

Chapter 4 Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian

“We don't want what you did here to only echo in the air, how our grandfathers used to do things... Yes. You have unwrapped it for us. That is why we will open again this container of wisdom left in our care.”

the late George Davis (*Kichnáalx—Lk'aanaaw*) of Angoon, on the importance of the Sealaska Heritage Institute and its work

I. considered together

Though Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian peoples are both distinct cultures and distinct nations, they are today often considered together. This is largely an artifact of their joining together to fight for their civil rights first in the Alaska Native Brotherhood in 1912, and then against the seizing of their land for the Tlingit National Forest through the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida (CCTH) in the mid-twentieth century. Today the CCTH continues as a tribal organization, while Sealaska is the ANCSA regional corporation. The Sealaska Corporation founded Sealaska Heritage Institute in 1980 at the request of elders and clan leaders, and traditional scholars in order to preserved traditional knowledge and foster cultural revival.

As explained in the words of the late George Davis (*Kichnáalx—Lk'aanaaw*) of Angoon:

“We don't want what you did here to only echo in the air, how our grandfathers used to do things... Yes. You have unwrapped it for us. That is why we will open again this container of wisdom left in our care.”

As SHI explains, “These wise traditional leaders told the new leaders that their hands were growing weary of holding onto the metaphorical blanket, this “container of wisdom.” They

said they were transferring this responsibility to Sealaska, the regional Native corporation serving Southeast Alaska.¹ Sealaska Institute dedicated the Walter Soboleff Building in Juneau in 2015 as the culmination of decades of work.²

Members of all ethno-linguistic groups live in the area that is today called Southeast Alaska, but share many cultural patterns with people of what is also as the Northwest Coast of the US and Canada, separated now by modern political boundaries.

Tlingit-Aani, the Tlingit homelands are now wholly within present day Alaska in the United States. The Haida lands and nation have been split, with the center of *Haida Gwaii*, the heart of the Haida homeland, in British Columbia, Canada. Most Haida live on the Canadian side of the border where their experience of colonialism and their political realities have been different. The Tsimshian are also sometimes grouped with “Natives of Southeast Alaska” yet they too have a distinct culture and history. The Tsimshian people originated on the coast of the mainland in what is now British Columbia. Tsimshian in Alaska are the descendants of a small faction of the Tsimshian people who moved from Canadian Territory to Annette Island in U.S. Territory in 1886 when they created the community of Metlakatla, which later became the first Indian Reservation in Alaska. There are still fourteen Tsimshian First Nations in British Columbia.

II. The Tlingit Haida and Tsimshian world

Like all indigenous people, the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian lived in a world conditioned by cooperation with animals, and plants, a world complete unto itself, with unique cosmology,

¹ <http://www.sealaskaheritage.org/about>

² http://www.sealaskaheritage.org/sites/default/files/WSBBooklet_WebWithCover.pdf

language, myths, social organization, culture and customs.³ The Tlingit and Haida cultural and social systems are constructed around clans based on matrilineal descent, a cultural system which confers a specific place in the society on each individual. Extended families lived in large clan houses controlled by a clan chief or leader. Some of these houses were of immense size, housing as many as 100 individuals, marked by ceremonial house posts, and filled with highly decorated house screens, and ceremonial clothing and objects, *at.oow*, all of which belonged to the clan collectively. Ceremonial totems prominently displayed in front of the house marked the heritage of the clan. Important occasions were celebrated with a potlach, where powerful chiefs, supported by their clan, invited those from the opposite clan and gave away valuable material possessions.

Clans

Tlingit and Haida cultures and societies were and are organized around matrilineal moieties or sides, further divided into clans and houses. Traditional Tsimshian social systems are the same, but the faction of Tsimshian that moved to Metlakatla willingly suppressed most of their traditional belief systems, though they did not give them up entirely. The matrilineal system is complex, and central to culture and identity, conferring a special place to each individual. It has been best explained by Nora and Richard Dauenhauer who completed an immense body of work on Tlingit history and culture. Tlingit society is first of all divided into two complementary moieties or ‘sides’: Raven and Eagle (although these sometimes have different names, Crow and Wolf respectively.) Tlingit society is further organized into clans and house groups. Each clan

³ Walter Echo Hawk, “Context for Setting Modern Congressional Indian Policy in Native Southeast Alaska” 78, published in <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/ii/ii24/20130516/100839/hhrg-113-ii24-wstate-mallottb-20130516.pdf>

belongs to one side or the other. There is no western religious or cultural equivalent to moieties. Both Tlingit and Haida societies are matrilineal: all children belong to the moiety and clan of their mother. Every individual must marry someone from the opposite moiety. And moieties served to organize traditional ritual obligations such as potlatch and burial. In particular, the members of one clan would be responsible for carrying out the burial rituals for members of the opposite clan. But to say that the moieties are opposing sides is to misrepresent. Really, the function of the clans is to ensure complementarity and cooperation in a structured way.⁴

