

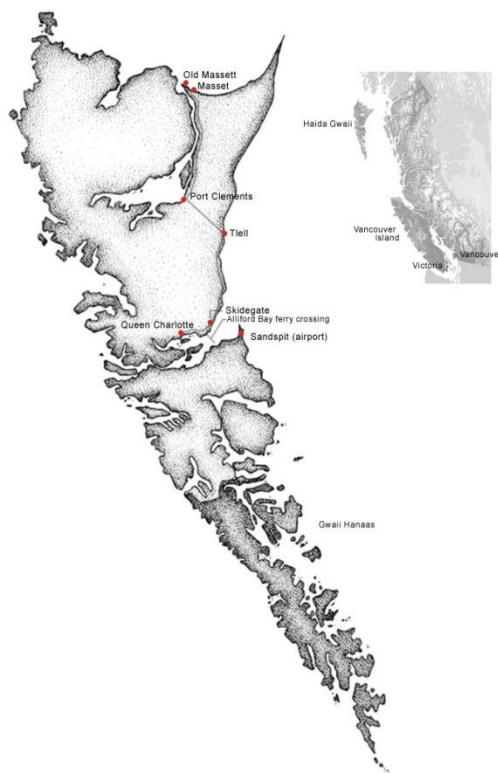
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### The Haida Native American Tribe



**Figure 1 - Haida Gwaii**

colonialism (Anthony 42). Prior to the early 1980 renaming, this island was known as The Queen Charlotte Islands. Haida Gwaii, which is actually an archipelago, lies just off the coast of British Columbia, a long triangle with a 100-kilometer top, slowly tapering to a point 300 kilometers south (see Fig. 1) (Anthony 41). Protected modern tribal territories encompass the entire Haida

The Haida are a tribe of indigenous peoples native to the Pacific Northwest of both the United States and Canada, with their chief modern territory being the island Haida Gwaii (Anthony 42). According to tribal memory, this island, along with parts of southern Alaska and parts of Prince of Wales Island, has been home to the Haida people since “time immemorial” (Haida Nation). The island of Haida Gwaii literally means “island of the people.” The name was proposed in 1980 and officially adopted in 2010 as part of a movement to reclaim tribal identity from

Gwaii archipelago, including reserves of offshore waters (The Consequence of our Action). Today, Haida make up about 50% of the approximately 5,000 people living on the island.

First contact is estimated as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, possibly with Buddhist monks. Later contacts were with Spanish, Russian and British settlers. Pre-contact population was estimated to be 20,000 but dropped to approximately 600 by the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to the introduction of foreign diseases through trade and travel (History of the Haida Nation). Most of the population was decimated between 1774-1890 from a mix of measles, influenza, cholera, mumps and venereal diseases (Wilson 4). The 120 years of disease took a tragic cultural toll on the Haida, particularly on their oral history. As huge numbers of tribe members were lost in waves, entire volumes of knowledge were lost from the people who would have normally been responsible for gathering and preserving part of the oral tradition. In the article *Sometimes, It's All Right There* from the Haida Laas Journal, Barb Wilson likens the loss of the people and the oral histories to the Smallpox epidemics to “a fire burning a library of 30,000 books. Our elders are our books of knowledge.”

Haida oral traditions are a part of tribal identity and an inseparable part of their culture. Oral histories provide a link to tribal past as an “affirmation of the community in a Western-dominated world” (Ames 119). Oral histories are comprised of creation myths, fables to preserve societal taboos, stories of victories in war, and Chiefly lineage among others. For most of the Haida’s history, these oral traditions were carried out in the Haida language, *Xaayda Kil*. Many linguists today consider this to be a unique and isolated language, separate from the Na-Dené languages (Enrico 7). Although considered a unique language, *Xaayda Kil* does share and borrow many phonological and morphological characteristics from its cousin language of Tlinglit. Today there are only 40 remaining native speakers, called “first language speakers” and

approximately only 275 “second language users” (Enrico 10). While doing field research for the Haida language preservation efforts, Linguist John Enrico noted that “today, persons between the ages of 70-80 speak a considerably simplified Haida...most persons between the ages of 50-70 have some comprehension but are non-speakers, and persons under 50 are very unlikely to be able to understand the language.”

