 October 2007.

taught it to me as well. (*Laughs*) So just imagine the problems a lot of these old people had with that.<sup>60</sup>

For all their limitations, or perhaps because of them, the Anglican churches that developed in the Nass Valley also conveyed something of the supernatural to the Nisga'a who helped build them and filled their pews every Sunday. "[T]he atmosphere of the old parish church with its reverent and stately worship" that McCullagh and other missionaries aimed to recreate was both new to Nisga'a and yet familiar as a way of conducting oneself when interacting with the supernatural. Strict demands for subdued behaviour and carefully prescribed movements of the liturgy evoked the side of Nisga'a spirituality concerned with haw'ahlkw. Haw'ahlkw applied to a range of forbidden activities, around which one needed to exercise caution and respect. One gets a sense of how the Anglican churches came to be included in the Nisga'a sense of haw'ahlkw through the recollections of contemporary Nisga'a about the early days of these churches. After an afternoon service of rejoicing at the Church Army Hall in Gingolx, the mood of the villagers changed as they returned to their own church in the evening for service: "[T]he Christ Church was really sacred. You weren't allowed to—the kids to be turning around or to run around, to play around. The people really respected it. They kept it clean and they wouldn't allow anybody to do other things than what the minister and the preacher are doing."<sup>61</sup> Parish churches, in their implicit and explicit restrictions on the types of behaviour within them, became for Nisga'a repositories of haw'ahlkw.

Both the Church Army Hall and the Anglican church came to perform important functions in Nisga'a religiosity. Through their weekly services within the villages these two institutions facilitated a kind of sacred movement. Wednesday was Church Army

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<sup>60</sup> McKay, interview.

<sup>61</sup> Nelson Clayton (Gwis̓k'aayn), interview by Nicholas May, Gingolx, 2 October 2007.

day, but equally important to Nisga'a parishioners was the gathering at the Church Army Hall on Sunday afternoons between morning and evening services at the Anglican church. Clayton related to me what the elders in his village of Gingolx used to say about Sundays. They would describe the local Christ Church as "really sacred," as a place where you were not allowed to make any noise and had to keep still. This was where they began their day, asking God to forgive them for any sins they had committed. In the afternoon they walked down to the Church Army Hall where they could rejoice, knowing that they were forgiven. This happiness could be expressed in any number of ways, but often included singing, clapping and dancing. When they returned to the church for the evening service the day would conclude.<sup>62</sup>

Within these Sunday movements lay ideas about different spiritual practices having their proper place. The church was a place where the formality of the liturgy summoned an equal measure of solemnity from parishioners. Understood in a Christian idiom, Nisga'a approached their God in this sacred place humbled by the awareness of sins in need of forgiveness. As it developed on the north coast, the Church Army both filled out this Christian dialectic and resonated with pre-contact habits of engagement with the supernatural by offering a space in its hall, processions and revival tours for exuberant celebration of the saved. The types of singing reinforced this distinction. On Sundays Nisga'a worshippers moved from the church hymnals they sang "incredibly slowly" to lively songs that invited dramatic gestures in their hall, and then back again.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Clayton, interview.

<sup>63</sup> Douglas Hambidge (Walaksim Kaldils), interview by Nicholas May, Vancouver, 22 November 2007. The importance of performing Church Army and regular Anglican Church liturgies at their respective sites in Nisga'a villages was suggested to me by Hambidge's recollection of the response he received when he suggested in the 1970s that they might have Church Army services in the large church in Kincolith, since the old Church Army Hall was close to collapsing. The Nisga'a parishioners were adamant in pointing out that their Christ Church was church, "not Church Army."

Nisga'a patterns of connecting with the supernatural through movement found another new expression in the development of *xhaykws*. These inter-village visits echoed the winter movements of the Nisga'a before the arrival of Christianity, when people travelled between villages to attend feasts and different ceremonies associated with the return of the spirits during the season of *haw'ahlkw*. Since each Church Army band was organized by village, all those in the village who were able to travel participated in the trip, which would last several weeks. The trips seem to have answered a need for residents of different villages to come together, as if it was not sufficient for the people of a given community to worship only at their village church. Spreading the gospel provided opportunities for social interaction throughout the winter season, and appears to have been an occasion for less overtly religious activities as well, such as catching up on news and sharing stories.<sup>64</sup>

Like the ecstatic movements within the Church Army Halls, *xhaykws* offered Nisga'a a kinetic experience of the sacred. If as the art historian David Morgan asserts “[t]he things we do with our bodies have direct impact on the state of our consciousness,” the inter-village marches of different Church Armies over the frozen Nass that became a common sight at the end of the nineteenth century likely enabled their participants to attain different mental states than those prompted by other Christian activities, such as praying or studying scripture.<sup>65</sup> One Church Army leader, the late Charles Swanson, is remembered to have described the effect these gospel trips would have on their

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<sup>64</sup> Susan Neylan notes similar social functions for brass bands on the north coast, finding that “[t]hese Aboriginal musical groups acted, in effect, as a connective institution that intertwined family, community, and culture,” “‘Here Comes the Band!’: Cultural Collaboration, Connective Traditions, and Aboriginal Brass Bands on British Columbia's North Coast, 1875-1964,” *BC Studies* no. 152 (Winter 2006/2007): 38.

<sup>65</sup> David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 2.

participants. Marches from Laxgalts'ap to either Aiyansh or Gingolx took more than one day, and so a few would go out ahead to prepare camp for the evening. Swanson would explain that by the time the army, maybe fifty or sixty strong, reached this stopover they had all been "converted again."<sup>66</sup> Although a visiting Church Army would arrive in a clamour of noise, as each had their own brass band, they would nonetheless attempt to surprise their hosts. Many of my Nisga'a informants recalled the excitement they felt on first hearing the drum outside their village, which signalled an impending visit from another village's Church Army.<sup>67</sup> The sound of the approaching army set off a flurry of activity within the village as residents attempted to turn the surprise around by showing that they were in fact ready if not expecting the visit. Houses were cleaned and food prepared for guests whose visit might last days, but more likely weeks.

Part of the Church Army's appeal to the Nisga'a was undoubtedly the opportunity it provided for laity to participate in emerging public religious rituals. Nisga'a were involved in their village Anglican services, primarily as lay readers and Sunday school teachers, but until the advent of the new religious organizations that began to spring up in the 1880s public experiences of religion for the vast majority were limited to attending services and revivals. Each Church Army counted in its membership the entire population of a village, and the use of military titles further differentiated the range of possible roles. The repertoire of possible titles grew to include types of Captains, Lieutenants and Sergeants, and was further multiplied by categorizing spouses of office holders as well. Beyond rank potentially anyone might contribute to the service by

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<sup>66</sup> Mackenzie, interview.

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, Nelson, interview. For a history of Aboriginal brass bands in British Columbia, see David Mattison, "On the March: Indian Brass Bands, 1866-1916," *British Columbia Historical News* 15, no. 1 (1981): 6-14.

requesting a song or leading a dance. Also an attraction was the rich material culture of the Church Army. In addition to flags and banners each army had its own band, whose members donned uniforms.

The Church Army did not develop in a power vacuum. William Collison, the lipleet who introduced it, astutely read the winds around him when bands of native evangelists seemed to be sweeping into the mission from every direction. As Collison pointed out, he took a different tack in 1894 than Duncan had during the revival at Metlakatla in 1877.<sup>68</sup> This comparison was not quite fair, however. Duncan had been away in Victoria when the angels had reportedly begun to appear in the church. The missionaries holding the fort, so to speak, Henry Schutt and Alfred Hall, were both new to their job and eager to oblige the enthusiasm they found. Collison's approach reflected his accumulated twenty years of work on the north coast, and reveals a shrewdness underneath his amiable personality of which his colleagues seem to have thought him incapable. It had also appeared in the spring before Collison suggested the Church Army to his parishioners, when they had ordered three large marble monuments from Victoria. Chief Mountain issued a call to all neighbouring peoples, "both heathen and Christian," to attend a great feast, where one of the stones would be erected in memory of a deceased relation. Rather than proscribe the event, Collison organized religious services every evening the visitors were present, the enthusiasm from which spilled over into the daily feasts. The lipleet credited his intervention with the chief not once mentioning his marble monument.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Collison, Kincolith, 6 April 1893, CMS fonds, C.2./O.3.

<sup>69</sup> Collison, Kincolith, 6 April 1893, CMS fonds, C.2./O.3.

Inside the development of the Church Army we see a process of Christianization through negotiation of the different forms it might take. From the perspective of Collison and other missionaries on the Nass, their task was as much to steer the “excitable nature” of the Indian into more palatable channels of Christian expression and to prune the excesses of “wild growth” as McCullagh put it, as it was to promote the “reverent and stately worship” of the old parish church they may have preferred. In the Nass the Church Army thrived on the margins of acceptability, with most priests and the larger Anglican Church being reluctant converts to its central place in the religious life of Nisga’a communities. Village priests attended revival meetings in their local Church Army Halls with a frequency that depended on their views of the institution, but when they did show up, as the honorary heads of each army they would be expected to give a sermon at the beginning as the mood was just warming up. Meeting lengths were often far longer than the priests would have wished. The impression of one former cleric who sat through “hour after hour” of Church Army services in the later twentieth century evokes the challenge his predecessors may have faced adjusting to a different sense of time. He described some of the services as “interminable,” adding “They’d go on and on and on, for hours on end, and you thought, ‘Oh, Lord, how long?’”<sup>70</sup> Indeed the tension between the Nisga’a and their priests over the place of the Church Army in their Christianity continued after the period of Christianization explored here, with a bishop at one point trying to disband the organization as he thought it was “far too emotional.”

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<sup>70</sup> Hambidge, interview.

Greater acceptance and a willingness to see it as an “authentic” expression of the Christian faith grew among a new generation of priests that arrived in the 1960s.<sup>71</sup>

In the decades after its introduction in 1894, the extraordinary popularity of the Church Army added a vibrant, expressive dimension to the Nisga’a’s Christianity. The organization resonated with earlier collective spiritual practices in a number of ways. Notably, the repertoire of possible army titles was put to full use by Nisga’a familiar with rank recognition. But even in such parallels we see evidence of creativity as the Nisga’a discerned new possibilities for spiritual expression. If we view the arrival of uniforms and banners from England as marking only lipaleet direction of Nisga’a religious expression into more palatable channels, we overlook the excitement that the Nisga’a must have felt when they first removed them from their boxes. Here the creative possibilities of Christianization are interwoven with its more coercive gestures. Missionaries like Collison and Hall became ambivalent promoters of expressions of Christianity that were not what they had envisioned for their neophytes, but which appeared tolerable most of the time.

## Music

The potency of singing as a particularly effective medium through which supernatural power might flow was a well-established truth in pre-Christian Nisga’a spirituality. If, as Guédon asserts of the Tsimshianic peoples, action began with intent and became more real with its articulation in words, then *limx* (songs) were an even more

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<sup>71</sup> Mackenzie, interview. Mackenzie told me that the elected and hereditary chiefs of the Nass met with the bishop and told him that such an action would probably result in the end of the Anglican Church in the Nass. John Hannen, interview by Nicholas May, Victoria, 21 November 2007.

powerful vehicle of expression that could propel a wish into fruition.<sup>72</sup> Songs were present at almost every interface with the supernatural. The presiding spirit at initiation ceremonies was called by songs, which themselves in their power to invoke were regarded by the Nisga'a and other peoples of the Northwest Coast as "among the treasured gifts from supernatural beings," and thus passed down through lineages along with stories and crests.<sup>73</sup> An integral part of the process of becoming a shaman was the acquisition of power songs from spirit helpers, which could then be used to summon their assistance. Nineteenth-century Nisga'a also believed that songs could bring illness if put into a person by someone with malevolent intent. Nisga'a, like the group of elderly women the first CMS liplet on the Nass Arthur Doolan found gathered around a boy very ill with croup, frequently explained to him that the cause of the sickness was a "leemy" put into the patient by some enemy.<sup>74</sup> One of the more sacred classes of songs were *lim'oo'y*, dirges sung to show respect to those who had crossed the river to the spirit world. In composing and singing them mourners believed they helped the deceased's spirit to be reborn more quickly.<sup>75</sup> Songs appear to have been integral to managing times of transformation, as the culture hero Txeemsim had taught by his practice of composing a special song after killing an animal to show respect for its soul, as well as human dependency on the animal's offering of its coat of flesh.<sup>76</sup>

Translation of even less sacred experiences into song provided Nisga'a with a way to draw power from them. Jacob McKay explained to me how the ancestors typically went about drawing joy and strength from some positive event:

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<sup>72</sup> Guédon, "An Introduction to Tsimshian Worldview," 141.

<sup>73</sup> Garfield, *The Tsimshian Indians and Their Arts*, 56.

<sup>74</sup> Doolan, Journal, 20 November 1865, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

<sup>75</sup> Boston, Morven and Grandison, *From Time Before Memory*, 159.

<sup>76</sup> Nisga'a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga'a Study*, vol. 1, *Nisga'a Origins*, 81.

[O]ur forefathers were able to take time off, starting late in November, when the cool winds first started. They'd invite people from different communities close by, or even in their families. They'd practise some dance, create some dance based on what happened during the summertime; some good thing that happened to them, that provided a little extra for the family and for the *wilp*, and . . . it made them stronger. And develop new stories and re-enhance the stories already in existence.<sup>77</sup>

Songs of a jubilant and often comical nature composed during what McKay called the “starvation months” reminded Nisga’a of the abundance to be found from the land, water and even heavens.

On Duncan’s second visit to the Nass in 1860 the holder of the name Sgat’iin, a chief the liplet described as old and blind, wanted to hear Duncan sing, “and then he would die,” a phrase likely meant to be taken metaphorically.<sup>78</sup> It was as though the real test of the missionary’s spiritual abilities lay less in the address he had just given than in how well he could sing. When Doolan was working on the Nass a few years later he saw his “total inability to sing,” which he attributed to a hearing disability, as a “sad drawback” to the mission work and stressed that a knowledge of music was “nearly indispensable” to a missionary among the Nisga’a.<sup>79</sup> References in the missionary records to the occasions on which Nisga’a used songs strongly suggest that they were applying the new repertoire of Christian hymns in familiar ways. One of these was around death, as one prepared to make the journey to the spirit world on the other side of the river. Gints’aadax, the Wolf chief who before his own conversion had asked two students of the CMS mission to sing the hymns they had learned at one of his feasts, was in many respects a changed man as he lay on his deathbed at the Gingolx mission over thirty years later. Yet George Kinsada, as he was now known, had a similar request for

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<sup>77</sup> McKay, interview.

<sup>78</sup> Duncan, in “The Indians of British Columbia,” *Church Missionary Intelligencer* (April 1865): 115.

<sup>79</sup> Doolan, Journal, 25 September 1865, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

the resident missionary William Collison, calling him to his side on his last evening to ask, “Will you sing for me? There are two songs I long to hear again: ‘I will arise and go to my father,’ and ‘Rock of ages cleft for me.’”<sup>80</sup> Gints’aadax and other Nisga’a called on their missionaries to sing for them when they felt themselves slipping away.<sup>81</sup>

One of the most attractive aspects of the more expressive forms of Christianity to nineteenth-century Nisga’a was the central place they accorded to music. When I asked Joseph Gosnell (Hleek) how the Church Army began he explained:

Well our people love to sing. And when you start singing, you start clapping your hands, and the next thing you do, you’re dancing. And, you know, that was frowned upon by the Anglican Church. But that’s what our people love to do. And I think not only Aboriginal people. You turn on your TV any given time on Sunday and you’ll see people playing instruments, clapping their hands and dancing.<sup>82</sup>

Recalling the gospel trips that he had participated in as a teenager where the singing would go on for hours on end, as well as stories from his father and others of their trips in the early twentieth century, Gosnell singled out the power of singing to “mesmerize” the participants, inducing a trance-like state in which they appeared to lose control of themselves. The Nisga’a name for these gospel trips, *xhaykws*, meaning literally to tip over or capsize, encapsulated the ecstatic reverie brought about by singing that became so characteristic of these occasions. Also suggestive of how nineteenth-century Nisga’a understood their gospel trips are the word’s roots. In *Sim’algax* the prefix “*x*” denotes the action “to eat,” and “*haykw*” is the Nisga’a word for spirit. The “tipping over” of participants in gospel trips may have been connected with the idea of “eating spirit.”<sup>83</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Collison, in “British Columbia,” *Church Missionary Intelligencer* (June 1899): 551.

<sup>81</sup> For another example, see letter written by M.E. Rush, wife of Methodist missionary Dr. William T. Rush, in “Lakalzap,” *The Missionary Outlook* (June 1902): 132.

<sup>82</sup> Gosnell, interview.

<sup>83</sup> “Nisga’a Community Portal,” First Voices, <<http://www.firstvoices.com/en/Nisgaa>>.

Gosnell's father used to tell him that he felt totally different when he came away from a gospel service. His body felt so light it was as though he was "walking on air."<sup>84</sup> An understanding of how this tradition developed, and what if any roots led back to earlier Nisga'a practices, is made difficult by the fact that so little is remembered today about religious practices that predated Christianization. Continuities, which undoubtedly number many, perhaps reside less in conscious memory than in the acts themselves, in the way physical movements and spiritual states responded to song. Gosnell thought that the same trance-like states induced by song occurred during the ceremonies that Nisga'a used to practise, although he had never witnessed them. He cited some of the early films that were taken of performances from other cultures along the coast, in which participants can be seen singing and dancing in irregular movements.<sup>85</sup> From these ethnographic films, fraught with interpretive and representational problems as they are, imaginative links offer hints of how past and present might be related.

Nisga'a enthusiastically embraced the new Christian hymns that became available to them, although they did not always take them up exactly as their lipleet thought they should. The Protestant missionaries who served on the Nass generally anticipated an acoustic dimension to the conversions they worked to facilitate. Dennis Jennings, one of the many Methodist ministers to be posted at Laxgalts'ap in the closing years of the nineteenth century, made a trip to the upper Nass as the haw'ahlkw season was getting underway in November 1889. Reaching the village of Gitwinksihkw the religious state of its inhabitants was immediately patent: "By the noise we heard," Jennings recalled,

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<sup>84</sup> Gosnell, interview.