Each moiety is in turn organized into various clans. Each clan has a Tlingit or Haida name, of course, but also a crest that is always represented in ceremonial objects and symbolic representations. The crest also sometime serves as the English name: Thunderbird, Brown Bear, Killer Whale. While each clan has a historic place of origin, over time, and by way of intermarriage, each clan also has houses in many different communities. “Most clans are dispersed through a number of communities, but in any given community certain clans predominate for historical reasons. For example, *Kiks.adi Kaagwaantaan* and *L’ukaax-adi* are strong in Sitka; *Deisheetaan* and *Telkweidi* in Angoon... etc.

⁴ Nora Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer, “Introduction,” *Haa Tuwunáagu Yís, for Healing Our Spirit: Tlingit Oratory*, University of Washington Press, 1990

many as 60 or 70 clans at one time, but anthropologist Sergai Kan estimated seventeen or eighteen in the early 19th century.⁶

The final subdivision of society is the house group. Most basically, until the encounters of the 19th century, people resided in large clan houses in each community, and the house was fundamentally a part of an individual's identity. However, many individuals might be members of one clan but reside in another. For instance, traditionally newly married couples would reside with the husband's mother's brother, a senior member of his clan. If the husband's mother belonged to the Killer Whale clan, then the couple would reside there. The wife and children, though living in a Killer Whale House, were genealogically members of an opposite clan. Likewise, of course, an individual could be a member of a house group even if he or she did not reside in the house. So the house group can also be understood as a kinship identity. As the house group grew in numbers, the members might separate and begin a new house, still related to the old. And sometimes a house might expand in population and stature and take on the status of a clan.⁷

Ceremonial totems prominently displayed in front of the house marked the heritage of the clan. Thus Tlingit society is very structured and highly complex. Each individual belonged specifically to a house, clan, and moiety. Yet each person was also proud to be a son or daughter of the father's clan. Most often he or she would marry a member of the father's clan. All of *Tlingit Aani* was and is related in one way or another, and any Tlingit individual would be able to find clan relatives no matter where he or she travelled.⁸

⁶ Kan, *Memory Eternal*,

⁷ Kan, *Memory Eternal*, Ch. 1.

⁸ Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer.

Tlingit social organization is also very formal, with a significance and importance placed on acknowledging structure and ancestry. Each clan and house is represented by heraldic crests displayed on totem poles, canoes, feast dishes, house posts, weavings, jewelry, and other ceremonial objects. These representations, *at'ooow*, are owned collectively by the clan, and house, not by a leader or by any individual.

The Potlatch

A central event in Northwest Coast society is the potlatch. In the simplest terms, the potlatch is a ceremonial event celebrated by the giving away of goods to the guests. Most importantly, when someone died, the members of the opposite clan would perform the death rituals. A year after a death, the relatives of the deceased were obligated to have a potlatch to thank the members of the opposite house who had helped carry out these rituals. But the potlatch was a ceremonial event that could be celebrated for any number of occasions. A great chief might invite other clans to a potlatch to impress upon them the vastness of his wealth by giving away vast amounts of goods, including ceremonial objects, carvings, tools, food, blankets, etc. A potlatch might celebrate a coming of age, or a marriage.

The population of what is now Southeast Alaska included people residing in several towns, and included slave populations drawn from other clans of as well as other tribes. An estimated ninety percent of the population died during the 1800s from smallpox; and other diseases arrived as well, including typhoid, measles, and syphilis, affecting many more inhabitants.

Where did the Tlingit and other Northwest Coast peoples come from

Tsimshian, Haida, and Tlingit all trace their origins to the interior of British Columbia and tell stories of their ancestors moving down the Nass and Skeena rivers to the coast.