Haida society is organized in two major moieties, the Eagle and the Raven (Our History). Moieties are “groups of linked clans that divide a society into two halves” (Bonnvillian 469). Each of the Haida moieties is comprised of a number of lineages, but no clans. Tribal members trace their moiety back to supernatural women, each associated with either the Eagle or the Raven moiety. Traditionally, villages will be comprised of numerous lineages and both moieties (Haida Kinship). Haida moieties were traditionally exogamous, but their population numbers have shrunk such that this social taboo has become maladapted (Stearns 185). Also traditionally, when a Haida woman married a non-Haida, they ceased to be members of their moiety, but frequently their children were allowed to marry back into the lineage affiliations (Stearns, 183). Haida lineages are matrilineal; children are automatically allocated into their mother’s lineage. Consequently, a father’s matrilineage depended upon the tribal recognition of marital relations (Stearns, 175). Historically marriages were arranged for children between members of different moieties, Eagle and Raven, and children were granted membership into the same moiety as their mother. Family households contained, on average, 30-40 members and were overseen by a chief. These chiefs were given authority to act as a war chief in times of hostilities and each village also had a designated chief, which was the wealthiest or most respected of the family households. Village chiefs periodically changed hands as wealth or respect was granted to

another man. In keeping with the matrilineal kinship ties, Chiefton rank was traced through the mother's line, usually a Chief's oldest sister's son (The Haida).

Oftentimes moiety membership granted entitlement to resources such as waterways, hunting territories and house sites. Since Haida subsistence strategies centered on waterways and the ocean, the Haida became master craftsmen of cedar canoes using them to fish the coastline waterways. These canoes became highly prized by other tribal nations and even Caucasian settlers. Early European explorers adored the large Haida war canoes, decorated with carvings and family crests. These war canoes would later become known as "head canoes" (see Fig. 2) (The Haida). Since Haida Gwaii lacked many resources valued by the Haida (such as mineral pigments and mountain goats), they used their craftsmanship as their main means of subsistence.

As early as 2,000 years ago, they established

themselves as traders and craftsmen- an economic



Figure 2 – A model of a traditional war canoe.

system which lasted through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The canoes were their main good of trade, known throughout the Pacific Northwest tribes as the best water vessels available (The Haida).

Haida subsistence strategies in modern years have become intertwined with tribal artwork. The Haida style of art is iconic and internationally known. Today, traditional artwork is often made specifically to be sold to tourist markets, providing an income to families and towns.



Figure 3 - Haida Raven

Originally, these pieces of art were for purposes of social identity rather than for the pure abstract purpose of "art" (The Haida). One of the most important aspects depicted in their artwork are the moieties (see Fig. 3). These pieces are meant to show the owner's status and lineage affiliation. Often the moieties and status

symbols are carved into cedar trees to create totem poles. The totem pole is another iconic piece of artwork from the Haida tribe, but was also utilized and created by other Pacific Northwest native tribes. The totem poles were often referred to as “monumental poles” (Totem Poles) and were placed in doorways of houses, carved into support beams of homes or as freestanding memorials for deceased honored members of the society. Early totem poles were likened to billboards, often signaling the presence of rich and powerful



Figure 4 - Haida Totem Pole

families or the boundary line for owned land or waterways. Modern misconception holds that the bottom figure of the pole holds the lowest rank, whereas the exact opposite is usually true. Most often the bottom figure is the most important, and contrary to the term “low man on the totem pole”, the bottom figure was most often not human (see Fig. 4) (Smith). Totem poles were often the focal point of tribal potlatches; huge social gatherings meant to redistribute wealth and name new chiefs (Pryce). Another iconic hallmark of Haida artwork is argillite carvings. Argillite is unique to the British Columbia area and is a type of soft, black stone made of mostly clay.

Traditionally, argillite was carved into pipes, bowls and small sculptures which were popular trade items after European contact (see Fig. 5). Today most argillite takes the form of jewelry, but this was not a historically popular way of using the stone (Ventura). Designs carved into the stone are based on the Haida oral traditions and myths. Common themes are, of course, the Eagle or Raven moieties. Bill Reid, a Haida tribal member, was a famous and skilled artist of both totem poles and argillite carvings. He is considered to be the greatest influence in introducing the world to the art of the Pacific Northwest (Bill Reid Foundation).



Figure 5 - Argillite Carving

The Haida nation continues to be a prominent player in Pacific Northwest culture, both in the First Nations and Western culture. Tribal councils regularly meet in local towns and with American and Canadian representatives to perpetuate and preserve Haida traditions and customs. There is work being done to document and preserve the Haida language and artists such as Bill Reid help bring publicity and recognition to this beautiful society.

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