<sup>85</sup> Edward S. Curtis's 1914 silent motion picture, *In the Land of the Head-Hunters*, a story set among the Kwakwaka'wakw before European contact, comes to mind as one of the more well-known examples of this genre.

“we felt we were in the midst of heathenism.”<sup>86</sup> Yet Nisga’a musical preferences did not divide so neatly as they Christianized. Their conceptions of the sound of the sacred expanded explosively at this time as they eagerly devoured new pieces as quickly as lipleet could introduce them. McCullagh noted of his Aiyansh congregation in 1896 that since quite a few had learned to read music “hardly a week passes without a new hymn and a new tune being taken up for practice.”<sup>87</sup> Nisga’a in the missions showed an incredible appetite for the prolific number of stirring gospel hymns produced by the nineteenth-century revivalist evangelicals Dwight Moody and Ira Sankey, and missionaries like Collison were thrilled to hear these songs echoing out from canoes going up and down the river. Several of my interviewees recalled the strength of the Anglican choirs, and their penchant for “big songs” like the “Hallelujah” chorus from George Handel’s *Messiah*.<sup>88</sup> These new musical traditions took root among older traditions, as became apparent in the strained relationship that developed between the people of Laxgalts’ap and the Methodist Church after Alfred Green, the resident missionary of twelve years, left. The church’s difficulty securing a replacement who was able to stay for longer than one year seems to have been at the heart of the discord, but there were also other issues. Placement of a new missionary at the village took the form of a formal contract in which the villagers agreed to submit to their new teacher, but the demands went both ways. When Stanley Osterhout was stationed at Laxgalts’ap by the Chairman of the BC Conference of the Methodist Church in late 1896, he noted regretfully that “one of the most important clauses of the agreement was that they might use the drum in the church on Sunday.” To Osterhout’s relief the drum was soon

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<sup>86</sup> Jennings, letter dated 26 November 1889, in *The Missionary Outlook* (March 1890): 46.

<sup>87</sup> McCullagh, “A Transformed People,” 511.

<sup>88</sup> See, for example, Grace Azak, interview, and Clayton, interview.

relegated to “its more legitimate sphere,” namely the outdoors and the schoolhouse, but in other corners of the church the blending of musical traditions continued apace. In the same letter Osterhout announced that the ladies of the mission had bought an organ, “and with its assistance we are able to make every service attractive alike to Christian and heathen.”<sup>89</sup>

In Nisga’a hands the “Indian branch” of the Church Army evolved into a new Christian institution, distinct from its overseas origins. As much as new lines of connectivity in this colonial period were making the transfer of religious and other ideas between Europe and the Americas more possible than ever before, the Church Army that emerged in London’s working class neighbourhoods was still too distant to offer more than the “cargo” that could be shipped to the Nass: the governing rules, the military-style uniforms, the missionary’s impressions gathered during a visit home. In this trans-Atlantic movement the Church Army provided Nisga’a with a measure of manoeuvrability in their Christianization. Its basic structures—especially the open-air services, evangelical trips, abundant music and attention to rank—appealed to Nisga’a religious sensibilities while helping to hold them within the bounds of religious orthodoxy laid by their clergy. Yet the different conditions it found in the Nass, with no industrial poor to preach to, invited localization as Nisga’a and their missionaries were left to imagine what an evangelical army might be capable of in the spiritual landscape of the north coast. Like a distant relation, the Church Army that took root on British Columbia’s north coast bore only a slight resemblance to its namesake in England. It continues to evolve independently today, much like a handful of other lay religious organizations (YM/YWCA, ACW) that operate locally, outside the embrace of nationally

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<sup>89</sup> Stanley S. Osterhout, letter dated 17 December 1896, in *The Missionary Outlook* (March 1897): 40.

and internationally organized institutions with which they share their names. The presence of these independent versions of larger religious societies hints at similar processes of localization of Christian forms as they became Nisga'a.

## Chapter 6

# Making the Heart Good: Nisga'a Memories of Christianization

This dissertation has drawn on the insights of contemporary Nisga'a gathered from interviews to examine the historical process of Christianization in their society. In this final chapter we turn our attention more directly to Nisga'a society today by looking at how Nisga'a with whom I spoke in the four modern communities remember this phenomenon. If the practice of history is, as Greg Dening puts it, "always the past and the present bound together in the sparse and selected symbols that time throws up," the presents we bring to our practice are every bit as varied and multifaceted as the pasts we conjoin with them.<sup>1</sup> As we might expect, the people of the Nass have a very different relationship with their past than I initially did approaching it as an outsider with an interest in a complex historical phenomenon. When I began fieldwork in the valley after doing archival research, and met direct descendants of people whose lives had been captured in part by the written record, this quickly became apparent to me. For these Nisga'a the past I was interested in was family history, intimately woven into their own identities and kinship structures. In foregrounding some of the perspectives my interviewees shared in this chapter, my goal is to both enrich our understanding of how

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Dening, *Performances* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 47.

the Nisga'a incorporated Protestant Christianities and their aspects into their culture as well as explore how histories of this phenomenon might be differently constructed.

The Nisga'a elders I conversed with understand their religious history in ways that emphasize continuity with their ancestors. Many understand their ancestors as having already been Christian before the *lipleet* (missionaries) arrived, and place this early transformation, this coming of light, within the longer trajectory of their emergence as a people in the Nass. Significantly, *lipleet* did not introduce the light. Contemporary Nisga'a partition their past; the fundamental break for them is not between a heathen past followed by a Christian era, but one between a devout past, where religion was very dear to ancestors and people respected *haw'ahlkw* (taboo), and a challenging present where these ideals are difficult to achieve. Nisga'a remember the loss of culture and forced change that were part of their Christianization, and these memories exist in tension with assertions of continuity across this change. This loss of many objects is recollected as a kind of death, and Nisga'a today do not easily understand how their ancestors parted with them. In recent years movements like cultural revival and attempts by the Anglican Church of Canada to "inculturate" Christianity within Nisga'a and other Aboriginal societies have contributed to an ongoing reassessment among Nisga'a of their historical Christianization. Finally, if our invocations of the past are unavoidably partial and selective, contemporary Nisga'a too recall aspects of this process that are important to them, including profound events that may have left no trace in the written record.

### ***Nisga'a Historical Consciousness***

In order to better understand how contemporary Nisga'a remember the process of Christianization their ancestors experienced beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, it is

helpful to outline some of the significant ways in which Nisga'a conceive, cultivate and pass on their past today. As is true of every other human society, the Nisga'a have developed certain social practices for shaping memory, what Jennifer Cole describes as an "art of memory."<sup>2</sup> If all re-membering is inevitably a selective process of reorganizing and transforming the past, from the myriad ways of doing this societies nonetheless develop authoritative practices from which to create plausible pasts. Only the broadest of strokes can be offered here of a complex practice that merits extended exploration in its own right, for the Nisga'a, like any other human society, simultaneously engage with past and notions of pastness in a host of ways.

Many of the formal memory practices Nisga'a use today themselves stretch back into the distant past. They survived the dramatic changes Nisga'a society has experienced over the last two centuries, and in recent years have been enjoying a renaissance. Among their many consequences, the efforts of both missionaries and governments to reform Aboriginal peoples and ultimately assimilate them into the emerging Canadian settler society worked to undermine the institutions Nisga'a had developed to bring their past into the present. Most blatant of these attempts was the amendment to the Indian Act that banned the potlatch in 1884 and was only repealed in 1951, but less formal pressures were at least as effective in eroding existing cultural practices. William Collison, the missionary at Gingolx for over three decades, felt obliged to intervene in 1886 when some of the villagers attempted to display their *ayukws* (crests). He reported that

[a]n insidious attempt was made by several of our people to re-introduce the old system of Crests at Xmas. They at first stated that it was only for amusement and

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<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Cole, *Forget Colonialism?: Sacrifice and the Art of Memory in Madagascar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 1.

hence some were induced to join it. From the first I firmly opposed it refusing to attend any feast where it was permitted. I endeavoured to show them that it was sinful to make an amusement of a custom which continued to bind so many of their brethren in heathen darkness. At length it was given up and those who were the leaders expressed their repentance.<sup>3</sup>

Given these pressures, what is perhaps most remarkable is that many of these cultural practices, although changed in varying degrees, survived. The Nisga'a continued to feast throughout the colonial period, if in modified form without some of the proceeding's more offensive practices in the eyes of its detractors. Collison was not the only missionary who attended feasts, though as we see here he used his influence to shape the institution, refusing to attend any feast where ayukws were displayed. Today the sense Nisga'a have of their past continues to be powerfully moulded by these pre-colonial memory practices.

### ***Amgoot*: Memory and the “Good Heart”**

*Amgoot* is the *Sim'algaḡ* (Nisga'a language) verb for “to remember,” meaning literally “good heart.” The importance of the act of remembering in Nisga'a culture can be seen in how Nisga'a understand the heart. In the Nisga'a view the heart lies at the core of a person's being. Susan Marsden writes that the neighbouring Gitksan and Tsimshian view the heart “as the seat of both feeling and thinking,” and this is just as true for people of the Nass.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, the root *goot* (heart) forms the base of many words that Nisga'a use to express emotional and mental states. Some examples demonstrate the centrality of the heart to being. *Haniigoot* is the Nisga'a word for “to think,” meaning literally “used for-on-heart,” while to come to one's senses is *luu-t'aahl goot*. Human

<sup>3</sup> Collison, Kincolith, 27 January 1886, CMS C.2./O.2

<sup>4</sup> Susan Marsden, “Northwest Coast Adawx Study,” in *First Nations Cultural Heritage and Law: Case Studies, Voices, and Perspectives*, ed. Catherine Bell and Val Napoleon (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008), 159.

qualities both positive and negative often reference the heart, including words for generous (*ayeem goot*), irresponsible (*axgoot*, meaning literally, “not-heart”), brave (*daxgathl goot*), self-centered (*hat’agam goot*), merciful (*k’e’em-goot*), peaceful (*luu-gakshl goot*), troubled (*luu-haaxkwhl goot*) and worried (*luu-wantkwhl goot*). *Sayt-goot*, literally “all together-heart,” is the verb Nisga’a use when they gather together or meet.<sup>5</sup> Also, the motto of the modern Nisga’a nation is *Sayt-K’i’lim-Goot*, which conveys the idea of all hearts coming together as one. In telling me about Nisga’a spirituality, Daphne Robinson (Najeeytsgakw) turned to the language. “[I]n the language, everything begins from—like if we’re talking about, I’m really sad, it’s said, ‘*Luu-getkwhl goodiy’*. It’s coming from the heart. It’s always the heart. ‘*Goot*’ means heart. And every time we say something it’s from the heart.” If the heart is at the centre of how Nisga’a understand themselves individually as persons and collectively as a people, the act of remembering, of bringing the past into the present, *amgoot*, is integral to making that heart good.

One way in which memory makes the heart good is through the Nisga’a’s use of it as moral practice. For Nisga’a the past provides principles to follow that enable them to live with integrity, to act in responsible ways. Such a use of the past is of course not unique to the Nisga’a, but rather seems to be shared widely among different cultures. Michael Lambek argues that for the Sakalava of Madagascar the past “sanctifies the present. The Sakalava carry their history not only in order to prosper in the present but also for the opportunities it provides for living authentically and with dignity.”<sup>6</sup> When made present, the past enables a similar way of being in the world for the Nisga’a.

<sup>5</sup> “Nisga’a Community Portal,” First Voices, <<http://www.firstvoices.com/en/Nisgaa>>.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Lambek, *The Weight of the Past: Living with History in Mahajanga, Madagascar* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 9.

Recalling the sometimes hard lessons acquired by the ancestors is key to the practice of the principle of respect that is so central to Nisga'a thought. Past events, like most dramatically the eighteenth-century volcanic eruption prompted by a group of children's disrespect toward salmon, have the ability to remind contemporary Nisga'a of the consequences of forgetting that the animals are relatives, and that they may hopefully avoid such catastrophic events by in turn living properly. This example demonstrates nicely how while on one level Nisga'a practices with respect to the past appear to be commemorations of events, they are also in a fundamental way about honouring relationships. Remembering, I would argue, is no less an act of civilization than the *naxnok* (spirit) displays that preceded feasts, an exercise that for the Nisga'a created the order and meaning that makes life possible by drawing from the richness of ancestral experience. As a moral practice, remembering the past brings wisdom and balance to many contexts of contemporary Nisga'a life, from the feast hall to the fishing camp to the school classroom. Today Nisga'a invoke the past both to legitimize and contest the way things are currently done in the valley. Guests at any one of the regularly held special assemblies are likely to hear different views on matters such as correct feasting practice or the role of the *sigidim haanak'* (matriarchs) in the past. This last point underscores the degree to which memory is also an active process. The morality the past offers is not always self-evident to the present, but must continually be cultivated, drawn out by the practice of remembering.

Nisga'a modernity has not included a reorientation away from the past that is often attributed to other modernities. This is not to say that the Nisga'a have not felt pressure to figuratively "put the past behind them," or attempted to do so, for they

certainly have—only for them the pull of the past has been at least as strong. The past continues to simultaneously impinge upon and allure the Nisga’a present. Chief Andrew Mercer of Aiyansh eloquently described this struggle in a speech that was translated by McCullagh on Boxing Day 1913 to the group of white settlers who had recently established themselves in the valley. That year saw the first mass migration of K’amksiiwaa (white people) into the Nass, a sudden arrival of Europeans and Americans, largely single men, intent on taking land.<sup>7</sup> Before the year was over the Nisga’a had launched what would become their famous petition to the Privy Council in England in a bid to resolve the ongoing land question as the valley floor around them was being staked, creating a potentially explosive situation.

Perhaps because he was cognizant of the stakes, Mercer was conciliatory in his speech during what McCullagh would call the “first White Christmas” in the Nass. The chief told those assembled that his people had no hostile feeling toward the settlers, and that he wished a very real friendship to subsist between themselves and the settlers now residing in the valley. With insight befitting his chiefly status Mercer anticipated obstacles to this friendship, and pointed out one, which seemed to stem from a key difference between the Nisga’a and their new neighbours. He explained:

Now, it may be that you fail to see in us anything to command the respect and consideration necessary to the building up of such a friendship. You see among us many apparent failings, superficialities and inconsistencies in our effort to live a civilized and Christian life, therefore, in your judgment, we are not qualified to be counted in as men with men. But this is not the truth of the case by any means. Like you we are fighting our way onward to the realisation of our hopes. But there is this difference between us and you: with you the fight is always in front; you have no enemy in your rear to contend with; in going forward you are not pulled back from behind. Therefore in your lives are no sudden

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<sup>7</sup> James McCullagh, *Souvenir of the First White Xmas, 1913, in the Valley of ‘Eternal Bloom,’* (Nass River, BC: printed by author, 1913), 3, lists fifty-two settlers as having arrived at this time, only five of whom had partners residing with them.

reverses, no apparent contradictions of purpose, and no progress discredited by unexpected reversions to a lower level, as so often happens with us.

We have to fight behind as well as before—to contend with the magnetic influence of the past as well as strive after the attraction of the future. To have a future before us is a new thing to the Indian mind. To hold on to the past, to repeat it, to live looking back at it, is an attitude of mind opposed to the new life to which you have introduced us. Our thoughts and view-points are not the same as yours. . . . And if we do not all at once produce exactly the same pattern of civilization that you produce you will give us credit at least for doing our best amid the entanglements that beset our path.<sup>8</sup>

In the colonialist language of progress and civilization that Nisga'a had come to share in part with their guests, Mercer cautioned the newcomers against making judgements about the Nisga'a without first understanding the nature of the fight they were involved in. That fight was on two fronts, not only into the future but equally with “the magnetic influence of the past,” which for the first time appeared to be at odds with the future, pulling against the new life being offered them. As if to emphasize the Nisga'a's difficulty with forgetting their past, Mercer concluded his speech with an invitation to the settlers from the “Band Boys” and their leaders to join them the following evening for supper followed by a concert. Several items on the concert's programme would “deal with the Indian life of the past,” which the chief trusted they would find interesting.<sup>9</sup>

Another significant way exists in which the Nisga'a employ memory's power to make the heart good, one connected with the settlement feast that follows a death. Herbert Morven (K'eexkw) shared with me the vital role of memory at this time while discussing the larger question of balance:

Nisga'a's basic understanding of goodness and bad is, “Bad is always accompanied by good in equal amounts. And good is accompanied with—by bad with equal amount.”<sup>10</sup> If we don't care in how we share, take care in how we

<sup>8</sup> “The Indian Speech” in McCullagh, *Souvenir of the First White Xmas*, 16-17.

<sup>9</sup> “The Indian Speech” in McCullagh, *Souvenir of the First White Xmas*, 17.

<sup>10</sup> “Adigwil hagwin sdilhl hat'axkwahl aam, iit hagwin sdilhl aamithl hat'axkw.”

share, the good that we receive gets taken away. And if we don't look for the good that bad brings, that bad never dissipates. It's always there, and it gets in the way of growth, of learning from that bad experience in a good way. . . . If we find the good and we share it dissipates the bad to goodness. That's why in healing and death, the way our people share death, and start to bring back wholeness.<sup>11</sup> When they start to help the healing process for those who are bereaved, they talk about memories, *amgoot*. "Amgoot" is our word for memory. "Am" is good. "Goot" is heart. And through memories you receive a good heart, which becomes healing in its nature. And so the good memories of the deceased actually begin to heal the wound, or the sting that death brings.<sup>12</sup>

Death brings a rupture, a cut felt by everyone but most sharply by those who were closest to the deceased. Morven compares death in the Nisga'a nation to a tiny sliver in a person's hand. The whole body nonetheless feels that little sliver. To rebuild wholeness Nisga'a share this loss, which all experience at some point over the course of their lives. Providing the bereaved with memories at the *yukw* (settlement feast) is the particular way in which they do this. Memories on these occasions work to make the heart good, *amgoot*, by healing it, and reconstruct the past to provide the present loss with context and meaning. Done within the feast hall, this process also enables those in attendance to collectively re-member themselves again and again. Remembering in the *yukw* is a response to grief, providing a tool and cathartic practice to heal the rupture and allow both those in mourning and the community to continue.