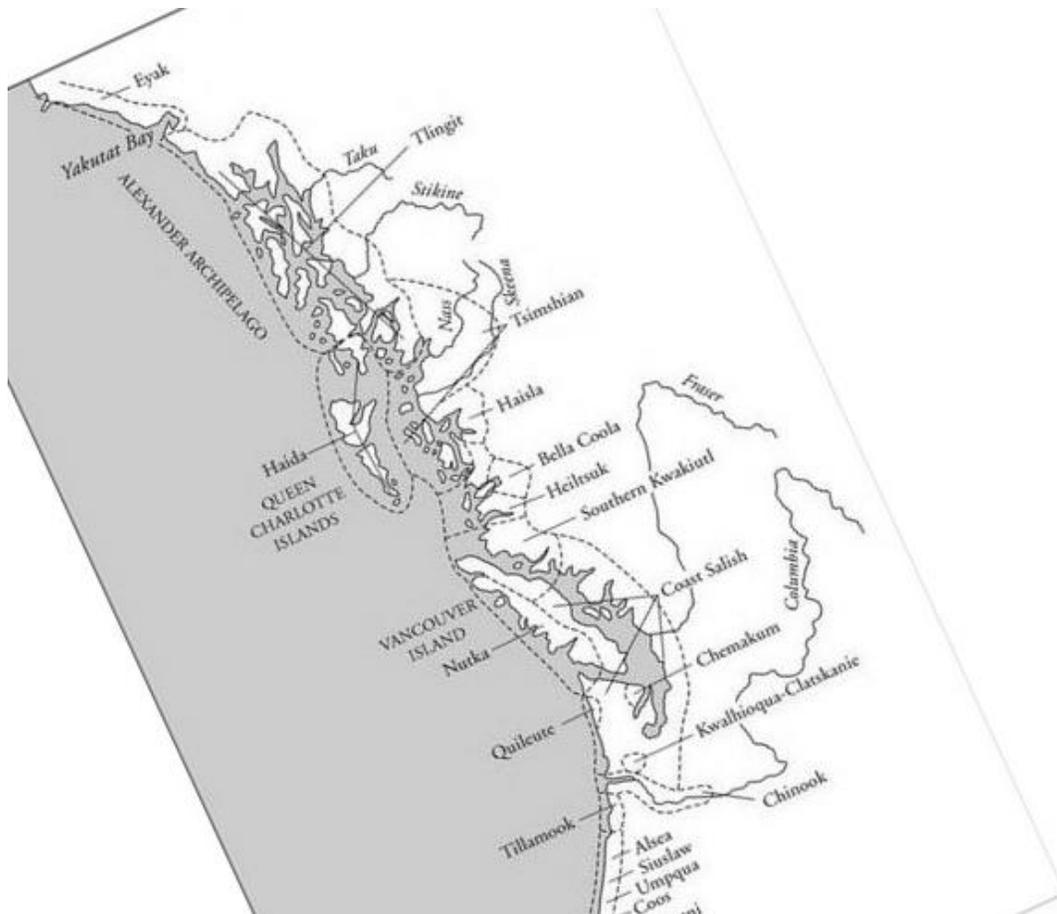


Figure 1 Linguistic Groups of NW coast, Grinev, Tlingit Indians in Russian America

Archeologists discovered the remains of an ancient fishing weir off the coast of *Haida Gwaii*, the homeland of the Haida people in British Columbia, and later shown to be 13,700 years old. This ancient subsistence site proves that the Haida and other Northwest Coast people have inhabited the area for much longer than was once commonly supposed.⁹ With their ability to utilize the abundant range of coastal resources, the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian developed complex societies with highly developed political organizations that survived the early

⁹ <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/bc-researchers-may-have-found-earliest-site-of-human-habitation-in-canada/article20737278/>

incursions by the Russians, and the incursions by the Americans and the appropriation of their Native lands and resources.

Tlingit scholars and anthropologists agree that the development of recognizable Northwest Coast traditions began over 5,000 years ago, while the classic Tlingit culture was in place by 500 years ago. “Tlingit oral traditions emphasize the migration of the ancestors of the nineteenth century clans from the interior of Alaska and British Columbia.”¹⁰

As populations in the area of the Skeena River expanded, clans moved out., while the Haida settled the Queen Charlotte Islands, and the Tsimshian remained on or near the mainland. The Tlingit generally continued to migrate to the north. The Haida spread out in what is now *Haida Gwaii*, the Haida homelands, the islands called the Queen Charlottes by the British.¹¹ Continuing population increases led a part of the northern Haida to expand further, moving north from *Haida Gwaii* in about 1730 into a region occupied by the Tlingit, establishing villages in the southern half of Prince of Wales Island.¹² The group of Haida that split off was called the Kaigani. “Attesting to the fact that the Tlingit lived on this land before the Kaigani, according to Grinev and Krause, “are the Tlingit names for the Kaigani villages, including *Kasaan*. ‘lovely village’ and *Sukkwáan*, ‘grassy village.’ ”¹³ With the movement of the Haida from the south, some Tlingit clans moved from Prince of Wales Island to the coast of the mainland, where they displaced and partly assimilated the Dené population.¹⁴ As the Tlingit continued to move north along the coast, they continued to mix with and displace their Dené neighbors, *Tsetsaut*, *Tahltan*,

¹⁰ Sergai Kan, *Memory Eternal, Tlingit Culture and Russian Orthodox Christianity through Two Centuries*. University of Washington Press, 1999; Frederica de Laguna, *Under Mount Saint Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972.1990, 20

¹¹ named the Queen Charlottes by the British, and officially renamed *Haida Gwaii* in 2010

¹² Andrei V. Grinev, *The Tlingit Indians in Russian America, 1741-1867*, Translated by Richard L. Bland and Katerina G. Solovjova, U. of Nebraska Press, 2005 .p. 18-19, citing Krause 1956:206.