From this role in making the heart good we can begin to see how the act of remembering is integral to the functioning of Nisga'a society, as it arguably is to every other human society. The "magnetic influence of the past" Andrew Mercer told the new settlers about over Christmas 1913, and which was beginning to be something progressive Nisga'a had to contend with, exerts its power through a number of

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<sup>11</sup> "Hlaa yukwhl si 'aay'indiithl gagoothl nuw'imhlgwit."

<sup>12</sup> Herbert Morven (K'eexkw), interview with Nicholas May, New Aiyansh, 9 June 2008.

mechanisms, some of the more salient of which I will summarize here. Together they work to bring memories of the past into the many occasions where they are needed.

### **Adaawak**

Nisga'a cultivate their past most fundamentally through stories, specifically through the many *adaawak* that have been retold by every generation in their traditionally oral-based culture. The word *adaawak* can be used to refer to a general story that one might tell, as well as to the body of legends and histories that narrate the collective past of the Nisga'a people and the various tribes, clans and houses that make up their society. These living *adaawak* work to embed the Nisga'a who recite and listen to them into their valley and provide the foundation for their multi-layered identities. Many *adaawak* deal with origins, such as the creation of the world and the beginnings of the four tribes and the different houses within them. *Adaawak* about the Nisga'a culture hero and trickster *Txeemsim* are also numerous and cover in detail aspects of his life and adventures, including his voracious appetite as a youth that led to his abandonment by his earthly relatives, the lessons in humility he learned through mistakes, as well as his feats—not least the stealing of *'max* (light) from his grandfather's house in the sky. The vast repertoire of *adaawak* provides the raw material for the *Ayuukhl Nisga'a*, the code of laws of ancient Nisga'a society that have been gleaned from their stories, particularly the examples that *Txeemsim* gave them. As the late Bertram McKay (Axdii Wil Luugooda) has explained about the foundation of Nisga'a ethics in often hilarious stories, "A lot of people who are not versed in our philosophy will hear these stories and probably will scoff at them because they weren't written down as were the legends of other countries.

But in every legend Txeemsim presented there was some form of direction included in it and these became the Nisga'a laws."<sup>13</sup>

Among the treasured possessions of every house are the adaawak telling the history of its origins, migrations and territories. An example of these are the stories of the migrations of the Gitgigeenix (People from the North) Wolf house group, who were originally from the upper Stikine River but left that northern country and their Tlingit relatives after a feud developed between themselves and their Eagle neighbours.<sup>14</sup> Many adaawak document historical events that brought upheaval to houses. In the early twentieth century Frank Bolton (Txaalaxhatkw) shared with anthropologist Marius Barbeau how the people of his house group had lived together on Haida Gwaii at one time, but were scattered by the great flood to different places. Thus while Txaalaxhatkw ended up on the Nass, and others went to distant places like Gitxat'a'a and Laxseel, his house shared its crests and adaawak with them.<sup>15</sup>

Nisga'a recognize the authority stories about the past can exert on the present. Over the centuries they have developed ways to ensure that every telling of them in their largely oral culture is consistent in its essentials with earlier transmissions. To begin with, not just anyone may tell an adaawak. Only the leading members of the house that owns the adaawak may recite it. This restriction has been important in Nisga'a society where adaawak function as legal title to the lands and resources, or *ango'oskw*, of a house. As one elder put it years ago, "someone else can easily take over any trapline as

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<sup>13</sup> Bertram McKay, "Ayuukhl Nisga'a: Laws of the Nisga'a," in Nisga'a Tribal Council, *Nisga'a: People of the Nass River* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1993), 125.

<sup>14</sup> Nisga'a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga'a Study*, vol. 2, *Nisga'a Clan Histories*, 221.

<sup>15</sup> Nisga'a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga'a Study*, vol. 2, *Nisga'a Clan Histories*, 319.

long as they know the story.”<sup>16</sup> For the claims of an *adaawaḱ* to be accepted as credible representations of the past they must be publicly recited at a feast. The most common occasion for this is the *yukw*, where the rights of the house must be publicly reaffirmed during the transfer of a name to a successor. Performance gives *adaawaḱ* their power. Guests from other houses and tribes are invited, for their presence is key to the validation of the *adaawaḱ*’s claims. After the story is told, one of the guest chiefs must make a speech telling the host that he supports what the chief has said. Guests further demonstrate their agreement with the host’s *adaawaḱ* by the very act of attending the feast and eating the food offered, legitimating its claims.<sup>17</sup>

## **Ayukws**

Interwoven with the *adaawaḱ* are the *ayukws*, the visual symbols that encapsulate a history and whose display historically accompanied its telling. Every house possesses its own series of these named representations, all of which have been taken from supernatural encounters. Alfred Mountain, who held the name Chief Mountain when he told his *adaawaḱ* to Barbeau at Gingolx in 1927, recalled how during his ancestors’ journey back to the Nass after drifting north during the Flood they encountered *naxnok*, supernatural beings, “which they took for their crests and dirges.”<sup>18</sup> As icons of the *adaawaḱ* they reference, *ayukws* serve dually as a memory aid and symbol of a long story. Since they can only be displayed by their rightful owners, the showing of *ayukws* adds further proof of a house’s claims to territory and resources. Historically when people travelled to their *ango’oskw* it was not uncommon for them to take their *ayukws*

<sup>16</sup> Abel Stewart (Wii Muk’wilks), in Nisga’a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga’a Study*, vol. 4, *The Land and Resources*, 25.

<sup>17</sup> Boston, Morven, and Grandison, *From Time Before Memory*, 36.

<sup>18</sup> Nisga’a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga’a Study*, vol. 2, *Nisga’a Clan Histories*, 263.

with them so that others would know who they were.<sup>19</sup> Ayukws, as simple images representing often lengthy and complex histories, have the ability to convey the many meanings of those narratives through a wide range of material expressions. They appear on house fronts, on chiefly regalia and, most famously, on *pts'aan* (totem poles). Indeed, the Nisga'a's abiding cultural concern with the histories of lineages and supernatural encounters of the ancestors has propelled the development of arts like painting, sculpture and even dramatic performance.<sup>20</sup> A number of my interviewees explained to me that totem poles are “like a book to us.” Every pole in essence is a list of ayukws, which in their symbolic way tell the history of the families that reside in the house behind them.<sup>21</sup>

The proprietary nature of both *adaawaḵ* and ayukws, which often concern ancestral rights to territories and resources as well as powers gained from contacts with specific supernatural beings, has encouraged the creation of a plethora of histories. Even when they draw from the same events, such as the general Raven cycle, and touch on the same incidents as other narratives, Nisga'a regard them as different stories and privately owned by the particular lineages to which they confer specific rights. Each crest must be exclusive; even if members of more than one house share a past experience they cannot use it in the same way. Barbeau in his compilation of stories on *pts'aan* provides an example of this. When the upriver Wolf chiefs Sgat'iin and K'eexkw once saw a bear squatting atop a tall pole that had jammed itself at the bottom of a large waterfall they each drew a different crest from this experience. Sgat'iin took the ayukws “Spearing-the-Sky” after the name of the pole, while K'eexkw took as his ayukws the name “Where-

<sup>19</sup> Nisga'a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga'a Study*, vol. 2, *Nisga'a Clan Histories*, 135.

<sup>20</sup> Garfield notes this need for the Tsimshianic peoples and their neighbours more broadly, *The Tsimshian Indians and Their Arts*, 59.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Davis, interview.

the-Bears-Climb.”<sup>22</sup> Rather than attempt to corroborate the details of their supernatural experience and then present them publicly at a feast, each chief drew for himself—and his house—a distinct crest that would represent his encounter and add to the spiritual power of his house. In other words, as with all recreations of the past the needs of the present gave shape to what was brought forward. We see a similar trend toward a diversification of accounts of the past when a house grows too large and decides to split. Typically the two new houses divide their ayukws, but important ones might be shared. In these cases new crests might be made from the original by changing their names. Thus an original “Eagle” crest might give rise to “Croaking Eagle” and “Split-in-two Eagle” or any other number of ayukws, all pointing back to the same supernatural encounter.<sup>23</sup> Past events might be remembered in any number of ways, as present circumstances and needs shift how they are recalled.

## **Names**

Nisga’a also reference the past through the collection of ranked names that each house possesses. Each name carries certain responsibilities and so requires someone to hold it. The passing of a chief or matriarch creates a void that sets in motion a chain of movements in which every recipient of a new name passes on his or her present name to a suitable candidate next in line within the house. Each ranked name in a *wilp* (house) has a story behind it explaining its origin with some ancestor. In this way Nisga’a over the course of their lives cycle through a framework of names, embodying the identities of ancestors along with the powers and duties attached to their names. Yet the relationship

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<sup>22</sup> Marius Barbeau, *Totem Poles*, vol. 2, *According to Location*, Bulletin no. 119 (Ottawa: National Museum of Canada, 1950), 444.

<sup>23</sup> Boston, Morven, and Grandison, *From Time Before Memory*, 35.

between the present and past is far from static. With the first calling of a name for a new recipient at a yukw the dialectic between the accumulated weight of the inherited name and its present holder begins anew. Over time names may rise or fall in stature according to the abilities of those embodying them to strengthen them. Similarly, new names can emerge. Nisga'a hold their names with an awareness of the historical legacies they represent and of the responsibilities carrying them in the present are certain to entail.<sup>24</sup>

This overview of some of the key institutions that mediate the relationship contemporary Nisga'a have with the past and give shape to their historical consciousness would not be complete without mention of some of the practices that have emerged in recent years. A distinct branch within the Nisga'a Lisims Government, the Ayuukhl Nisga'a Department (AND), came into being during the implementation of the historic Nisga'a Treaty in 2000. The department's mandate is to "protect, preserve, and promote Nisga'a language, culture, and history," which it has interpreted to include the creation of a national archive. Although still in its developing stages, this collection includes copies of virtually everything written about the Nisga'a and neighbouring peoples of the north coast since Vancouver and other explorers began the practice in the late eighteenth century. AND is also home to an extensive collection of oral history interviews, many of which were conducted in the early 1980s as part of the Ayuukhl Nisga'a Project. A major impetus behind the creation of this archive has been the long struggle of the Nisga'a to have their land question settled and the need to demonstrate ownership of their lands in terms acceptable to the Canadian judicial system. Nisga'a society continues to respond to both pressures to present their past in ways familiar to the dominant society

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<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of the function of names in Tsimshian society, with its many parallels to Nisga'a society, see Christopher F. Roth, *Becoming Tsimshian: The Social Life of Names* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

and opportunities for understanding offered by these ways—reflected in their support for studies like this one—while practising and promoting ways of relating to the past they have developed in their valley that continue to be integral to their identity.

During their long struggle with federal and provincial governments for recognition of their title to traditional lands, Nisga'a often used the phrase “from time immemorial” to date their occupancy of the Nass Valley. If the arrival of the earliest ancestors stretches the limits of Nisga'a memory, reminders of the distant past are nonetheless everywhere in the valley for many contemporary Nisga'a. Many of the valley's basic geological and ecological features are a legacy of Txeemsim, the culture hero who through his adventures made the Nisga'a's home a more habitable place. The coming of the oolichans in March is one such reminder today. In the *adaawak* Txeemsim, driven by his ever-voracious appetite, tricked the oolichans to come to the Nass River earlier than their former June arrival, a move which also saved the people from hunger at winter's end.<sup>25</sup> Other features of the land serve as mnemonics of ancestral experiences. One example of this is the way in which stories of the *Wil pdaa'aksihl aks* or Great Flood that nearly washed away the Nisga'a are anchored in the valley. While describing this event to me Joseph Gosnell drew my attention to nearby *Xhlaawit*, one of the four mountains upon which the ancestors sought refuge.<sup>26</sup>

Most Nisga'a memory practices look on the past as a source for wisdom and strength in the present. Ancestors learned the skills and conduct necessary for success in life, but some of these lessons came at great cost. More than two hundred years ago a volcano erupted in Nisga'a territory. Its lava pushed the course of the Nass River to the

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<sup>25</sup> The story of this and many other adventures of Txeemsim can be found in Nisga'a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga'a Study*, vol. 1, *Nisga'a Origins*.

<sup>26</sup> Gosnell, interview.

opposite side of the valley, and in the process buried two villages. When relating this tragedy Nisga'a locate its cause to the disrespectful activities of a group of boys. Not long before the volcano erupted, they had been catching humpback salmon by hand in a creek. After stuffing pieces of slate into their backs like fins they released the salmon, amusing themselves as they watched them struggle up the creek.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Remembering Christianization***

Having surveyed some of the major structures by which Nisga'a have historically brought the past into their presents, the remainder of this chapter turns to the specific question of how contemporary Nisga'a remember their Christianization. What *adaawaḱ*, if any, tell of this phenomenon? If Nisga'a traditionally view memories as having the potential to make the heart good, is this true for memories of nineteenth-century religious changes?

The Nisga'a I interviewed do not recall the process by which their culture Christianized, and they and their ancestors came to understand themselves as Christian, in any one way. The many layers of a complex historical development that spanned several decades and the multiple ways it was experienced and is now reimagined by those who reflect on it do not lend themselves easily to any single metanarrative.

### **Christian Ancestors**

Present-day Nisga'a reimagine their ancestors within a Christian framework. This became clear through the uncertainty among my interviewees about when the Nisga'a had become Christians. What I envisioned to have been a significant change is barely

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<sup>27</sup> There are many versions of the story of the volcanic eruption on the Nass. See, for example, that given by Peter Nisyok, a Gisk'ansnaat Wolf of Gitlaxt'aamiks to William Beynon in 1927. Cited in Boston, Morven, and Grandison, *From Time Before Memory*, 148.

remembered, or as I would soon learn, remembered differently in the Nass. In New Aiyansh Lorene Plante (Ksim Lax̄ Miigunt) assured me that memories surrounding the arrival of Christianity are well preserved, but was less clear about its relationship to the Nisga'a's identity as Christians: "Well, there's a lot of stories about what happened when Christianity came into the valley. I don't know if it was when they became Christians, or if they were already Christians, because they—most people tell us that they were already giving thanks to K'amligihahlhaahl, you know, which is the Almighty above."<sup>28</sup> According to the understanding of Plante and others the Nisga'a had long been Christians, as evidenced by the ancestors' practice of giving thanks to K'amligihahlhaahl. The Christianity of the ancestors both preceded and was distinct from the more recent arrival of Christianity—the one remembered to have been brought by European missionaries—in the valley. Charles Alexander (Gadim Galdoo'o) told me he was "quite sure it all started" when the ministers came to teach the Nisga'a, before adding, "But our great-great-grandfathers, grandmothers, already knew about God, they called K'amligihahlhaahl. I'm quite sure it wasn't too hard for the ministers to teach the Nisga'a nation about Christianity."<sup>29</sup> A number of Nisga'a with whom I spoke could recall that their ancestors had been baptized, but were unclear whether this act made them into Christians, explaining they had already known about God.

On the question of the particular type of conversion missionaries sought and recorded, Nisga'a today have almost no stories. My informants offered a number of clues that suggest a reason for this silence. Almost everyone pointed out to me the significant similarities to be found between the religious beliefs of their ancestors and Christianity.

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<sup>28</sup> Plante, interview.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Alexander (Gadim Galdoo'o), interview by Nicholas May, Laxgalts'ap, 27 September 2007.

Belief in a god who created the world and placed the Wāhlingigat, the ancient Nisga'a ancestors, on Lisims, was the parallel I heard most often. Grace Azak (Ne' Jiits Hoostkw) and George Williams (Ksdiyaawak) both referred to their ancestors' awareness of the presence of a "spirit" that guided them. Numerous *adaawak* depict Sim'oogit Laxha, meaning Chief of Heavens, or *K'amligihahlhaahl*, whom interviewees defined as the Nisga'a Creator. For many the Ten Commandments mirror the *ayuuuk*, the ancient laws of the Nisga'a. Elders also cited the parallels between the Christian flood story as relayed in the *Book of Genesis* and the oral tradition of their own ancestors' narrow escape from a great deluge. Charles Alexander told me that the Nisga'a account of the flood was a long story, but related a few details. Some Nisga'a managed to survive by roping their canoes to the mountain tops, but others were lost in the attempt. Still others floated a different way, settling in what is now Alaska when the waters receded. For Nisga'a today the flood story in the Christian Bible describes an event experienced by their ancestors in the distant past.<sup>30</sup> Hearing these stories from elder after elder I began to understand that Nisga'a stories about "becoming Christian" are to be found not in reference to nineteenth-century events but in their *adaawak*, in events like the coming of light into the world after Txeemsim stole it from his grandfather in heaven. For contemporary Nisga'a the civilizing events of the past—by which their ancestors came to be organized into four tribes, learned to follow *aam* ("good") and established the order symbolized in the feasting system against the potential for chaos—are to be found near the beginning of a much longer timescale, namely that of their existence as a people.

Thanks to these many similarities, and the way they set the Nisga'a drama of "becoming Christian" in a much earlier epoch of their history, contemporary Nisga'a

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<sup>30</sup> Alexander, interview.

recall the ease with which their ancestors embraced the new Christianities as they were introduced to them in the nineteenth century. The continuities were such between the ways of the ancestors and teachings of the lipleet that accepting the latter was almost a non-event. During my interview with Gary Davis (Wii Gilax Namk'ap) he explained to me how beneath its different forms the "European" or "Western" Christianity presented by the missionaries was not that novel:

[T]he only thing they brought in new was the rituals that the churches held during services. We already had that spiritual belief that we were made one with God and we were made in his image. So that made it easy for us to accept it, and that was the only difference, was the rituals and the physical structures. That was the only thing that was different. And the Bible. That was brought in by the missionaries. That was it.<sup>31</sup>

Shared beliefs that underlay different practices, which the ancestors were able to identify, appear to have mitigated the historical importance Nisga'a have placed on their becoming Christian. "The Western Christianity was so close to our own Christianity," Davis told me, "that it wasn't very much of a conversion."<sup>32</sup>

Yet these very similarities are remembered to have been a factor behind some of the tensions the Nisga'a experienced with the arrival of missionary Christianities. While Davis believes the new Christianity has enhanced the religion of the Nisga'a and their ties with the spirit world, he also pointed out some of the problems the arrival of a second Christianity created. He related how a significant number of people did not immediately embrace the new Christianity, "because they believed that, why accept a second Christianity when we already had one?"<sup>33</sup> Missionaries presented their Christianity as

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<sup>31</sup> Davis, interview.

<sup>32</sup> Davis, interview.

<sup>33</sup> Davis's understanding of his ancestors as essentially Christian resonates across time and place with the view of another Christian regarding his supposedly pagan past. In an appeal to King Philip III of Spain, Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, an early seventeenth-century native Andean, noted how poorly some

something separate, and some who took it up reflected this division in their lives. Paul Mercer, Davis's grandfather and the first Nisga'a priest, was one of those who "went overboard to the other side," as he put it. As Mercer understood it, his desire to take Priests Orders in the Anglican Church required a loss of the spiritual and material powers of holding a chiefly name:

[H]e was one of the ones that was converted totally. So he shunned the Nisga'a traditions and he never took it into consideration that our spirituality was not very much different than the Western Christianity. So when he was offered a name, he refused because he said he believed in one God. He believed in the Western Christianity model.<sup>34</sup>

Davis pointed out how the existence of two parallel but separate Christianities led to the division of the community of Gitlaxt'aamiks as missionaries siphoned off those interested in the new Christianity to Aiyansh. In Davis's view a rivalry developed between the respective powers of the spiritualities, "what a priest can do and what our prophets would do." Each "wanted to keep the power on their side." In this contest McCullagh, the missionary at Aiyansh for nearly forty years, is remembered for his strength:

He was able to control people in a manner, not in ways to his own benefits, but to the benefit of our people. And he made sure that this person was able to see that if he was converted that he would be able to help his own people. But I still, in my own mind, I can't see the logic in that, because why help somebody that doesn't need help, or why fix something that's not broken? But they thought that they were able to Christianize us, because they called us heathens.<sup>35</sup>

So although, as another elder told me, there are "very, very few that can relate to how their families first became Christianized," Nisga'a today nonetheless recall much about the religious changes experienced during the decades of what we might call their re-

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priests compared to pre-Hispanic Andean ministers, who he explained "were Christians in everything but their idolatry," "Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala's Appeal Concerning the Priests, Peru (ca. 1615)," chap. 27 in eds. Kenneth Mills, William B. Taylor, and Sandra Lauderdale Graham, *Colonial Latin America: A Documentary History* (Lanham, MD: SR Books, 2004), 176.

<sup>34</sup> Davis, interview.

<sup>35</sup> Davis, interview.

Christianization.<sup>36</sup> Individual and collective conversion stories like those documented by the missionaries who served in the Nass, whatever their meanings to their Nisga'a participants, were virtually nonexistent in my conversations with Nisga'a elders. Far more prevalent in the valley today are, as Lorene Plante put it above, "a lot of stories about what happened when Christianity came into the valley." As I learned during my interviews in the four villages, Nisga'a memories of Christianization today cluster around the many changes they experienced with the coming of this mission Christianity.

One of my interviewees shared a story with me that exhibited a very distinct memory of how an ancestor became Christian. Jacob McKay and I were discussing some of the factors that likely played a role in the Nisga'a's adoption of Christianity, including the treatment for disease and garden produce available at the missions, when he mentioned the role of intimidation. "[T]here's no secret about that," McKay explained, and then told me about how his grandfather Leonard Douglas's family had to move from their village across the river to Greenville (Laxgalts'ap) to be converted or go to jail for the death of a well-known chief. This difficult decision had been set in motion by Jacob's great-great-grandmother's birthday. The chief drank too much of the "strong homebrew" made for the occasion and died:

[T]he chieftains took ownership, but the missionary, you know, with his conniving and meetings with the police, I guess, provincial police who came up on the boat to investigate, found that a lot of people through his investigation was—a lot of people were involved, some very prominent people. And, you know a smart person like the missionary, he saw his golden opportunities to intimidate these people, you know, give 'em an option: Go to jail or convert to Christianity, to that family.

Well, the chieftains, apparently my great-great-grandfathers—not Leonard Douglas himself, but—he was just a young man then when that happened, when they crossed the river and stood in front of a flag pole in Greenville to honour

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<sup>36</sup> Gosnell, interview.

allegiance to the Crown and to the Church, and—you know, so that his sister, or his aunties wouldn't go to jail and rot in jail. Because that was the threat: Put your women in jail, where they'll be lost forever. And probably that was true, that they didn't think it was an idle threat. Yeah, my grandfather just cried when he used to tell me that story, the day of his conversion. And from then on he never looked back.<sup>37</sup>

It seems likely that this event occurred in 1904 when McCullagh, acting concurrently as missionary and magistrate, “overhauled” the villages of Ank'idaa and Git'iks.

McCullagh threatened to prosecute those found in possession of alcohol, to the effect that the leading chiefs publicly declared heathenism to be at an end and moved to the nearby mission of Laxgalts'ap. The trauma wrought by this step, or push, into Christianity has ensured that it is revisited and remembered, despite the desire to “never look back.”

Several Nisga'a shared with me that some of their ancestors were known as “heathens.” Their memories suggest an ambiguity over the term in both past and present. Lavinia Azak, for example, told me how her grandmother explained to her that the people who had stayed in Gitlaxt'aamiks were heathens, “because they were still doing the potlatch and things like that. But when her husband became a lay reader, he doesn't go to that anymore, go to what we do now. When they put up a feast, and she's the one that put his money in for him because he doesn't go.”<sup>38</sup> Azak paints a picture of Nisga'a concomitantly using the distinction and trying to live around it. Other Nisga'a I interviewed shared with me how the historical descriptions they found of their ancestors as being heathen perplexed them, and their attempts to understand what they meant. “I have papers from my grandfathers when they were baptized,” Charles Alexander explained by way of answering my question about how the church had begun in his village of Laxgalts'ap, “and they were called ‘Heathens’ on the paper. I don't know

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<sup>37</sup> McKay, interview.

<sup>38</sup> Lavinia Azak, interview by Nicholas May, Gitwinksihlkw, 20 September 2007.

why.”<sup>39</sup> James Moore (Jagam Sinaahlk) told me he was reading the biography of the missionary McCullagh written shortly after his death in 1921 when I spoke with him in Laxgalts’ap.<sup>40</sup> In our conversation it came up that McCullagh “didn’t just say heathens,” but called those he was trying to convert “savages” and “cannibals.” “[H]ow wrong can you be, how wrong do you choose to be?” Moore asked rhetorically. Having lived so long among Nisga’a McCullagh would have known better, he assured me, and then suggested that the missionary was able to raise more money for his mission in England by depicting the Nisga’a as depraved. To support his theory Moore explained to me that there was nothing in Nisga’a stories “that even hints to people eating flesh,” and described two types of feasts that are required to be put up if blood is drawn or someone is killed. Still, Moore told me that his “heart got so hurt” that he went searching for memories. He asked his late father, Charles Swanson, if he had heard any stories about the Nisga’a practising cannibalism. His father replied that he had never once heard anything about cannibalism, but that there was some truth to the other names. “Of course we were heathens at one time,” Moore recalls him saying, “but K’amlighahlhaahl came and we started worshipping him, even though it was just known as our spirituality, what we were as a people, we believed in something.”<sup>41</sup> As I heard from contemporary Nisga’a, Swanson’s reply placed the profound civilizing acts that brought a new order to the Wāhlingigat not in the nineteenth century but the distant past.

In Gingolx, heathenism, and in particular their ancestors’ escape from it by moving downriver to found this coastal village as a Christian settlement, figures centrally in elders’ histories of their community. The missionary literature casts this event as an

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<sup>39</sup> Alexander, interview.

<sup>40</sup> Joseph William Wright Moeran, *McCullagh of Aiyansh* (London: Marshall Brothers Limited, 1923).

<sup>41</sup> James Moore (Jagam Sinaahlk), interview by Nicholas May, Laxgalts’ap, 27 September 2007.

exodus from heathenism, consciously drawing parallels with biblical accounts of God calling his faithful to leave their native land.<sup>42</sup> Nelson Clayton (Gwisk'aayn) invoked this powerful narrative to describe for me what the settlers left behind upriver:

Some people say that when they came down from upriver . . . a few of the people were Christians and they wanted to find a place where they could live by themselves. And there's, I guess there's still a lot of heathens in them times and they wanted to get away from them.<sup>43</sup>

As a translator for the previous generation of elders, and through his own training as a spiritual leader, Harry Moore (Wii Xbaàla) has heard the story of how some of their ancestors left Ank'idaa to get away from heathenism many times. Moore has struggled with the meaning of this label, and shared with me the interpretation to which he eventually came:

And it took me a while to understand what heathenism was really about, and I understand it now. They just wanted to get away from the people that were . . . leading a different life, you know, by doing things they shouldn't be doing, like a taboo thing, may happen.<sup>44</sup>

Moore explained that people in Ank'idaa were not respecting the haw'ahlkw, the cautionary precepts at the root of Nisga'a society that keep people from danger by their following. The heathenism that some of the ancestors fled, then, can be understood as the missionaries' way of describing the harmful behaviour proscribed by the haw'ahlkw. Such an interpretation of heathenism renders the actions of the ancestors comprehensible. Interestingly, it also concurs with the journal of Arthur Doolan, who led the settlers to

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<sup>42</sup> For example, on the first Sunday after the two rafts containing settlers and missionaries landed at the site that would become Gingolx, Doolan's sermon topic was "Abraham[']s call to leave his native land", a reference to *Book of Genesis* 12 where the biblical patriarch Abram is called by God to leave his home for a new land he would be given, Journal, 16 June 1867, CMS, C.2./O.

<sup>43</sup> Clayton, interview.

<sup>44</sup> Harry Moore (Wii Xbaàla), interview by Nicholas May, Gingolx, 26 September 2007.

their new village. Doolan recorded frequent “whisky feasts” and episodes of gunfire during his mission within the lower villages creating an often dangerous environment.<sup>45</sup>

When talking with my interviewees about Christianization many recalled for me their ancestors’ strong faith and devotion. Some Nisga’a reminisced about the discipline they remember their ancestors practising as Christians. “I remember what the people in the olden days said about what happens around here,” Nelson Clayton recounted as we took tea in his living room:

The constable walks around on Sunday, and . . . if he sees anybody working, or—you’re not allowed to cut any wood, or the women weren’t allowed to do any laundry. And if you have any clothes on the clothesline, the constable went there and asked you to take ’em off. Because that’s how much respect they had for Christianity when they first really got into it in the olden days.<sup>46</sup>

Another elder recollected that any clothes left on the line after six o’clock on Saturday risked being cut down by a constable, in which case they were to remain on the ground until Monday. Among many of the elders I interviewed there was a certain respect for the disciplined lives they remember their ancestors to have lived. Elders in all four villages talked about how dear religion was to their forebearers. Some alluded to the sacredness of everything to the elders, whether it was the food they ate, the stillness they practised in church, or the seriousness with which they observed the haw’ahlkw and rites like baptism. Charles Alexander related how his grandfather told him that he prayed “even if he just drinks a cup of tea.” He fished for Mill Bay Cannery with three different old people, “[a]nd all they do is pray, you know, they pray to God before they go to bed, early in the morning as soon as they wake up they pray.” Many marvelled at how some in the older generation could quote the Bible from memory, or freely translate scripture

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<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Doolan’s journal entries for 6 May 1865 and 9 November 1865, CMS C.2./O.

<sup>46</sup> Clayton, interview.

from English during a service after having taught themselves how to read it. In these and other memories my interviewees revealed a subtle admiration for the power and dignity of ancestors who had lived according to an honourable if difficult path.

Nisga'a with whom I spoke contrasted this past of faith against a more checkered present. They recall a time when collective religious practices were the norm. Even the youngest elders today have living memories of the inter-community revival trips that would take a touring village weeks to complete:

[O]ur people in the old days, before the amenities—you know, the satellite TV, radio, telephones, BC Hydro and the highway into the community—before they were very isolated. So spirituality and Christianity was very much a big part of our lives. Then I remember all the people that came in. The evangelists that came were our own crusaders. One community would travel to another community. And they'd do it for a week at a time. I remember I was a little boy, I remember the Captain would take his line and symbolically throw it, throwing the anchor, he says, "We are anchored here for a few days. How long, we don't know. God wants us to be here." And I remember those words in our language, eh. He wants us to leave our anchor in. And they're here for seven, ten days at a time. People just won't let them go. They'll be given—make a feast every day. People would be worshipping—like I said, eh, they had to literally pull us out of church. "You have to go to school tomorrow. You have to go to bed." And, "No, no, I want to be here. I want to sing, I want to listen, I want to hear everything." And most times we got away with it, you know, maybe nine, ten o'clock, then Mom or Dad walks us home. We have to go to bed.<sup>47</sup>

James Moore had much to say elsewhere in our interview about the loss of culture that came with Christianization. Yet here he frames his memories of the exciting revival tours, with their echoes of the winter ceremonial gatherings that preceded them, against a present Nisga'a world no longer marked by the isolation that made possible a particular intensity of local religious life. Grace Azak's response to my question about *when* Nisga'a understood themselves to have become Christian similarly contrasted a Christian past with a more fragmented present:

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<sup>47</sup> James Moore, interview.

Long time ago people were one, there was no question asked. If there's going to be a service on Sunday then people go. People go to choir practices regularly. The band practices, they go regularly. . . . [M]ost of the problem, started when we were exposed to the world, like the road opening and the TV and all these modern things.<sup>48</sup>

For Azak and others who expressed similar sentiments, memories of the divisions opened in the process of Christianizing are subsumed beneath the more pressing break between a past remembered for its unity and religious devotion and a present in which these ideals are more difficult to attain.

In our conversations about the history of the Nisga'a's Christianization my interviewees often mentioned changes that have come in recent years. These present differences serve to reinforce the pastness of the history they recalled for me. Moore and Azak echoed others in seeing revolutions in communication as being behind many of these shifts. Today a Nisga'a's network of social connections is more likely to be diffused far beyond the Nass Valley. Over half of the Nisga'a live outside the valley, in nearby urban centres like Terrace and Prince Rupert and beyond. Great revival tours began to wane in the years following the completion of the first road into the valley in 1958.<sup>49</sup> The change is especially palpable for elders in the coastal community of Gingolx, which was only connected by road to the other Nisga'a villages in 2003. While generally positive about the new connection and greater mobility they currently enjoy, villagers told me about the difficulty they now have organizing events when more people are out of the community at any given time. This reorientation resembles an earlier emptying of the streets remembered when electricity arrived. "[E]verybody stayed home

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<sup>48</sup> Grace Azak, interview.

<sup>49</sup> The unpaved road was built by the logging company Columbia Cellulose to allow it to better exploit the tree farm licence it had been granted by the British Columbia government ten years earlier, much of which encompassed Nisga'a lands. See Daniel Raunet, *Without Surrender Without Consent: A History of the Nishga Land Claims* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1984), 180-7.

watching TV listening to radio,” Harry Moore explained while reflecting before me on why his grandchildren didn’t learn more Nisga’a songs.<sup>50</sup> When evangelicals roll into the village today, they are as likely to be from Arizona as from another north coast community.

Other challenges of the present, including many of those some might see as part of the modern condition, give force to memories of the past as a more stable and balanced time. Contemporary Nisga’a share with many non-Nisga’a the dilemma of how to build functional identities and communities in a world where there is no apparent limit to their possibilities. They also share with other Aboriginal peoples across Canada and elsewhere higher rates of unemployment, high school incompleteness, disease and suicide than are found in neighbouring settler populations, about which my interviewees spoke. The impact of the life cycle no doubt shapes these memories of better times; if I had interviewed Nisga’a youth they probably would not have spoken as fondly of the past. Yet these memories of a dignified past undoubtedly also reflect an orientation toward time that is part of the Nisga’a cultural tradition, in which the past, particularly the ancestors and the teachings they offer, are a repository of morality and wisdom for present Nisga’a to draw upon as they carry themselves into the future. Whatever the cause, its effect with respect to memories of Christianization is to minimize perceptions of the changes that the move into Christianities brought, and to present all ancestors as sources of strength. The fundamental break in Nisga’a historical consciousness is not along Christianization or the many other changes they experienced in their long nineteenth century, but between past and present.

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<sup>50</sup> Harry Moore, interview.

## Loss

Although Nisga'a I interviewed emphasized the continuities of "being Christian" and similarities between the "first" and "second" Christianities, many of the stories they shared with me revolved around themes of loss and rupture. Interviewees remember the many disruptive changes the arrival of Protestant Christianities introduced into the lives of their ancestors. Memories of ancestors not being able to take names because of their status as Christians are widespread amid Nisga'a today. When I asked Lorene Plante if she had heard stories about how the church began in Gitlaxt'aamiks she mentioned that some ancestors had become ministers, but noted that "a lot of our people are still angry about that, because some of our grandfathers were supposed to get Indian names, big Indian names, but they chose to give it up to become a minister."<sup>51</sup> A number of them had been taken into the mission house at Aiyansh as young men and instructed by McCullagh. Charlie Morven was one such man. Morven's granddaughter, Doris Tait (K'alii Xs'ootkw), told me how her grandfather was given the Wolf name Duuk' but never used it in the feast hall because he felt that doing so would conflict with his status as a lay reader in the Anglican Church.<sup>52</sup>

Among the Nisga'a I interviewed were several grandchildren of Paul Mercer, who described their grandfather in the context of his decision to relinquish two powerful names. Mercer was also a lay reader in the church for many years and he too had been one of "McCullagh's boys," as the lipleet called the group of students who boarded with him at the turn of the century. When pressed to accept a chiefly name that became vacant during the winter of 1920-21 Mercer had at first refused, but after much soul-searching

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<sup>51</sup> Plante, interview.

<sup>52</sup> Doris Tait (K'alii Xs'ootkw), interview by Nicholas May, New Aiyansh, 11 September 2007.

agreed to take it, on the condition that he receive it from McCullagh. His Raven house agreed, and in one of his final acts McCullagh cobbled together a ceremony to bestow the office upon his former student. In pre-Christian Nisga'a society, the office of chieftainship was defined by one's ability to harness and control spiritual power for the benefit of the house. Yet now Christians like Mercer found themselves divided between their responsibilities as chiefs and spiritual leaders. Decades later in 1955, when he became the first ordained Nisga'a priest, Mercer decided that as such he could no longer hold his chiefly Raven names Ksim Xsaan and Axdii Wil Luugooda.<sup>53</sup> It is this final parting from his Nisga'a names that Mercer's grandchildren recollected about his difficult walk. Their vivid memories point to both the pain still felt around his decision, which had all the rupture of a death in a society that continued to be organized around feasting, and the need to remember—with the possibility of bringing understanding and through it the making of a good heart, amgoot.