¹³ Grinev, *Tlingit* citing Krause and Swanton 1908:408.

¹⁴ Grinev, *Tlingit*, p. 4-6

Taku (Taku-Tine), Tagish, and Tutchone some of whom had attempted moves from their inland strongholds to the coast. For example, the Chilkat village of Klukwan, was still an Athapaskan settlement as recently as 300 years ago.¹⁵ Likewise, according to Grinev, Tlingit migrating from the southeast as early as the second half of the 18th century began to assimilate the southern Tutchone from the Dry Bay area, and some Ahtna Athapaskans, and Eyak in the region of Yakutat Bay. Grinev theorizes that pressure from the Tlingit led to the resettlement of the Eyaks to the right bank of the Copper River. As noted by Grinev, “the data of linguistic analysis of the Tlingit language also corroborates that the bearers of this language moved northward, taking the language with them.”¹⁶

Population

The population of the area that is now Southeast Alaska may have been 25,000 to 30,000 at its height in the 18th century. The population given in 1805 by the Russian Lisianskii was 10,000. Of course, anytime you see a large round number, it is obviously a rough estimate. In 1806, Russian America company functionary Rezanov produced an estimate based on information taken by promyshlenniki of Tlingit settlement known to the Russians. His list is more than 10,000 fighting men— and this did not include southern Tlingit. This suggests a total population of 25,000 -30,000. And this was after a number of disease epidemics.¹⁷

The ravages of disease before European encounters are hard to tally, though undoubtedly diseases reached the NW coast before outsiders themselves. An English explorer in 1787 noted pockmarks on Indian faces, but none of the faces of children younger than twelve, thus deducing

¹⁵ Grinev, *Tlingit*, p. 18-20, citing Kalervo Oberg, *The Social Economy of the Tlingit Indians*, Seattle, U. Washington Press, 1973.

¹⁶ Grinev. *Tlingit*, 18-20

¹⁷ Grinev, *Tlingit*, p 28

an epidemic around the time that the first Spanish explorer reached the Alexander Archipelago in 1775. A chief later told Klebnikov about the epidemic and that only one or two people from each family had survived.¹⁸

Trade

The Tlingit people traded extensively with other people of the Northwest Coast. They also controlled important trade routes across the coastal ranges into the Interior, and guarded them to maintain a monopoly on trade in furs from the interior. The Chilkoot controlled trails leading from current Dyea and Skagway. Meanwhile, the Chilkat people of Klukwan controlled the trail now traversed by the highway from Haines to Haines Junction, into the territory of the Thaltan and on to the middle Yukon River at Fort Selkirk. Similar passes linked tidewater with the interior through the Taku Inlet, south of Juneau, leading to the Taku River valley and the Stikine River valley, from Wrangell.

The major trade Tlingit trade item was oil from small fish called euchalon, or colloquially hooligan, which is also known as the candle fish because it is so rich in oil. The oil from these fish was so important to interior tribes food, and for heat and light that the trading routes have been called grease trails. Tlingit and Haida also had access to the long, thin, and hollow dentalium shells that were highly prized in the interior, and functioned almost as currency. Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian traded the oil and dentalium shells, cedar baskets, and smoked seafood for furs from the Dené.¹⁹ The Dene tribes like the *Tsetsaut*, *Tahltan*, *Taku (Taku-Tine)*, Tagish, and Tutchone in the interior had access to vast forests of woodland furs like beaver, muskrat, wolf, and wolverine, and also to caribou and moose hides which they tanned and

¹⁸ Grinev, *Tlingit*, p 93

¹⁹ UW archives, "Tlingit Trade"

manufactured into skin clothing, and moccasins decorated with porcupine quills. They also manufactured birch wood bows wrapped with porcupine gut, leather thongs and sinews, and snowshoes.²⁰ In addition, it seems the coastal people found iron, perhaps in beach detritus from wrecked ships, and forged it into tools. Native copper was also a prized commodity and trade item. There were at least two native sources of copper, one in the White River drainage, in the Yukon Territory, and one in the territory of the Ahtna on the Copper River. Copper from these sources was traded widely.²¹

From the coast, “goods were taken in canoes upriver as far as possible, then switched into male slaves' backpacks made of a large basket with shoulder and forehead straps, holding 100 pounds or more. In large groups, women carried packs weighing about 65 pounds, and saddle bags on dogs held up to 25 pounds. A wise trader always included a shrewd elderly woman to act as bargainer and to keep track of exchange values.”²²

“Tlingit also traded among themselves. For example, to island peoples, men and women from mainland Tlingit villages traded rabbit or marmot skin blankets, moose hide shirts, skin trousers with feet, dressed hides, cranberries in oil, pressed strawberry cakes, candlefish oil, horn spoons, woven blankets, and spruce root baskets. In return, islanders gave sea otter pelts, dried venison, seal oil, dried fish (halibut, salmon, herring), dried seaweed, clams, mussels, sea urchins, herring spawn, cedar bark, baskets, greenstone, and yew wood for bows, boxes, and batons.”²³ Tlingit women wove impermeable spruce root baskets “in great demand among neighboring tribes.”²⁴ The Tlingit worked the native copper, which they acquired from the

²⁰ UW archives “Tlingit Trade” <http://content.lib.washington.edu/aipnw/miller1.html#trade>

²¹ H. Kory Cooper, “Arctic Archeometallurgy,” *Oxford Handbook of the Prehistoric Arctic*.