One of the more painful events Nisga'a today attribute to the dichotomy introduced by missionary Christianity was the breakup of villages and houses. Many Nisga'a became de facto Christians when the head chiefs of their houses decided to become Christian. As Gary Davis described it, reflecting the greater concern with individual choice today, when a chief was baptized into the new Christianity "the rest of the house had to follow suit, whether they wanted to or not."<sup>54</sup> Although the missionaries welcomed mass conversions, they were also eager to demonstrate the power of the Word at work on individual souls; their records attest to many Nisga'a declaring themselves

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<sup>53</sup> Harry Moore, interview. John Barker, "Tangled reconciliations: the Anglican Church and the Nisga'a of British Columbia," *American Ethnologist* 25, no. 3 (August 1998), writes that Mercer's decision was "a move praised by the church hierarchy," 442.

<sup>54</sup> Davis, interview.

Christian on their own, even against the wishes of relatives. Nisga'a memories of this phenomenon, in contrast, focus not on the strength of faith required but the difficulty of severing oneself from kin. "[I]f you had relatives," one elder recalled of the first converts, "you ignored them. That was the harshest thing that you could have done."<sup>55</sup> If today the Church and house structure of Nisga'a society have found something closer to coexistence, this was not always the case. Joining the Christians meant abstaining from many of the practices that wove Nisga'a life together beyond the nuclear family, and replacing them with Christian forms of affinity. From a Nisga'a perspective each of the individual conversions would have rent a hole in the existing social fabric, weakening the houses through attrition of their membership. From her own research, and the control she found the missionaries to have exercised, Daphne Robinson imagined how becoming Christian started breaking up the houses. In a matrilineal social structure where only young girls hold the potential to increase the size of the clan, in the House of Minee'eskw, one of the smallest houses in the Nisga'a nation, Robinson is the sole daughter in her family and herself has only one daughter. "I know if my daughter decided to give up being Nisga'a," she explained, considering the similar demand placed on her ancestors, "it would impact me tremendously, you know, and our family."<sup>56</sup>

When remembering their ancestors' move to Christianity most of my interviewees spoke about the purging of material culture that it necessitated. Pts'aan were conspicuously absent in front of the smaller frame houses that all Nisga'a were beginning to build for themselves in the new Christian villages. The interiors of these houses were similarly devoid of artistic expressions of heraldry, from ceremonial regalia down to the

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<sup>55</sup> Williams, interview.

<sup>56</sup> Daphne Robinson (Najeeytsgakw), interview by Nicholas May, New Aiyansh, 27 May 2008.

many everyday objects like wooden combs, ladles and storage boxes whose surfaces had invited the display of one's crests. Objects bearing more explicit connections to Nisga'a understandings of the supernatural, such as masks, or *Halayt* (shaman) paraphernalia like rattles, soul catchers and bear-claw headdresses, were formally proscribed in the village rules of missions like Gingolx. For some Nisga'a with whom I spoke the loss of these cultural artifacts was the most defining step of a move into Christianity that otherwise involved little change. I interviewed Cheryl and Stuart Doolan (Kw'axsuu) together at their home in Gingolx. When Stuart told me that he did not think the missionaries' Christianity was "anything new" to their ancestors, Cheryl rounded out her husband's answer by adding, "[o]nly that they had to get rid of their regalia. They couldn't use them anymore."<sup>57</sup>

Nisga'a vividly recalled for me some of the ways that different objects left the valley. Lorene Plante presented the process of their removal as a few acts of sweeping violence committed by outsiders: "When the Christian people came into the Nass, and they started cutting down the totem poles, that made a lot of people angry, because it was very heartbreaking watching the totem poles go down the river. They took them by river. And they went door to door collecting all the artifacts, and took them with them." Plante shared with me how her grandmother used to tell her how they hid pieces in hopes that the *lipleet* would not find them. "But anything that was out on display within the house, they took them," she explained.<sup>58</sup> In Laxgalts'ap memories of a large bonfire shape this narrative of violent loss. The paraphernalia of Charles Alexander's grandmother, who was a *Halayt*, was lost in this fire, as were many other items. At the celebrations in

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<sup>57</sup> Cheryl Doolan and Stuart Doolan (Kw'axsuu), interview by Nicholas May, Gingolx, 26 September 2007.

<sup>58</sup> Plante, interview.

February 2009 marking Hobiye, or the Nisga'a New Year, at this village the Laxgalts'ap Cultural Dancers performed a story that commemorates the burning of the regalia. Worth quoting in full are the narrator's words for what they tell us about how Nisga'a recollect this event today:

The Nisga'a expressed *ayaawaatkw* . . . It is a cry of song in despair. It expresses a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness that one has done their utmost to do something or to change something but to no avail. No one cares. And so, our ancestors have now settled in the new village of Laxgalts'ap. Their daily lives in the community and sustenance from the river and the land carried on. Then one day the missionary learned that some of the people had secretly carried some of their prized cultural possessions with them to the new village. He became enraged with anger, and so proclaimed that on a designated day everyone who had cultural possessions must bring them to a gathering at what is now the intersection of Church Street and Front Street. They were forced, our people were forced to then dump their prized possessions on the street, such that the pile became ten feet high. One by one our ancestors reluctantly carried forth . . . piled their drums, their regalia, masks and everything they had on the street, in an attempt to show certainty and finality, wiping out our culture. The missionary did not allow anyone to leave the scene but to stand around a ten-foot-high pile of our culture, and watch as he poured kerosene all over the pile. He then lit a match, and he burned it.<sup>59</sup>

In this performance, entitled "Burning of Regalia," Nisga'a recall the violence and coercion employed to force those ancestors who still retained some of the forbidden objects to finally part with them. An unnamed missionary, donning a black gown the Protestant evangelical missionaries who resided in the Nass would have shied away from, and a mask whose paleness and facial hair clearly mark him as K'amksiiwaa, appears in caricature, walking around making interrogative gestures. Through such reenactments, Nisga'a evoke past missionary attempts to create theatre, to mark a definitive turning point in their Christianization. Here Nisga'a remember the conflagration at the

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<sup>59</sup> "Burning of Regalia," video, 4:00, from a performance by Laxgalts'ap Cultural Dancers at Hobiye (Nisga'a New Year) in February 2009, posted at Ancient Villages & Totem Poles of the Nisga'a, <[www.gingolx.ca/nisgaaculture/ancient\\_villages/resources/regalia.htm](http://www.gingolx.ca/nisgaaculture/ancient_villages/resources/regalia.htm)>.

intersection of Church and Front Streets as an attack on their culture, an interpretation which, while illuminating missionary coercion, is more silent on how the ancestors might have understood this purging.

Nisga'a used different imagery to convey to me how the loss of cultural objects like regalia and totem poles, whatever its ostensibly religious motivations, cut at the root of their culture and thus identity as a people. "This drum would be burnt. That Eagle dish and these dishes here would all be burned," Joseph Gosnell told me while gesturing to some of the objects in his living room, "[a]nd yet they play an integral role, a major role in the culture of our nation."<sup>60</sup> Also in New Aiyansh, George Williams poignantly depicted the consequences stemming from when the ancestors gave up the practice of their culture in accepting Christianity: "So there again . . . we start losing our identity along with those things, because the totem poles identify the *pdeek* [tribe] and clan in the community, and when they were gone, then they were left wandering around aimlessly."<sup>61</sup> Williams's words powerfully transmit an image of confusion as Nisga'a wandered a land bereft of the poles and other familiar markers that physically reminded them of who and where they were. They speak to aspects of modernities—disorientation and disenchantment—that Nisga'a, like peoples elsewhere, have not been eager to accept.

From my interviews it became clear that for many Nisga'a this severing from the past was far from complete. "[T]hose artifacts are still everything that we believe," Gary Davis told me by way of explaining their continuing importance to Nisga'a today despite their relative absence,

and everything that we build, everything that we make has a life. The trees that God has given to us, the cedar tree, has a life of its own, and when we carve

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<sup>60</sup> Gosnell, interview.

<sup>61</sup> Williams, interview.

images into it, we believe that image gains life. And when a carver finishes a pole, he breathes life into that pole. So everything that we make is a part of us. It's a part of our lives. That's our belief.<sup>62</sup>

The gradual return of some artifacts to the valley from different museums in recent years has thus in the view of many Nisga'a been a reunion with a part of their collective self forced into exile during the period of Christianization.<sup>63</sup> In these tangible objects Nisga'a feel the power of their ancestors who, like the pole carver, breathed life into them during the acts of making and then using them. Lorene Plante shared one such experience of repatriation that occurred during the Nisga'a annual convention a few years earlier:

[I]n the convention they said there was something entering the room. And here there were big glass cages of all the artifacts being wheeled into the room. And I always get emotional.

It was really emotional for a lot of people, because when the artifacts came in, the whole hall stood up in acknowledgement. We felt the strength of our ancestors who did the carvings, who did the pieces. We felt it as they came in to the Civic Centre in Prince Rupert. It was so powerful, so beautiful and so powerful that I can imagine what it would do to other nations who had to go through what we've gone through. . . . And people were so happy to see the individual pieces of our master carvers, who have gone on for years, and—to be wheeled in under glass. Oh, it was such a day for everybody. People were crying, people were laughing, people were rejoicing. But—it was a day to remember.<sup>64</sup>

Having left the valley, these artifacts now returned home with new powers, including the ability to communicate across generations of Nisga'a the strength of the ancestors.

Given the importance contemporary Nisga'a attach to what they refer to as “traditional culture” many expressed their wonder over how the old people would have given it up, and often with apparent ease. Around my question about what she would like

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<sup>62</sup> Davis, interview.

<sup>63</sup> See Allison Nyce, “*Wilksilaks* Transfer of Knowledge: A Working Model for Maintaining Tradition” (master's thesis, University of Northern British Columbia, 2010), for a discussion of the process of artifact repatriation from a Nisga'a perspective.

<sup>64</sup> Plante, interview.

to learn from a history of the Nisga'a's Christianization, Cheryl Doolan shared with me how she has often wondered how and why people in the past ever allowed the Nisga'a protocol to be taken away, "because nowadays we hang onto our culture, our ayuuk, our protocols, our regalias and like we're even putting totem poles up around the community now, and I sure would like to see an explanation in there."<sup>65</sup> Charles Alexander, whose grandfather left behind four totem poles in his ancestral village when he moved across the river to the Laxgalts'ap mission, revealed his similar incomprehension of the ancestors' seeming acceptance of loss: "I don't know why the old people agreed to allow these people to take their chieftain blankets, eh? You know, headpiece, and all that, talking stick and all that, everything. . . . [A]nd yet they were very powerful people, in strength."<sup>66</sup> The strength Nisga'a today remember their ancestors to have possessed only adds to the puzzlement. When I asked Jacob McKay the same question about what he would like to learn about the history of the Nisga'a's encounter with Christianity from my study, he replied that there are "some beautiful stories" about the first sightings of strangers, and then quickly turned to his curiosity:

But the most intriguing point for me is, being as warlike, like any other First Nations at that time in our history, we repelled the Haidas, the invaders, invaders from the inlands, from the coast, and other directions in our history. And that's well documented. We didn't give an inch. So the Nisga'as are well known for that, that if somebody comes in and touches the women and children in any way, shape or form without express permission of the chieftains, they pay a heavy price. And yet when these strange people came into contact with my forefathers, they listened to them.<sup>67</sup>

Present-day Nisga'a recall how their ancestors watched visitors to the Nass closely, moving swiftly when they revealed exploitive motives or violated the respect that was

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<sup>65</sup> Cheryl Doolan and Stuart Doolan, interview.

<sup>66</sup> Alexander, interview.

<sup>67</sup> McKay, interview.

due. K'amksiiwaa traders, miners and settlers learned this as well. The notable exception to this practice appears to have been the liplet who stepped ashore, and who in time managed to get the Nisga'a to part with so much that is remembered to have been central to their way of life.

As difficult as this apparent exception is for many of those I interviewed to understand, their words also point to a possible explanation. Several elders referred to the traditional openness of Nisga'a society. My interviewees underscored both the vulnerabilities as well as opportunities of this stance. Looking at the generations before her Daphne Robinson articulated what she saw as a reason underlying much of the Nisga'a's reception to Christianity: “[T]hey’re so open to receiving people. They’re very open and respectful to other people. They—because of the culture, the way the culture is. It opened the doors for people to come in, and I still see that. I still see that happening.”<sup>68</sup>

Gingolx makes a point of being open to all who wish to preach there today, a stance that local elders explained had been reinforced by historical experience. The isolated village has long been a target for distant evangelicals, and since the completion of the road connecting it to the other Nisga'a villages upriver in 2003 it has become easier for them to sweep in. Harry Moore, the priest in charge of the century-old Anglican church in the centre of the village, told me that two churches, one Pentecostal and the other Mennonite, are currently trying to win adherents there. When they began proselytizing, he added, one of the hereditary chiefs in Gingolx sent word around that the villagers were not to stop anyone from coming in, whatever their Christian faith. Such a policy recalls an earlier event in the village related by another resident. Nelson Clayton

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<sup>68</sup> Robinson, interview.

described how when the settlers built themselves a new church other evangelists from different denominations came and wanted to use it. The missionary at the time, however, refused to let anyone go in the church, and sent them away. Such a proprietary view of the church had its consequences, as the villagers soon learned:

And I remember what the elders said in them days, you know, that he shouldn't have done that, because I guess they started realizing that, you know, when you build a church it is open to anybody. And not very long after that, that church burnt down. And so that's when the older people in them days, they told the minister, you know, if anybody comes you've got to welcome them into the village, into your home, and into the church, and allow them to use the church whenever they felt like it, whenever they came to this community.<sup>69</sup>

For Clayton and the elders who passed on this story, the destruction of the new church following the liplet's refusal to open it to others came as a sign that a basic moral value had been ignored, namely the need to welcome outsiders along with their differences.

This memory appears to guide Gingolx's approach to visiting evangelists today.

Others drew from more recent experiences of negotiation and compromise to understand how their ancestors could have been led to accept the missionaries' demands that they part with objects precious to them. Joseph Gosnell compared their experience to that of the Nisga'a more recently as they negotiated to reach a treaty with the federal and provincial governments in 1999:

[P]eople couldn't see it in their minds that in order to receive something we have to give up a major portion of our territory. And I think the same can be said about people's lives, spiritual lives. They said, "Why, why do we have to do this? Why should we give these things up? They belong to us. Why should we give it up to receive something else?" It was extremely difficult for our people to fully understand that.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Clayton, interview. This event may have been the destruction of a newly completed church and a number of surrounding houses in Gingolx by fire in September 1893. At this time a number of evangelizing groups were travelling up and down the Nass and Skeena Rivers, including the band of enthusiastic young men Collison would form into a Church Army.

<sup>70</sup> Gosnell, interview.

For Gosnell the treaty offers insight into the difficult choice his ancestors had to make a century earlier. He imagines the ancestors balking at the demand that they give up their valued possessions. Yet this was the offer in the proposed exchange before them.

Elsewhere in our interview Gosnell explained how he was told that “if a person wanted to enter heaven, according to the missionaries, they had to literally denounce our culture.”<sup>71</sup>

The ancestors were made to understand that the path to heaven came at a price, which for Gosnell makes their renunciations more intelligible.

Though they saw missionaries as instigators behind the purges, my informants also saw their ancestors as participants in this process. They sometimes remembered their ancestors as people who could get caught up in religious fervour and decide to do away with proscribed objects when their Christian commitment called for it, but more often viewed them as reluctant participants. Plante recalled reading letters in which some carvers replied to requests for pieces from collectors by saying they would be glad to part with them as they “need[ed] to eat for the winter.”<sup>72</sup> Outside demand for Nisga’a items could provide much-needed money. At the same time that some cultural objects were becoming less tenable to Christianizing Nisga’a, the growth of new museums and the emergence of anthropology as a profession ensured a steady interest in those that were not destroyed. The missionary McCullagh acted as a middleman between the father-and-son collectors Charles and William Newcombe and Nisga’a willing to part with a range of requested items, from chiefs’ robes to copper shields and totem poles.<sup>73</sup> George Williams told me about how the totem poles in Gitlaxt’aamiks did not survive long after

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<sup>71</sup> Gosnell, interview.

<sup>72</sup> Plante, interview.

<sup>73</sup> See, for example, McCullagh’s correspondence with the Newcombes dated 20 August 1906 and 17 May 1911, in BCA, Newcombe Family Papers, 1870-1955, Box 15, File 12.

the 1917 reunification of this community with Nisga'a from the mission of Aiyansh after the latter was flooded out. During a religious revival shortly afterward Nisga'a pulled down the poles, which had survived decades of Christianization in Gitlaxt'aamiks. While telling this story, Williams recalled an awareness among his ancestors of the paradox that these increasingly untenable poles were nonetheless very desirable to K'amksiiwaa collectors: "Some of the people, like one in my house where the Spiritual Bear or the Laughing Bear pole was cut down by the chief himself, and he said, "I'm going to do this. Nobody's going to have this pole. It's not going to a museum, sorry. Cut it up chop it up and throw it into the fire."<sup>74</sup> Through such memories the ancestors are remembered to have recognized the absurdity of their situation as they chopped up their poles.

Another way the Nisga'a I interviewed attempt to understand the loss and more forcible gestures that accompanied the reformulation of their spirituality into a Western-recognized Christianity is to see them as the result of misunderstandings. All of the missionaries who worked in the Nass for any length of time eventually acquired some degree of fluency in Sim'algaḡ. A few, like McCullagh, had an unusual gift of linguistic mastery. In the words of one elder, McCullagh "was able to understand our people, those who spoke up, and the reason why they weren't able to accept Christianity."<sup>75</sup> Such efforts, including those of the many Nisga'a who learned English, were not enough to prevent the grossly inaccurate cultural translations that Nisga'a recollect today. Listening to Charles Alexander one autumn afternoon in the Laxgalts'ap Village Government Office gave me a sense of how contemporary Nisga'a recall these challenges. Repeating a refrain I was hearing from elders up and down the valley, Alexander told me that the

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<sup>74</sup> Williams, interview.

<sup>75</sup> Williams, interview.

ancestors had already known about God, whom they called K'amligihahlhaahl. "I'm quite sure it wasn't too hard for the ministers to teach the Nisga'a nation about Christianity," he concluded. Conveying this common ground was another matter, however. Later in our conversation Alexander spoke about how difficult communication must have been between his ancestors and the missionaries, and then imagined how it might have been established:

I have to go back to, you know, the education that they didn't have. How did our great-great-grandfather[s] understand, you know, these ministers that come to try and teach the Nisga'a nation? How did they understand? Who was the interpreter? I wasn't born until 1930. My great-great-grandfathers was born in early 1800s and they never went to school . . . But they pray a lot and they ask for help; never, never once forget to pray, one day. I think . . . what all the preachers say, God does answer your prayer, you know. So maybe that's what happened to our great-great-grandfathers, that's how they understand these ministers. Through prayer. . . . Some people they have solid hearts, you know. They, it's pretty hard for them to do things, pretty hard to understand some things, you know. So I think this is how they learned, through their own kindhearted—you know. 'Cause you know, I don't know how they understand, because they can't even write initial on their—when they get paid and all that. They have to use an "X."<sup>76</sup>

Reflecting on this early encounter, Alexander imagined the failure of conventional tools of communication; differences of language and literacy would have presented an almost insurmountable divide. Alexander's own schooling was limited—he was kept back from attending residential school by his grandmother—but his familiarity with several registers of literacy presents yet another gap, one between himself and his ancestors. The explanation he conjectures here bridges all these gaps, however, by turning to what we might call the spiritual plane, where, to paraphrase Alexander, communication was easy because the referents were already familiar. Here Nisga'a and missionary spoke a language both already knew, the language of prayer and kindheartedness.

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<sup>76</sup> Alexander, interview.

## Halayt

A few elders mentioned the disappearance of the Halayt in the context of Christianization. I decided to tread lightly on this topic after learning that some of the elders might be frightened by the word “shaman,” which is not a Nisga’a word and more properly belongs to the realm of anthropological discourse. Some of the knowledge of *halayt* (power) was traditionally of a secretive nature, something I intended to respect and should be kept in mind when any statements on this topic are made.

Those who discussed the Halayt remember them as powerful figures. Jacob McKay described the Halayt to me: “Now these are the ancient people that actually practised these amazing feats. . . . They used their minds, and especially gifts that were given to them, their spirits, to impact other people, and to travel great distances both in mind, body and soul.” Through continuous practice they were able to “literally fly” and do other extraordinary acts, gifts that once harnessed could be used for healing.<sup>77</sup> Gary Davis used the term “prophets” to denote the Halayt, and included in his description of their gifts that of foresight.

Contemporary Nisga’a explanations of how the shamanic tradition of Halayt disappeared complicate the larger missionary narrative of the triumph of Christianity over darkness and superstition. A number of my informants related to me that there was definitely “a dark side” to Nisga’a culture. This was the realm of the *haldawgit*, or “witches” as they translated it, people who would try to overcome your spirit from some malevolent motive. When the missionaries encountered the *haldawgit*, Joseph Gosnell said, they mistook their practice for the whole of Nisga’a spirituality. Both *haldawgit* and

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<sup>77</sup> McKay, interview.

the far more positive practices of halayt were equally condemned, with no attempt to distinguish their very different bases and fruits.<sup>78</sup> The consequence of this for Halayt was that the arrival of Christianity “took away from its goodness.”<sup>79</sup> Gary Davis described a struggle between the Halayt and the missionaries, with each practitioner vying to be the best conduit of power:

I think the only rivalry that new Christians had and our Christian form of life was the power of the spirituality, what a priest can do and what our prophets would do. How the balance of power, the struggle of power would be and who would have more power. They didn't really come down to fight or anything. Our spiritual leaders wanted to keep the power on their side. Same with the priests. They wanted to keep the power on their side.<sup>80</sup>

In securing their dominance over access to the supernatural, priests further cemented the view of the Halayt as sinister practitioners of evil. George Williams recalled for me the way the late Bertram McKay, a highly respected Nisga'a elder, explained that the Halayt turned to witchcraft, in effect fulfilling the role the lipleet had ascribed to them. Their powers demonized and their profession discredited, the Halayt had to find other ways to feed themselves, which included using the threat of their powers for extortion.<sup>81</sup>

Some elders understand the marginalization of Halayt as having been an unnecessary consequence of Christianization. They hope that Halayt might be remembered as not only compatible with contemporary Nisga'a society but in fact essential to its healing and future prosperity. One such person is Herbert Morven, current chief of the Wolf House of K'eexkw. Morven was a deacon in the Anglican Church, an office in which one of his responsibilities was to bring Communion to the sick and shut-in. He left after some time, however, drained by his inability to “shake the need” of those

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<sup>78</sup> Gosnell, interview.

<sup>79</sup> Morven, interview.

<sup>80</sup> Davis, interview.

<sup>81</sup> Williams, interview.

to whom he administered the sacrament, and has yet to return. In the course of our conversations it became clear that he is also someone who has personally explored how his ancestors acquired knowledge and wisdom from the land. Timothy Derrick, Morven's grandfather who has already appeared in this study, was a Halayt. It was in his generation, around 1913, Morven thinks, that such healers started to disappear. His grandfather only reached the second degree, and Morven does not know how many degrees existed in the perfection of direct communication with the spirit world.<sup>82</sup>

According to Morven the loss of the Halayt removed a cornerstone of Nisga'a spirituality—but he seemed surprisingly optimistic about the potential for its recovery. In the course of our interview Morven explained Halayt to me by drawing from an eclectic mix of contemporary spiritual sources. When I answered his question regarding whether I had ever read the twentieth-century spiritual classic *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* in the affirmative, he drew from it to explain Halayt, noting “there was that seagull that seemed to move without fluttering wings. That's a Halayt in nature. That's the closest I can come to sharing my understanding of what a Halayt is.”<sup>83</sup> Although he has never had the fortune of hearing a Nisga'a Halayt, Morven told me that he had nonetheless found such practitioners elsewhere. “If you look in his eyes,” he said, referring to the late American author Joseph Campbell, “you will recognize eyes of Halayt, because of where he is in his understanding. My wife believes he's Halayt, and I believe in what she says, because of how he explains.” Morven expressed that he would like to go to Scotland, to see the flourishing garden he had read about that was created on a rocky beach “through

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<sup>82</sup> Morven, interview.

<sup>83</sup> Morven, interview. See Richard Bach, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull: A Story* (New York: Avon, 1970).

communications.”<sup>84</sup> “That was our relationship with our environment, that same relationship they have with their garden,” he explained. “That’s the way Nisga’a are here.” What these examples suggest are that for Morven at least, while the knowledge and practice of the great Nisga’a Halayts of the past may have been largely lost to the history of Christianization, Halayt can also be understood through international authors and terms of reference of a spiritual nature. He remembers the timeless possibilities of obtaining halayt through contemporary examples, reimagining the spiritual path of the ancestors by finding experiential ways to connect to the powerful relationship to be had with the environment. During our interview Morven shared with me a number of experiences he had on the land near water and with trees that helped him cleanse himself, not least from the suffering that arose from the abuse he encountered at residential school. It is this ability to cleanse, Morven believes, that enabled Halayt to take on the responsibility of healing the sick, of taking on other people’s hurts that he found so draining as a deacon.<sup>85</sup>

## Cultural Revival

Nisga’a today recall their adoption of Christianity from the vantage point of their current cultural revival. As civilizing and Christianizing projects did a century ago, this project in its many manifestations enjoys a hegemonic status within contemporary Nisga’a society. In large part the revival is an attempt by Nisga’a to regain some of the

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<sup>84</sup> The garden to which Morven refers is likely the famous garden established by Peter and Eileen Caddy and Dorothy Maclean at an RV park near Findhorn, Scotland in 1962, which flourished despite being planted in the sandy and rocky soil characteristic of the area. In her book, *To Hear the Angels Sing: An Odyssey of Co-Creation with the Devic Kingdom* (Issaquah, WA: Lorian Press, 1980), Maclean attributes the garden’s success to her ability to communicate with the devic or angelic realms “that over-light all aspects of existence.”

<sup>85</sup> Morven, interview.

control over their lives that was lost during colonization. Colonial and later Canadian governments attempted to assimilate Nisga'a and other indigenous peoples by imposing cultural, social and political changes on their societies. The Nisga'a are not unique in this response; indigenous peoples across Canada and beyond have looked to the revitalization of suppressed cultural traditions as a means of decolonization. Whatever its apparent conservatism, the return to what are imagined to be earlier cultural practices is an inherently creative act. James McDonald has documented this process in the neighbouring Tsimshian community of Kitsumkalum. Drawing from Pierre Bourdieu, he notes how the attempt to return to practices like ceremonial feasting that had waned or been abandoned and in some cases of which little knowledge remained is gradually creating a new habitus, or second nature, that is allowing villagers to develop "alternative cultural dispositions" to those of the dominant society. These dispositions, created in ways the Kitsumkalum regard as traditional, are enabling this native community to reshape their world as they see appropriate to their needs and aspirations.<sup>86</sup>

Some clarification of my use of the term "tradition" is warranted before turning to the question of how the cultural revival is reshaping memories of Christianization. When contemporary Nisga'a talk about their "culture," they are referring to a Nisga'a cultural tradition that stretches back millennia to their beginnings as a people. Jan Vansina argues for the study of tradition as a phenomenon in its own right, a topic that academics have tended to avoid not least because of its essentializing connotations. Vansina offers a definition of tradition that encompasses both continuity and change. Traditions can be understood as "fundamental continuities," stemming from a core of "basic choices"

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<sup>86</sup> James A. McDonald, "Building a Moral Community: Tsimshian Potlatching, Implicit Knowledge and Everyday Experiences," *Cultural Studies* 9, no. 1 (1995): 125-44.

which, if they do change, do so only very slowly and thus serve as touchstones for proposed innovations.<sup>87</sup> As this definition suggests, traditions are processes, and paradoxically achieve their continuities only by continually changing, adjusting to the ever-changing physical reality they attempt to predict or understand. The contemporary cultural revival occurring in the Nass—not least through its creative recontextualization of past practices for twenty-first-century Nisga’a society—can be viewed as occurring within the context of a long cultural tradition.

This cultural tradition came close to being overwhelmed as a result of direct assaults by the Canadian government and Christian churches on many of the Nisga’a practices that differed from the intruding settler society. The autonomy identified by Vansina as essential to a tradition’s ability to influence innovation came under attack from legislative and other pressures to conform to the newcomers. Remarkably Nisga’a society survived this concerted attempt to assimilate it, maintaining an identity distinct from the dominant society; yet much was lost or came close to being lost during their colonization, evidenced by very real gaps in knowledge of Nisga’a traditions. In our conversations some of my interviewees shared with me how foreign some long-held Nisga’a practices had become to them. Daphne Robinson gave me a sense of the depth of this break when she told me how she had learned about cultural dancing. As a girl she heard stories about how her grandparents had given up dancing to become Christian, and thought they were talking about modern dance. As far as she knew Nisga’a cultural dancing “was unheard of.” Robinson discovered its existence only when she returned from eight years of residential school in Edmonton as an adult and found the cultural

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<sup>87</sup> Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 258.

revival underway.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, Grace Nelson (Axdii Kiiskw) told me how she had known nothing of Nisga'a cultural dress until she was in her forties, when Eli Gosnell reintroduced it. Joseph Gosnell has related elsewhere how as a young boy crawling around in the space under his grandfather's house in Gitwinksihlkw he wondered why the support beams would be so elaborately carved. They were likely repurposed totem poles.<sup>89</sup> Yet for all these breaks, there have also been many continuities with the ancestors, threads of a living cultural tradition. One particularly relevant to the discussion here is the "magnetism of the past" described by Chief Andrew Mercer to the new white settlers on Boxing Day 1913. This abiding pull of the past is palpable in the Nass today as Nisga'a look to the ancestors for guidance in different areas.

A prominent aspect of the cultural revival has been the reintroduction of cultural forms that are remembered to have been discountenanced by both government and the churches active in the valley. In 1977 the Nisga'a raised their first totem pole in decades. Known as the Unity Pole, it is unique in combining all four crests and sub-crests of the nation on one pole, and with the figure of the culture hero Txeemsim holding a rainbow atop it offers a potent symbol of pan-Nisga'a unity. Since then poles have been carved and raised in all four of the modern Nisga'a villages. The practice of dancing made a similar reemergence on another symbolic occasion nearly a decade later. In April 1972 the Anglican Diocese of Caledonia, to which the Anglican churches in the Nass belong, held its first synod in a native village in New Aiyansh. On this occasion Eli Gosnell and Hubert McMillan led a group of ceremonial dancers in a performance before those

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<sup>88</sup> Robinson, interview.

<sup>89</sup> Alex Rose, *Bringing our Ancestors Home: The Repatriation of Nisga'a Artifacts* (New Aiyansh, BC: Nishga Tribal Council, [ca. 1998]), 62. They may also have been house posts, which historically were also carved.

assembled. It was the first such dance in decades, and revived a practice that had been almost completely forgotten. One attendee related to me how the first dance coincided with a tremor, which was taken as an auspicious sign. Around these years the elder Titus Nisyok (Minee'eskw) directed the painting of the front of the New Aiyansh Community Hall. Its *k'awax* or housefront painting is similar to the one decorating Haniik'ohl, a cliff along the Nass below Gitwinksihlkw that was a sacred site for Halayt initiates.<sup>90</sup>

The cultural revival has provided a platform for a more openly critical remembrance of the historical period of Christianization. Nisga'a critiques of the effects of the religious and other conversions initiated by the arrival of different Christianities predate the revival, but the changes in Nisga'a society—and in Canadian society—since the 1960s have provided a more open context for their expression, as well as for reflection on the legacy of the colonial period. One of the earliest recorded articulations of the more coercive side to the history of the Nisga'a's Christianization was made in October 1963, when George Pearkes, the Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia, paid an official visit to the Nass Valley. In a sign of the changing times and sensibilities, Chief Minee'eskw and Albert McMillan placed a *luux*, or sacred cedar neck ring once worn by secret society members, around Pearkes's neck on his arrival in Aiyansh. The chiefs explained to the Lieutenant Governor that this spiritual object “had been put away for sixty-two years.” According to a memorial of the official visit, Chief Minee'eskw informed His Honour that the village “has been at war with the Church for this period of time because early missionaries had confiscated all the ceremonial robes and had removed the totem poles from the Village, claiming that as the Indians had become

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<sup>90</sup> *Haniik'ohl* was known as the “Place of the Wise and Powerful.” See Nisga'a Tribal Council, *Ayuukhl Nisga'a Study*, vol. 1, *Nisga'a Origins*, 5, for an account of the significance of this place given by Chief Minee'eskw in 1976. See Hambidge, interview, for an account of the painting of the community hall.

Christians all pagan tokens be done away with.” Now, in light of the fact that the Lieutenant Governor had visited their village, “they would cease their warfare with the Church.”<sup>91</sup>

Chief Minee’eskw’s account to the Lieutenant Governor of what he described as the historic hostility between the Nisga’a and the Church displayed a willingness to speak openly and critically about the changes Nisga’a remembered to have come with Christianization, shared by few others of his generation. Daphne Robinson recounted to me how her own attempt to learn more about the transformations her ancestors experienced through becoming Christian met with great reluctance from elders to talk about them. A granddaughter of Paul Mercer, the first Nisga’a priest, Robinson found her grandparents rarely talked about becoming Christian and how it changed them:

[T]hey had to accept what was happening. It’s like they don’t ever ask questions about—you just accept it. . . . I didn’t hear anything. Except that later on, and—the whole suppression was a big one too. I guess they weren’t allowed to talk about it. They weren’t allowed to talk about, you know, about their culture and language, or anything. And that was actually—when they went to residential school—that was even done in a more horrendous way, to keep you from speaking the language. Yeah. So they were always afraid to talk about it.<sup>92</sup>

This fear among members of the older generations could hinder the desire of younger Nisga’a to know more about their past. When I asked Robinson how Nisga’a had understood missionary criticism of aspects of their culture, she had little to offer: “You know, I never really—I’ve never really heard the Nisga’a side of the story. I really haven’t, come to think of it. And again, it goes back to when I try to ask. They don’t

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<sup>91</sup> “Outline of Lieutenant Governor’s visit to Nass in October 1963, including a few excerpts regarding the visit of Governor Frederick Seymour to North-West Coast in 1867,” in BCA, Wilson Duff Papers, File 140, Niska “A.”

<sup>92</sup> Robinson, interview.

want to talk about it, because the missionaries did quite a number in instilling fear, and the whole thing about what we were practising before was sinful.”<sup>93</sup>

Differences in perception of the process of Christianization, or at least in inclination to talk about it with me, roughly followed the age of my Nisga’a informants. Those born in the 1940s or later were more likely to bring up the topic of culture, and the historical efforts of both churches and governments to assimilate the Nisga’a by erasing it. In the cavernous basement of Laxgalts’ap’s St. Andrew’s Church where he is the priest, Reverend James Moore told me about the “colonialists” who came in and tried “to weaken us in our nature as Nisga’a” by converting them into “European-style Christians.” Then, in a burst of defiant passion, Moore illustrated how their agenda had failed:

But little did they know that when God gave me this tongue it would last forever. And thank God for that. I’ve learned to carve again, I’ve learned to sing, I drum, I do cultural dancing and stuff. Psalm, I forget which psalm it was, it says you’re supposed to sing with your harps and your timbrels. And you know, sing to the glory of God. And what better way than with this tongue he give me, you know? Otherwise I’m—what somebody else wants me to be.<sup>94</sup>

Born in the 1920s and 1930s, those among the most senior generation of elders with whom I spoke were largely sympathetic to the cultural revival but noticeably less critical of the churches that missionized in the Nass, and less outspoken about the need to recover what was lost. One response to my use of the name for the Nisga’a creator, K’amligihahlhaahl, provides a case in point. Grace Azak did not know how to pronounce the name and so asked me to teach her, despite my own difficulty with it. After we

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<sup>93</sup> Robinson, interview.