²² UW archives “Tlingit Trade” <http://content.lib.washington.edu/aipnw/miller1.html#trade>

²³ UW Archives, “Tlingit Trade”

²⁴ Grinev, *Tlingit*, p. 30

Ahtna, Dené people on the Copper River, heating it and striking it with hammers. The Yakutat Tlingit in particular, those in closest proximity to the Ahtna, created arrow, spear, and harpoon points, knife blades, needles, hooks and ornaments, and created the large copper shields called *tinaa*, or coppers, which were an ultimate display of wealth. Abundant resources ensured large surpluses which underwrote the accumulation of wealth, and development of arts.

Northern Tlingit traded copper and copper objects to the Haida and Tsimshian for slaves, canoes, and carved items, as well as dentalium shells. They also traded mountain goat horns for buckets and spoons, and goat's wool for weaving. The southern Tlingit obtained large war canoes from the Haida.

Eventually, Tlingit individuals intermarried with Inland peoples, in the area that is now Carcross, and Tagish Lake, while others colonized Atlin and Tetlin, B.C. The clan system spread along with the people, with the Tagish and others adopting it. The clan system facilitated marriage arrangements, trading partnerships, and ceremonial participation far to the East into Gwich'in, Ahtna, and Koyukon territory. Did the Athabascan speaking people in the Interior adopt the clans from the Tlingit? The answer to that seems to be unknown.

The Tlingit and Haida lifeways, with clan structure, matrilineal descent, large extended families living in large clan houses, were entirely outside of the normative idea of a nuclear family and individual property that was pushed on them by American missionaries. American missionaries, brought western education, and then particularly in Sitka, insisted their students and graduates separate themselves from the clan structure, and live in nuclear families in a specially constructed western-style village surrounding the school. In Canada, the government actually outlawed the potlatches. (I discuss missionaries, Christianization, and education, and indigenous reaction and resistance in a later chapter.)

Encounters and engagement

The Tlingit were never conquered by the Russians. Instead they continuously and vigorously resisted Russian incursions. Before reading a newly translated work by Russian anthropologist Andrei Grinev I had been kind of ambiguous: I knew that the Tlingit were not enslaved as were the Aleut, but I did not understand the background. I had focused my teaching on the Battles for Sitka in 1802 and 1804, and on the different points of view about just what happened during that battle, the background of the battle, and the reasons that Tlingit attacked the Russian post. But pulling back to events even before Sitka provides even more context.



Figure 2 A copper shield, a principal trade item between NW coastal peoples.

Grinev supplies a lot of details from his own readings of the Russian primary documents. For this reason, I am quoting extensively.

Prior to encounters and engagements with the Russians

“By the time Spanish explorer Malaspina made contact with the Tlingit in Yakutat [in 1779] the Tlingit were already well acquainted with English traders. They had European axes, pots, even three books and a silver spoon, as well as Spanish clothing and the young Indians knew several English words.”

Malaspina’s ships remained in Yakutat from May until July. The Spanish were apparently not interested in trade, only in juridically claiming territory.”²⁵

According to outsiders, the Tlingit and Haida both had very war-like reputations even prior to contact with representatives of European and American powers. They attacked to secure

²⁵ Grinev, *Tlingits in Russian America*

access to resources and to secure the boundaries of their territories, and to claim specific prestige objects. “The Haida went to war to acquire objects of wealth, such as coppers and Chilkat blankets, that were in short supply on the islands, but primarily for slaves, who enhanced their productivity or were traded to other tribes. High-ranking captives were also the source of other property received in ransom such as crest designs, dances and songs.”²⁶

“The Haida were feared along the coast because of their practice of making lightning raids against which their enemies had little defense. Their great skills of seamanship, their superior craft and their relative protection from retaliation in their island fortress added to the aggressive posture of the Haida towards neighboring tribes. Diamond Jenness, an early anthropologist at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, described the Haida as the "Indian Vikings of the North West Coast":

*Those were stirring times, about a century ago, when the big Haida war canoes, each hollowed out of a single cedar tree and manned by fifty or sixty warriors, traded and raided up and down the coast from Sitka in the north to the delta of the Fraser River in the south. Each usually carried a shaman or medicine man to catch and destroy the souls of enemies before an impending battle; and the women who sometimes accompanied the warriors fought as savagely as their husbands.*²⁷