<sup>94</sup> James Moore, interview.

attempted our best pronunciations Azak told me that she had heard about the name and did not mind it, “because I know the meaning, that it was God.”<sup>95</sup>

How Nisga’a today remember their Christianization has been further shaped by the inculturation movement within a number of Christian churches contemporary to the cultural revival. This movement reached the Nass in the 1960s when Bishop Eric Munn sent “first-class clergy” to the valley, a cadre of educated men who were not typically assigned to remote northern parishes.<sup>96</sup> In contrast to their missionary predecessors, this new generation of priests brought with it a view that Christianity should be “inculturated” into Nisga’a culture. Their outlook reflected a larger movement taking place in Christian churches—the changes within the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II being perhaps the most well-known example—that reevaluated non-Western cultures and saw as desirable the translation of Christian doctrines and liturgy into local “indigenous” forms of articulation. As John Hannen, one of the priests sent by Munn, explained to me, there was a growing recognition that Christianity, as a religion of the “Word” made flesh, could only be expressed when “incarnated.”<sup>97</sup>

The focus of the local inculturation movement has been on finding and incorporating uniquely Nisga’a symbols that can be used to give an indigenous expression to their Anglican Christianity. This effort has found a sympathetic audience among many contemporary Nisga’a, who feel that aspects of their ancestors’ culture were unnecessarily condemned when they adopted Western Christian forms. In recent years, through a process of consultation, the Nisga’a and priests in the village churches have

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<sup>95</sup> Grace Azak, interview.

<sup>96</sup> Hambidge, interview.

<sup>97</sup> Hannen, interview. A critical history of the inculturation movement as it has developed within the Roman Catholic, Anglican and other Western churches remains to be written.

introduced aspects of “traditional” culture into the practice of Christianity in the valley. John Hannen described some of these for me during our interview, including the consecration of the altar in the new church at Laxgalts’ap with oolichan grease, and the use of the drum in services before the reading of the Gospel “as a way of welcoming God in our midst.”<sup>98</sup> Other changes to the practice of Anglicanism in the Nass mentioned in my interviews were the development of a new Nisga’a liturgy, the introduction of button blankets into the church services—as copes worn by priests and other officiates, and as altar cloths—and the increasing use of the four Nisga’a tribal crests in church art and ornamentation.

For many Nisga’a, this redemption of aspects of their traditional culture has “Nisga’anized” the Church and implicitly reaffirmed the Christianity of their ancestors, maintaining a continuity with the past that they have long asserted and cultivated. Indeed efforts in recent decades to inculturate Christianity into Nisga’a culture continue a process of indigenizing the faith. Earlier generations of Nisga’a, while receptive to much that was new in the Western Christianity, led the challenge of bringing forward Nisga’a truths by finding ways to express them within the confines of a more acceptable Western Christian idiom. Through this localization of their faith, including the naturalization of initially foreign concepts and practices, many features of this “second Christianity,” to borrow Gary Davis’s term, have become part of contemporary Nisga’a culture. While arguably well intentioned, more recent attempts to introduce iconic Nisga’a symbols into the valley’s Anglican churches tend to draw on the idea of a static and unchanging Nisga’a culture, a view challenged by the evidence of its capacity to adopt and naturalize

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<sup>98</sup> Hannen, interview.

originally foreign expressions of the sacred found in this study.<sup>99</sup> The reinvention of the Church Army and other religious organizations like the YM/YWCA and Anglican Church Women, for example, testifies not only to the manoeuvres of missionary promoters but also to the creative achievements of Nisga'a ancestors. Some recognition of this history of naturalization and adaptation is included in the movement, however. Priests I interviewed, who had been at the forefront of the inculturation movement in the Nass, spoke of participating in Church Army meetings, of sitting through seemingly interminable evenings of music interspersed with testimonies. While the High Church and other Anglicanisms of these priests differed from the Nisga'a's evangelical style, they nonetheless did not share the hostility of others within the Church toward them, deciding instead to view the Church Army meeting as an authentic Nisga'a manifestation of the Christian faith.

Contributing to a Christianization of the Nisga'a past is the search for Nisga'a symbols that convey their contemporary Christianity. Today Nisga'a are encouraged by the Church to find Christian meanings in their pre-Christian material culture. Their artifacts have proven to be rich repertoires in this respect, capable of generating a host of meanings through which present-day Nisga'a can express their Christianity. The introduction of *gwiis-gan 'mala'a* (button blankets) into church services is probably the best example of this process. Nelson Clayton described for me why these blankets lent themselves to being worn by priests during the service:

There's only two colours in the regalias that we have nowadays, and that's the black of . . . when our people were in darkness for many years. And then the red is when they finally came to their senses, I guess . . . for the daylight when they

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<sup>99</sup> Hawkins, "Reimagining God," chap. 4 in *Writing and Colonialism in Northern Ghana*, has noted a similar tendency toward reified and ahistorical conceptions of indigenous religious thought in African cultures in debates springing from the project of inculturation among the LoDagaa of northern Ghana.

finally realize that they're coming out of darkness and into Christianity. So that's the reason why they went back to the regalias.<sup>100</sup>

While the connection was patent for Clayton and other Nisga'a I met with, for others, like the priest at Gingolx Harry Moore, the relationship between what the blankets symbolized and the teachings of Christianity was more complex. Moore explained how he and other priests wear their regalia only during prescribed times during the service:

[W]hen we do a marriage or a funeral, I wear my regalia. When I'm preaching, if I'm going to do a preaching, I take my regalia off, in respect. Jesus wore all white when he gave the sermon on the mountain. And that's one of the things I was told. Our regalia does play a part in church, yes, that's when you see that the black and the red and the buttons, that's . . . the night and the day, and the stars, the universe. Where we get all our food, water, you know, and the things, the mammals on the ground, and we give thanks to God about that. But when it comes to the sermon, we take the robe off, the blanket off, and we just use our whites, signifying this is, this is God's area, you know. Because when that happens I really respect that. And when we do have like Communion, then before the Communion starts I put the blanket back on, signifying the holy bread and the holy drink. That comes from the ground.<sup>101</sup>

In Moore's understanding button blankets are not entirely synonymous with the religious practices during worship service—but in their references to the incarnated world, the food and water that provide life, there is nonetheless a clear role for them in contemporary Nisga'a Christianity. Through such processes of finding congruencies Nisga'a today are both indigenizing their religion as well as Christianizing aspects of their past once excluded by missionaries.

Not everyone has wanted to mend this perceived break with the past. A number of my informants shared with me the difficulty some Nisga'a have had with bringing back a past that the arrival of Christianity supposedly left behind. Daphne Robinson recalled one of the uncles in her house, a son of Nisga'a priest Paul Mercer, calling those

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<sup>100</sup> Clayton, interview.

<sup>101</sup> Harry Moore, interview.

who participated in the revival of the cultural dances “heathens.” He also refused to enter Holy Trinity Church after the four tribal crest designs were installed on the altar.<sup>102</sup>

When years ago the priest John Hannen gave St. Andrew’s Church in Laxgalts’ap an ambry made out of a traditional carved bentwood box for keeping the Holy Sacraments, some Nisga’a objected that it was part of heathenism. Recalling this controversy, James Moore, the current priest in the village, defended the gift: “[I]t’s a blessed box, blessed by the bishop—God’s servant. And used for our purpose to help us, remind us who we are, where we came from, where we—who we should be.”<sup>103</sup>

Stuart Doolan was the young chairman of Gingolx’s Christ Church in the 1970s when, at the urging of Nisga’a elders like Eli Gosnell, Bishop Munn expressed interest in introducing traditional regalia into the church. Vivid in his memory remains the controversy this proposal touched off in the village:

[O]ur elders were dead set against it for the longest time. It took several meetings. In their meeting they had a shouting match, because the white man came in and took all our totem poles away? Took all the regalias away. And now comes this priest he wants to reintroduce it again. . . . I watched my grandfather, one of them that was dead set against using regalia in church again. “Why do you want to go back to the heathen days?” they called it. “All what you talking about was taken away, and they still haven’t returned them.”<sup>104</sup>

The generation to which Doolan’s grandfather belonged lived through much of the period when the Nisga’a expunged those aspects of their material culture deemed “heathen.”

Most eventually accepted the insistence of their priests that many of the material expressions of their culture were incompatible with Christian life and therefore needed to be relinquished. For some the about-face brought by inculturation and more generally the cultural revival have forced them to revisit this painful history and to question its very

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<sup>102</sup> Robinson, interview.

<sup>103</sup> James Moore, interview.

<sup>104</sup> Cheryl Doolan and Stuart Doolan, interview.

necessity.<sup>105</sup> Nisga'a religious sensibilities are not static, but their changes have not always been in step with the new generation of clergy who arrived after the 1960s, the men who shared with me their belief that rattling is "essentially no different" from praying, and that Christianity is most "fundamentally expressed" in the different Nisga'a feasts.<sup>106</sup> Some Nisga'a feel the heavy decisions made by the ancestors are not so easily reversed. Today those against the use of regalia in church and other attempts to incorporate aspects of Nisga'a culture predating Christianization into the worship service are perhaps less likely to speak out as Doolan's grandfather did. More than one of my interviewees told me that they knew of people who are still adamantly opposed to the use of regalia, "but they don't show it publicly, you know they just keep it in their own hearts."<sup>107</sup>

## Remembering and Forgetting Missionaries

Forgotten are the vast majority of the two dozen or more missionaries who passed through the Nass Valley beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. The often abrupt appearance and then just as sudden exit of particular individuals that characterized much of the missionary endeavour on the north coast, beyond the two lipleet who remained for life, did not leave the type of memories that survived longer than the generation that experienced them.<sup>108</sup> Tomlinson's adoption aside, missionaries existed outside of the Nisga'a kinship structure, the matrix through which the Nisga'a past is carried forward

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<sup>105</sup> Barker, "Tangled reconciliations," notes opposition to blankets in church, 439.

<sup>106</sup> These two views were shared with me by Hambidge and Mackenzie, respectively, in our interviews. For a related discussion of gaps between the theology of priests and their parishioners, see William A. Christian, *Person and God in a Spanish Valley*, rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

<sup>107</sup> Cheryl Doolan, in Cheryl Doolan and Stuart Doolan, interview.

<sup>108</sup> These two men were, of course, the CMS missionaries James B. McCullagh, who worked at Aiyansh from his arrival in 1883 until his death in 1921, and William H. Collison, who worked at Gingolx from his posting there in 1884 after serving at other mission stations of the North Pacific Mission until his death in 1922.

into the present. To Nisga'a eyes, they must have also appeared deficient in kinship connections, lacking the reference to lineage so important to people of high status. Nisga'a generally addressed their lipleet with the title *sim'oogit* (chief), but such a shortcoming was more befitting the *waayin* in Nisga'a society, that rank of "not healed" people who, because they did not know their origins, were a people without history.<sup>109</sup> Wolf chief Sgat'iin's reply to the missive McCullagh sent in 1886 warning him not to attempt to take by force two converted chiefs at the Aiyansh mission can be read in this light. The missionary recorded that Sgat'iin apparently rushed about like a grizzly bear on receiving the letter, after which he

replied to my "hard paper" saying, that Skotēn had sat at the head of the Niskas ever since men first began to dwell upon the earth and could not be touched; that I had risen up like a new thing without a foundation, that my habitation was a tent temporarily pitched, and that if I made myself too objectionable with "hard papers" he would raise a wind that would blow me and my tent back to the sea.<sup>110</sup>

McCullagh had been at Aiyansh but three years when this exchange occurred. Though he would dwell on the river a total of thirty-eight years, a duration that helped ensure his remembrance today, the vast majority of missionaries who moved on from their mission posts after staying for a few years were precisely "new thing[s] without a foundation," soon forgotten in the *longue durée* of life in the valley. In this pattern of engagement most missionaries resembled other K'amksiiwaa passing through their valley, uprooted driftwood that soon moved on. From this flotsam of humanity contemporary Nisga'a

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<sup>109</sup> Boston, Morven, and Grandison, *From Time Before Memory*, 54-6. Discussion of the *waayin* in published scholarship on the societies of the Nisga'a and their north coast neighbours is very limited, but see Marjorie Halpin, "Feast Names of Hartley Bay," in *The Tsimshian: Images of the Past, Views for the Present*, ed. Margaret Seguin [Anderson] (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), 59-60, for an original interpretation.

<sup>110</sup> McCullagh, Aeiyaansh, Nass River B.C., 4 June 1886, CMS fonds, C.2./O.2.

recall only those individuals who lodged themselves more firmly on the banks of the river, becoming part of human life in the valley.

A few of my interviewees mentioned Arthur Doolan by name. Doolan only worked on the Nass for three short years, interrupted by stays at Metlakatla, but his role as the first European lipleet to be stationed among the Nisga'a has perhaps contributed to preservation of his memory. There is also evidence that Doolan earned the affection of many Nisga'a during his brief time on the river. His letters back to William Duncan from his new parish in London, inquiring about the many friends and acquaintances he had been forced to leave behind and promising to find time to answer the letters of anyone who wrote him, attest to this. So too do the gifts he forwarded, the toys and pictures he explained to Duncan he was sending because he, "should like, tho' absent, to keep a place in their memories and affections."<sup>111</sup> Tomlinson wrote that some Nisga'a who heard of Duncan's imminent return from furlough in England eagerly asked if Doolan was returning with him; indeed, he had contemplated such a move. It is difficult to deduce from Doolan's writings what the Nisga'a found special about him. Although the missionary condemned many contemporary Nisga'a practices and had numerous "enemies," he also counted "many friends" on the Nass.<sup>112</sup> Indeed Doolan seems to have quickly become attached to life in the valley. He developed a strong bond with the student Ts'ak'aamaas, whom he "loved . . . as a son" and who called him his father, and later wrote of his hope to again taste oolichan on an anticipated visit to the north coast

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<sup>111</sup> Doolan, The Green, Stratford, England, to Duncan, 22 January 1870, William Duncan fonds.

<sup>112</sup> In one letter written after he had returned to England Doolan pointed out to Duncan an oversight in his last letter: "By the way you do not allude to any one at Naas. Do please in your next letter for I have many friends there," Hazelwood House, Romeford Road, Stratford, Essex, to Duncan, 3 February 1872, William Duncan fonds.

that never came to pass.<sup>113</sup> Doolan is remembered in another way by Nisga'a adoption of his surname. Nisga'a adopted the names of missionaries they regarded highly. These names have been woven into the Nisga'a fabric, carried by people who are not necessarily aware of their origins or the reason for their incorporation. Conversely, the names of missionaries to whom the Nisga'a were indifferent or disliked are left to fade with their passing.<sup>114</sup>

The lipleet Nisga'a elders recall today are as likely to be those they knew in their own lifetimes as their nineteenth-century predecessors, men who worked in the villages in the early twentieth century. Their memories convey a picture of the humanity of these men—their virtues and faults, as well as a sense of how they were a part of everyday life in their respective villages. Nisga'a remember Oliver Thorne, the minister in Gingolx for many years, for things like his strict sabbath observance and visits to the canneries on that day to bring lettuce he had grown and “give a good word to the people.”<sup>115</sup> When I asked Charles Alexander what he knew about the missionaries, he answered by telling me about W.S. Cooper, the minister who worked in his village when he was a young boy:

Almost, like, he chooses the day when he wants us to be down there. First he make us run around his house, like two, three times, and he gave us one apple. And then he ask us to pack wood . . . from under the house. He was a really kind person. You know, when the oolichans come, he will ask me to, not to hook the oolichan, but to use a deep net. He likes oolichan but he said he can't eat too many. He never missed a Sunday. He married quite a few people here, but he was here for a long time. He was the last, the first I know, and he was the last minister that came here. Mr. Cooper. But one thing I know that—he's—I guess I shouldn't say this, but it's what happened. There's a lady, his cleaning lady, he had one daughter from this lady, from Greenville here. I'm not going to mention any names.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Doolan, Journal, 8 May 1866, CMS fonds, C.2./O.

<sup>114</sup> William H. Collison's name is another that lives on today on the north coast, especially on Haida Gwaii, where he opened a CMS mission at Masset before coming to the Nass.

<sup>115</sup> Grace Azak, interview.

<sup>116</sup> Alexander, interview.

Like other interviewees, the memories of missionaries Alexander offered me were as much those of clergymen they knew in their youth as the early promoters—both Aboriginal and K’amksiiwaa—who helped to Christianize Nisga’a society. His remembering of missionaries delineates some of the individuality and complexity of these figures that is often absent in academic and popular depictions of them. Alexander briefly hesitated over whether to include Cooper’s fathering of a child by a local woman in his recollection, but decided that it was part of the story and found a way to tell it respectfully.

James McCullagh is the missionary most remembered by Nisga’a today. My interviewees described both his abilities and his severe personality. A gifted linguist, Nisga’a recalled for me how he became fluent in Nisga’a, as well as how he used this skill to persuade. My interviewees in New Aiyansh pointed to McCullagh’s ability to exercise control. He would attempt to show people that if they converted they would be able to help their own, which is arguably the primary role of a chief in Nisga’a society. George Williams spoke of the missionary’s “harsh way” of converting people: “[W]hen McCullagh came he waved the aspirin, ‘If you don’t convert, you’re not going to get this.’ No matter how sick the person was. He carried a club with him, just about, he was that kind of—.”<sup>117</sup> Pauline Grandison was born a few years after McCullagh’s death and so never met him, but grew up listening to her father tell stories about the missionary. McCullagh was “a real good Christian,” he used to say, but was known for his strictness. Pauline gave me an example: “[W]hen everybody’s in church, and if a lady bring a baby, and while he was preaching, the baby started crying, and he just called the lady’s name

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<sup>117</sup> Williams, interview.

by her name and told her to take the baby out. That's how strict he is."<sup>118</sup> Nisga'a remember McCullagh's military background, an understanding of which may help to explain his rigidity as well as some of his more peculiar behaviour. Doris Tait told me that she knew McCullagh was from England, adding, "he came right from war, and he was the one that didn't allow our people to use anything Nisga'a."<sup>119</sup> Apparently on a certain day of the year McCullagh would don his full military uniform and gallop through the village on horseback shouting something indecipherable at the inhabitants.<sup>120</sup> A number of people remember their parents and grandparents calling McCullagh "Master," a form of address the missionary seems to have preferred and which he recorded Nisga'a as using in his writings.<sup>121</sup> Lorene Plante recounted with a laugh that she often mentions at meetings that she has a copy of "McCullagh's book," which from the response it provokes is the wrong thing to say: "You know, the older people, they get really angry. So there's still anger there. There's still anger there, you know, because of misunderstanding. They say there was a misunderstanding."<sup>122</sup> The book to which Plante and other Nisga'a often refer is the biography of McCullagh written shortly after his death in 1921 by an English admirer in the hagiographic genre. It consists largely of extracts from the missionary's writings, and for Nisga'a today is the most accessible collection of McCullagh's searing critiques of their ancestors and "the Indian" more

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<sup>118</sup> Pauline Grandison, interview by Nicholas May, New Aiyansh, 20 September 2007.