Defending their territory

Tlingit and Haida both were well established to defend their resources and territory. When the Russians arrived, Baranov with perhaps 700 of his Unangan and Sugpiaq hunters in

²⁶ Canadian Museum of History
<http://www.historymuseum.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/aborig/haida/happr01e.shtml>

²⁷ Canadian Museum

hundreds of baidarkas, the Tlingit must have known what their intent was. In fact, Baranov had already sent his hunters out from his base in Kodiak to hunt sea otters further and further east throughout Chugach territory, in Prince William Sound and Eyak territory at the mouth of the Copper River, approaching the territory of the Tlingit in Yakutat.

Russian Invasions

I think the story of continuing Tlingit resistance to the Russians is an important one. This part is mostly poorly digested notes from Grinev, who bases his account on Russian sources. I have yet to digest this into a narrative. As a beginning, I have tried to pin down the chronology. There is also a wealth of information on the Battles for Sitka specifically, from both the Russian and Tlingit sides, as well as other observers, in the book by Nora and Richard Dauenhauer, and Lydia Black. Anóoshi lingít aaní ká = Russians in Tlingit America: the battles of Sitka, 1802 and 1804. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008.) which I have yet to add.

One Russian ship wintered in Prince William Sound (which Grinev calls Chugach Bay) in 1783, where the local Sugpiaq told them about the Tlingit to the east. Then in 1788 two Russian captains set out from Kodiak to explore the NW coast, with expeditions visiting Yakutat and Lituya bays, the northwestern most settlements of the Tlingit. Relationships were apparently friendly and the Russians were able to trade for furs, and obtain two slaves -one apparently from Kodiak.²⁸ The Russian captains attempted to cement relations by giving the Yakutat chief a portrait of the Russian tsarevich. But according to de Laguna, the man they supposed was a Yakutat chief was “rather a chief of very high rank of the Chilkat *Gaanaxteidí* visiting Yakutat, probably to trade.”²⁹

“The members of the expedition and Governor-General Yakobi, as well as Shelikhov himself, assumed that the Tlingit, having accepted the national coats of arms, were now subject to the Russian Empire.”³⁰ Needless to say that was not the understanding of the Tlingit

²⁸ Grinev, p e86 [e-pages refer to electronic edition]

²⁹ Grinev e86

³⁰ Grinev

It can be assumed that the Russian copper coat of arms was accepted by the Indians as a clan totem of the Russians or as a valuable adornment (of the rare metal copper). The Tlingit may have considered the solemnly given portrait of the heir apparent Pavel as that of a god of the newcomers—*Ilkak*, in his turn, presented the Russians with an iron amulet in the form of the head of *Yel*, the Raven;³¹

In 1792 Baranov himself led an exploring expedition to Prince William Sound, with 150 two-hole hole baidarkas with 300 hunters. Yakutat Tlingit and Eyak allies attacked the Russians who were encamped on Hinchinbrook Island. The Russians retaliated with firearms but Tlingit all wore armor; Baranov was nearly killed.³² In a classic understatement Grinev says, “this first clash with the Tlingit showed the Russians that they were dealing with a serious opponent.” And according to Grinev, “no legend about this clash survived among Yakutat’s into the 20th century, or there are no Tlingit oral histories of this clash (though I have not confirmed or refuted this.)”³³

In 1793 Baranov sent a first hunting party to Yakutat, and then in 1794 Baranov a larger hunting party with more than 500 baidarkas and about 1,000 Alutiiq directed by only ten Russians.³⁴ It’s important to note that the Russians were disregarding any property or resource rights of the Yakutat tribes, a fact brought up by the Yakutat Chief in negotiations that was witnessed by an officer of Vancouver’s expedition who wrote: “The Chief of the Yakutat people used all his eloquence for defining the precise extent of the boundaries of their land, and indicating the injustice of the Russians who killed and carried away from there the sea otters.”³⁵ In 1796 Baranov went so far as to establish a fort at Yakutat. By the time the Russians began to

³¹ Grinev e86-87

³² Grinev e87

³³ Grinev, e90

³⁴ Grinev, e90

³⁵ Grinev, citing Vancouver 1833:5:438

expand to the east, beginning in 1796- to Yakutat and Sitka, they had thoroughly enslaved the Aleut. Thus Shelikov was able to send 80 Russians including women and children to attempt to plant a colony in Yakutat.

Meanwhile, British and American Traders were also trading in the Inside Passage, making their way from the south, where both had already been trading on the Columbia River mouth. Perhaps as many as fifteen American ships reached Northwest coast in late 1780s, while until the mid-1790s British were Tlingit chief trading partners. On his expedition in 1793-94, George Vancouver noted that the Indians were already very familiar with European goods, and had rifles, carbines and pistols. Vancouver also remarked on Indians warlike character, and that firearms made them more dangerous. He also noted that the Indians, presumably Tlingit and Haida, were adept at playing off the English against the Americans. The British ostensibly recognized Russia's international rights to the territory, and negotiated with them for trading rights, but the Americans did not bother with those niceties, and traded on their own. Plus, the British were restricted by their own monopolistic encumbrances, with trade rights granted only to chartered trading companies. The Americans were not limited by monopolistic restrictions, and each captain traded on his own. Both the British and the Americans had a greater variety of goods than the Russians. And in point of fact, both knew that there was little to stop their activities, as the Russians were undermanned, and the tail end of an extremely long supply chain. For all these reasons, after 1795 the Americans became the chief trading partners of the Tlingit.³⁶

The Americans now supplied broadcloth, cooking utensils, kettles, knives, guns, and fatefully, alcohol. The Tlingit told the American captains that they would not trade if they did not bring guns, they would not trade even one otter. American captains even engaged in the slave

³⁶ Grinev 114

trade, “buying Indian slaves at the mouth of the Columbia River, and trading them to the Tlingit and Tsimshian. Sometimes they bought and sold Hawaiians, particularly women.”³⁷

Further, while the Russians looking after their long term interests, were prohibited from trading guns, ammunition, and alcohol, the Independent American captains observed no such restraints. But, while the Americans had more goods and favorable prices, they did not work at showing the appropriate respect, they did not even try to be diplomatic it was ever man for himself. Overall, “both sides wanted to maintain mutually profitable connections.”³⁸

Nevertheless, the Indians also sometimes attacked the American traders.³⁹ However it’s important to remember that among all indigenous people, tribes and clans were able to maintain trade with others, even when the relationships sometimes devolved into violence.

Through this period, the Russians had almost no trade, because they had no goods. The Sitka outpost in particular was at the tail end of a long, long, supply chain from Russia. Russian trade goods came all the way from European Russia, and had to be transported overland over all of Siberia to the coast, and then transferred to ships for the journey to American coast. Many ships went down on the voyage across the North Pacific. In fact, the Russians often simply purchased goods from the Americans and the British.⁴⁰ But it’s also important to remember that the Russians did not really believe in trade, they believed in iasuk and bestowing gifts on the one hand, and in simply poaching the resources on the other. While Grinev says the Russians “preferred to buy furs from dependent nations at a lower cost,” that is truly an obfuscation, as the Russians did not buy furs from the Aleut, they forced them to hunt on Tlingit lands for them. The

³⁷ Grinev 115

³⁸ Grinev, quoting R Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774–1890*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1977

³⁹ Grinev, p. 115, citing Fisher, 1977:47, and Kan

⁴⁰ Grinev, e 115-116

Russians were not interested in buying the sea otter furs from the Tlingit because they had set their Aleut hunters to stealing the resource. The otters were the primary item that the Tlingit traded with the Americans and British. It is no wonder that there was tremendous enmity between the Tlingit on the one hand, and the Unangan and Sugpiaq hunters on the other.

Battles for Sitka

And then in 1799, Baranov sent a flotilla of 550 *baidarkas* along with two ships to found a Russian colony there. They immediately lost 30 *baidarkas*, and then 30 Russian *partovshchiki* (hunting party leaders who directed the Aleuts in the hunt.)⁴¹ On a return trip from Sitka to Yakutat, 135 Aleut hunters died from shellfish poisoning at a place they later named Peril Strait. Still they delivered 1,500 sea otter furs. [There was also an epidemic raging on Kodiak and on the Kenai peninsula and in Yakutat.]

Baranov claimed to have actually paid the Sitka Chiefs for the parcel of land on which he began building his fort in 1799. Baranov seems to have been cautious with the Tlingit, Grinev calls them militant well-armed and dangerous. He gave gifts especially to the chief of the Sitka *Kiks.adi* lineage. Baranov had his men build a few rudimentary buildings, and then left a garrison there with twenty-five or thirty Russians and fifty-five Unangan and Suqpiak men and a few of their wives. Of course this large body of men had to hunt and fish to sustain themselves, in addition to continuing to poach otters. Meanwhile area, and British and American traders were in the area, while the Russian supply ship had been lost.⁴²

In the end, it is not the facts of the battles, or the proximate circumstances that matter, the fact was that the Tlingit prepared, organized and carried out a massive attack on the Russian

⁴¹ Grinev e111

⁴² Lydia Black, *Russians in Alaska*, p156-157.