<sup>119</sup> Tait, interview.

<sup>120</sup> Mackenzie, interview. Mackenzie related that he heard this story from the late James Gosnell.

<sup>121</sup> Tait, interview. Nisga'a use of this title for McCullagh comes through in the excerpts from the missionary's writings Moeran used in his biography, *McCullagh of Aiyansh*. See, for example, pages 81, 86, 102, 214, 215. See also McCullagh, "Another Chapter of History," 28.

<sup>122</sup> Plante, interview. McCullagh attempted to write a book that would demonstrate how the Christian Gospel was the only hope for the moral, social and spiritual salvation of the Indians, but did not complete it before his death. In April 1899 he explained to a friend, C.B. Robinson, why he was making so little progress: "I digress so often and perhaps go in too much for moralizing," in Moeran, *McCullagh of Aiyansh*, 51.

generally.<sup>123</sup> Turn-of-the-century Nisga'a seem to have shared the assessment of McCullagh's severity held by their descendants today, which the missionary appears to have welcomed. He once wrote of the Nisga'a chiefs that he refused to "flatter them by useless *wau-waus* (handshakings or feasts); therefore they declared I was *alugt, nigi amt* (fierce and no good)."<sup>124</sup> The Sim'algaḡ word *aluk* more accurately translates as "angry" or "cranky," and points to an assessment of McCullagh's antisocial behaviour that still holds sway in the memories of Nisga'a today.<sup>125</sup>

Many Nisga'a memories, like those of McCullagh's severity, connect in some way or another to the written sources I had versed myself in before beginning to interview elders. One that refused to do so is the story several Nisga'a told me about what we might call McCullagh's conversion. Like his fellow missionaries on the north coast, McCullagh opposed the feasting system that he found the Nisga'a practising upon his arrival in 1883. McCullagh's struggle to suppress the "potlatch" frequently drove him to despair as he watched even those converts committed to extricating themselves from its reach drawn back into it. In 1899 the *lipleet* published a paper against the potlatch he had presented at the Annual Conference held by CMS missionaries in the North Pacific Mission. Within it he professed the impossibility that an outsider could "rightly comprehend what it all means," but basing his understanding on sixteen years of close observation condemned it as an obstacle to Aboriginal peoples' advancement as civilized Christians.<sup>126</sup> Nisga'a today cite this opposition, but do so in the context of McCullagh's

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<sup>123</sup> Joseph William Wright Moeran, *McCullagh of Aiyansh* (London: Marshall Brothers Limited, 1923).

<sup>124</sup> Moeran, *McCullagh of Aiyansh*, 36.

<sup>125</sup> McCullagh's second wife, Eleanor Wharton McCullagh, told Moeran that her late husband "acquired among the Indians the name of being quick-tempered and easily made angry," but added that his anger took the form of "righteous wrath," *McCullagh of Aiyansh*, 223.

<sup>126</sup> McCullagh, *The Indian Potlatch*, 1.

later transformation as a result of his very personal contact with this key institution of Nisga'a society.

As Nisga'a remember this change of heart, it was McCullagh's vulnerability to the very anguish caused by the loss of a loved one that the yukw recognized, and was intended to soften, that opened him to its true purpose. George Williams recalled for me how the Nisga'a stubbornly held onto this practice and the circumstances that eventually enabled them to keep it:

But one thing our people had to negotiate when there's a death in the community McCullagh did not allow people to grieve for their family. They grieved but one thing he did not want was to see a feast. So when his son died, at the age of twelve, he was devastated, because he understood our language, he learned our language very well. So when his son died the people of Gitlaxt'aamiks noticed how devastated he was, so they put on a feast, and they told him how to take care of the loss that had left from this world. And they negotiated to keep that part of our culture. All our own people, when there's a death in one family in the community, we all share the grief. The whole community shares in the grief for the lost one. And that's what they showed to McCullagh when he lost his son. After some negotiations with him, that part of our culture we kept, which is still flourishing today.<sup>127</sup>

Years of close observation did remarkably little to significantly alter McCullagh's perception of his hosts or their cultural practices from his initial assessment. Yet an evening of feasting, of being surrounded by people commemorating his lost son and sharing in his sorrow, gave McCullagh amgoot, a good heart, and in doing so an entirely different perspective on an institution he had in ignorance tried to eradicate.

Neither this transformation of McCullagh, nor that of any other lipleet after living with the Nisga'a, has been remembered outside the Nass Valley. McCullagh's writings, prolific as they were, remain silent on his revaluation of the yukw in light of a personal tragedy. Although his determination to change the Nisga'a remained as fervent at the end

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<sup>127</sup> Williams, interview.

of nearly four decades with them as it had been on his arrival, McCullagh's more personal writings suggest that he could nevertheless be profoundly affected by his hosts. Occasions that brought out their stubborn unwillingness to abandon certain cultural practices, their humour, or especially their capacity for love and holiness, rocked McCullagh in unexpected ways and even drew him to identify with them, if only momentarily. As Nisga'a tenure of their lands became increasingly uncertain in the face of growing colonial and then Canadian claims to sovereignty over them at the turn of the century, McCullagh became sympathetic to the land question. The missionary turned his printing press to the cause of publicizing a Nisga'a perspective of this injustice.

How McCullagh's about-face on the yukw is remembered and forgotten reminds us of the inevitably selective nature of our invocations of pastness. Why did McCullagh leave almost no trace of his change of heart on the yukw? To have broken ranks with the general consensus among Euro-Canadian missionaries, Indian Agents and legislators that the potlatch needed to be eradicated would have been a difficult stand to make. Civilizing and Christianizing projects of nineteenth-century Protestant missionary societies thrived on the identification then subjugation of "heathenism," which enjoyed an enormously elastic definition as missionaries encountered it in every corner of the globe. Finding something akin to Christian love at the heart of a cultural practice he had defined as antithetical to his work would have been an uncomfortable revelation for any missionary. Perhaps this unexpected gift from the people of Gitlaxt'aamiks in a time of mourning lay bare too great a contradiction to hope to resolve and so was better suppressed, maybe even eventually forgotten.

Yet the implications of such a breakthrough would have been too important to the Nisga'a to allow McCullagh to forget it. The ability of the Nisga'a to continue to practise their feasts as Christians depended on this fragile understanding achieved, and so, as Williams and others relate the story, they negotiated with their missionary to maintain them. From a Nisga'a perspective such events were important victories and thus worthy of remembrance. As moments of understanding in a relationship shaped largely by their absence they held great power. They could change that relationship, or in their retelling affirm the humanity of each party. In the Nisga'a story McCullagh was transformed when he saw that his community shared his grief and could show him how to care for his loss. "Why the transformation?" Jacob McKay asked rhetorically during our interview, somewhat frustrated that no non-Nisga'a had yet been curious as to why a missionary ingrained in the "old Victorian attitude" of European superiority had changed. "Prior to that, to the death of his son, you know, he thought about the Nisga'a like any other scholar from England or Western civilization, of First Nations."<sup>128</sup> Experiencing the power of the yukw brought McCullagh a littler closer to the Nisga'a world by eroding some of the colonial thinking that separated the two. Asking questions about these kinds of changes in the past is important to McKay and other Nisga'a who remember this story for the truths it may reveal.

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<sup>128</sup> McKay, interview.

## Conclusion

A fundamental goal of this research project is to tell a history of Christianization in a way that draws on the perspectives of contemporary Nisga'a, including what their own memory practices can reveal about this process. What these perspectives offer is a view of religious change as more deeply complex and ambivalent than is often possible when relying on sources produced by outsiders alone. This richness shone forth in my interviews, during which Nisga'a revealed positive memories of their Christianization—an understanding of a past which has more than its share of pain that scholars working only from missionary and government records are less likely to obtain. The research and findings of this dissertation show how Aboriginal narratives about their history can illuminate and complicate scholarship about Aboriginal pasts, challenging our understandings of larger processes like cultural encounter, colonization and Christianization.

This study illustrates that one of the ways Aboriginal perspectives on their past can achieve this is by providing hints to scholars regarding ways they might approach their topic. The latter half of the nineteenth century was a time of extraordinary shifts in the lifeways of the Aboriginal peoples who found themselves in the new settler society of British Columbia. Studies delineating the ways that European newcomers extended their control over this land and its inhabitants are valuable and necessary to larger goals of

decolonization, but these insights reconstruct a very settler-oriented version of the past. Ironically, even histories that take as their subject Aboriginal or other colonized peoples can turn into narratives about empire, about the press of power from above. The episodes of coercion that dot the pasts of colonized peoples are important to understand, and much of the historical literature pertaining to them has been concerned with just this task. Yet in focusing on power struggles and placing them at the centre of their histories, whether done *a priori* or arrived upon more accidentally, scholars risk producing shallow histories of Aboriginal and other colonized societies. Such works create the impression that negotiation with powerful outsiders is the central story of these peoples. While it may be true that in the periods of history under study colonialism and the tensions it gave rise to formed the basic dynamic of change in these societies, the imperious acts of those wielding more power are but one part of the larger story. Indeed, they may not even be the most important part.

Drawing on Aboriginal perspectives can be a valuable corrective to this focus, inviting us to scrutinize aspects of their pasts that we may not have initially considered to be as noteworthy. This study demonstrates the value of this exercise, taking cues from insights offered by Nisga'a during interviews. Although this project may not be able to fulfill all of the outcomes that my interviewees stated they would like to see flow from it—a number of them expressed a desire to see the recently cancelled Sunday School program return, for example—listening to their research priorities and what they wished to learn from histories written about their past can be an important step toward the larger goal ethnohistorians have of refining our methodologies where they remain colonized. Even cognizance of these priorities, which are often different from those outside the

society, can help scholars to write histories that are more pertinent, more reflective of the needs of the communities they claim to be about.

Beyond the Nass the findings of this thesis invite us to reimagine how we understand power to work as well as cultural change to occur in colonial contexts. Nisga'a responses to the Christianities that arrived in their valley followed a logic that was distinct. Though not immune to new influences, this logic was not reducible to outside direction. Nineteenth-century Nisga'a largely embraced the overtures of missionaries and colonial authorities eager to teach them, and generally accepted the authority of their lipleet. When they did tussle with their missionaries—usually over unmet expectations—they rarely rejected their logic or jurisdiction. Seen from the perspective of a people ever watchful of opportunities to acquire new useful knowledge, the foreignness of many aspects of the K'amksiiwaa, including their faith, ensured that the Nisga'a were keen to learn more. In the flurry of changes that arose from the increasingly overlapping worlds of Nisga'a and K'amksiiwaa—from a taste for calico shirts to the adoption of the handshake—evidence of cultural change was an unreliable indicator of colonized status. Like the huge American flag the people of Aiyansh flew to welcome a new teacher in 1915 because of its beauty, or the great wooden screen featuring a painted enlargement of the reverse side of a U.S. half dollar that the Eagle chief Agwii Laxha displayed in his house—depicting an eagle about to take flight—Nisga'a responses to Christianities and their promoters could elude dominant understandings of power.<sup>1</sup> Sharing forms with powerful others has its cost, but avoiding

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<sup>1</sup> Vera Basham, interview by Imbert Orchard, Penticton, BC, 9 November 1965, BCA, recalled seeing a “tremendous, huge and beautiful American flag” hung out to welcome her as she reached Aiyansh to teach in 1915, noting that it made her very indignant, “being the daughter of a conservative Britisher,” although she later found on inquiry that the people had flown it because they thought it was pretty. George

engagement altogether was unrealistic to expect of nineteenth-century Nisga'a. To manage this would have required disregarding the meanings they found in the Christian and other forms newly available to them. Such apparently subaltern acts are invitations worth attending to if historians wish to deepen their understanding of how different peoples have understood their engagements with colonizing forces and their offerings.

The story of the Nisga'a's Christianization told here suggests that religious change is a complex historical phenomenon with many dimensions. We would do well to resist the lure of totality in our metaphors. Instead of converting to Christianity the Nisga'a manifested evidence of a range of responses to the various aspects of the Christianities they encountered, including attempts to build their own new faith. Creation of a Nisga'a Christianity did not mean that every contradiction with ways that had preceded it was resolved, or that its forms were fully fused with the Nisga'a social fabric. Tensions and incongruities in Nisga'a religious life predated the arrival of Protestant Christianities and continued afterward. A simple displacement was just as untenable. The violent scraping and scouring that many Nisga'a essayed under the direction of their lipleet failed to completely expunge pre-Christian ways. Where it appears to have succeeded it left scars, seen in the difficulty some Nisga'a have had with more recent endeavours to restore certain aspects of what was left behind. More successful a path for the Nisga'a in their Christianization was the commingling, with varying degrees of awareness, of forms and meanings of different origins after 1860. Davis's "first" and

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Chismore, a doctor travelling up the Nass in 1870 while on leave from serving in the U.S. army at Fort Tongass, Alaska, saw the carefully painted screen, "inscription and all," when hosted by Agwii Laxha in Gitwinksihlkw. This type of screen, prominently displayed behind the chief's seat, traditionally exhibited the house's crest, here an Eagle, and the chief's use of what he had been told was the "Boston man's crest" seems to have been both an appropriation as well as a recognition of affinity. George Chismore, "From the Nass to the Skeena," *Overland Monthly* 6, no. 35 (November 1885): 452.

“second” Christianities intertwined, permeating one another in unpredictable ways. If the case of the Nisga’a is indicative of processes of Christianization elsewhere, what has been presented as a “great transformation”—the globalization of Christianity—appears more modestly, but no less remarkably, as innumerable histories of diverse religious landscapes rearticulated in light of their encounters with Christianities.<sup>2</sup>

This project is sensitive to the potential effects it may have upon contemporary Nisga’a and the challenges they face as they continue to strive to take control of their future, now with a treaty in hand.<sup>3</sup> Religious practices in the Nass are changing still. As many of my interviewees lamented, the kind of religious conformity—and community—that saw near-universal attendance at weekly worship services in the valley’s large churches in their youth is no more. Wednesday-night Church Army meetings persist, and revivals occasionally erupt, although today they are as likely to be led by an itinerant Pentecostal evangelist as a village Army, and do not involve the village-to-village tours examined in this study. The ongoing cultural revival is interwoven with naturalized Christian elements in a seamless way, which some outside observers today might characterize as “living mixedly.” For the Nisga’a youth who are at the forefront of this movement as cultural dancers and in other ways, the decision of many of their ancestors to radically break with the past in accepting the new may be difficult to understand. This project hopefully traverses this potential gap by revealing how for their Wāhlingigat the

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<sup>2</sup> The term “great transformation” was used by nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries but has also been employed more recently in a collection of critical essays on Christianization, Robert W. Hefner, ed., *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> At the close of the twentieth century a treaty was reached between the Nisga’a and the governments of British Columbia and Canada, settling a question of land ownership raised over a century before. See *Nisga’a Final Agreement* (Ottawa: Federal Treaty Negotiation Office, 1998).

intrusion of newcomers and their cargo presented both novel opportunities and dangers. Like the *naxnok* or supernatural beings they encountered, the alterity the ancestors found in the world of the K'amksiiwaa stranger provided an opening to power outside themselves. And like *naxnok*, these new powers could be ambiguous in their effects on those who came into contact with them. The changing relationship of turn-of-the-century Nisga'a with the supernatural realm made the important task of discernment difficult at times. Feasting on the aam of heaven could appear to demand burning regalia or leaving kin behind. Despite such perils the Nisga'a ancestors succeeded in acquiring and domesticating the powers they found in the Christianities that first appeared to them, harnessing their benefits for future generations.

During one of my initial meetings with the Nisga'a the possibility that this project might facilitate healing was mentioned. It is my hope that this exercise in remembering—in *amgoot*—in drawing on the insights carried by many in the Nass Valley today, will contribute toward the goal of making the heart good.

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Aiyansh on the Nass to the site of Gitzimgeluin village south of Kitsumkalum Lake,  
prepared by Jacob Russ alias Hadagim Lakha showing the locations of his ancestral  
hunting ground, called Laklako, also claimed by Abbi of Gitwingak [Map]

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# Appendix A

## List of Nisga'a Interviewees

### New Aiyansh

Gary Davis, Wii Gilax Namk'ap (Eagle)  
Joseph Gosnell, Hleek (Eagle)  
Pauline Grandison (Killer Whale)  
Herbert Morven, K'ee $\underline{x}$ kw (Wolf)  
Lorene Plante, Ksim Lax Miigunt (Wolf)  
Daphne Robinson, Najeeytsgakw (Eagle)  
Doris Tait, K'alii Xs'ootkw (Raven)  
George Williams Sr., Ksdiyaawa $\underline{k}$  (Wolf)

### Gitwinksihlkw

Alice Azak, Sigidimnak' Tk'igapks (Eagle)  
Grace Azak, Ne'Jiits Hoostkw (Frog)  
Lavinia Azak (Raven)

### Laxgalts'ap

Charles Alexander, Gadim Galdoo'o (Raven)  
Jacob McKay, Bayt Nee $\underline{k}$ hl (Beaver)  
James Moore, Jagam Sinaahlk (Wolf)

### Gingolx

Nelson Clayton, Gwisk'aayn (Wolf)  
Cheryl Doolan (Frog)  
Stuart Doolan, Kw'ax $\underline{s}$ uu (Wolf)  
Harry Moore, Wii Xbaàla (Raven)  
Grace Nelson, Axdii Kiiskw (Eagle)

### Retired Anglican Clergy

John Blyth, Hlguu $\grave{I}$  K'ee $\underline{x}$ kw (Wolf)  
John Hannen (Wolf)  
Douglas Hambidge, Walaksim Kaldils (Raven)  
John A. (Ian) Mackenzie