Garrison in 1802, which drove the Russians out of Sitka. Baranov must have been furious. He went back to Kodiak, and prepared for a return. In the end he was successful at retaking Sitka, and reestablishing his post. The Sitka Tlingit who had resisted, gave up their fort and melted into the forest in the middle of the night. Much has been written about the two battles for Sitka, which have been documented from both the Tlingit and Russian perspectives, especially in the book *Russians in Tlingit America* by Nora and Richard Dauenhauer and Lydia Black.⁴³

There were many provocations which might have induced the Tlingit to attack the Russian fort. While sea otter pelts were the primary item that the Tlingit traded with the Americans and British, the Russians had set their Aleut hunters to stealing the resource. The Russians were not only plundering the otters, but also hunting and fishing in Tlingit territory, to support themselves with fish and meat. They also plundered Indian graves, and the promyshlenniki disrespected the Tlingit and were accused of stealing women and young girls.⁴⁴

Grinev says the neighboring Tlingit blamed the Sitka Tlingit for allowing the Russians to settle in their territory, accusing them of turning themselves into slaves: A Sitka Tlingit was mocked at a Chilkat potlatch, saying the Russians were disgracing his clan. But there were other provocations as well. For one thing, many sources refer to “Russians” when they mean Sugpiaq Aleut, or perhaps Unangan Aleut. Kan says that the Koniag killed several Sitka leaders to avenge the deaths of their compatriots from poisoned shellfish, which they attributed to shamanism. So it in an indirect way, it was partly a revenge battle between two Indigenous groups.⁴⁵

⁴³ Nora, Dauenhauer, Richard Dauenhauer, and Lydia Black. *Anóoshi lingít aani ká = Russians in Tlingit America: the battles of Sitka, 1802 and 1804*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008.

⁴⁴ Grinev, 123

⁴⁵ Cited in Grinev, e124.

By the time the Russians attempted to reinforce their claim by planting a colony in Sitka, they were facing a different balance of power than they faced in the Aleutians in the 1750s to 1780s. By the end of the 18th century, the Tlingit themselves already had guns, and even cannons. The Russians did not have enough arms or manpower to force the Tlingit into slavery, as they had the Unangan and Sugpiaq. And they faced the anti-Russian agitation of several American traders, who would not have been unhappy to see the Russians ousted from their fort.⁴⁶ Then there were American deserters who had jumped ship and were taken into RAC service by Baranov. “trading friends- the Americans, and Oppressors, the Russians.” But also, some of the American sailors joined the Tlingit in attacking the fort.⁴⁷

The number of Tlingit who attacked was no fewer than 1,000, and perhaps as many as 1,500. The Tlingit chiefs had met the previous winter and planned the joint attack. Something like the Pueblo revolt.⁴⁸

Baranov returned to his potential Sitka Colony in 1804 with 120 Russians, and 900 hunters, in 400 *baidarkas*. The unstable union of the Kwaans which had pushed out the Russians had not fallen apart, but was riven with interclan and intercommunity enmity. Some of the clans closer to Yakutat made a truce with the Russians. Russians took the son of one of the chiefs hostage, *Amanat*- voluntary hostage. This is very middle ages stuff. It is also in Game of Thrones.⁴⁹ Eventually, some of the Tlingit came back to settle around the fort, to take advantage of trade opportunities. Grinev has a quote from Klebnikov:

⁴⁶ Grinev, e125.

⁴⁷ Grinev, e127-128

⁴⁸ Grinev, e127-8

⁴⁹ Grinev, p. 132 [e 119]-

“They repeat that we occupied the place where their ancestors lived, deprived them of their gains from hunting animals, and use the best places to catch fish. We, on the other hand, think that we brought them opportunity to sell their products for a profit, provide them with necessary things, and demonstrate cultivation and the use of potatoes and other things.”⁵⁰

Tlingit adaptation and continuing resistance

Tlingit only uneasily accepted Russian hegemony even after Baranov re-established their trading station at *Novo-Arkhangel'sk*, New Archangel, or Sitka. While there were ups and downs in their relationships with the Tlingit, Russians were always living uneasily in Tlingit territory. They were forced to operate the post as a garrison, behind a wall, with guards, and towers with cannons. They lived in fear. It was not long before they had virtually hunted out the sea otters, so their source of profits was continually declining. Despite efforts to broaden their economy, they never developed a true source of support for their colony. Further, they had a difficult time supplying the colony, as supplies, like wheat, from their parent Russian America Company had to be shipped across Siberia from European Russia. Thus, it seems that the only point to the colony was to maintain Russian claims to colonial territory. This was complicated by their need to obtain food and supplies from American and British traders. Eventually they did establish an outpost at Fort Ross on the California coast, but efforts there to grow enough to supply Sitka were unsuccessful.

There were many instances of Tlingit resistance in the period 1824 -1860, and attempts to curtail Russian hunting and limit trading. Grinev, quoting Russian sources repeats phrases like “peaceful attempts to acculturate them,” “manifest insolence,” and “dirty tricks.” During

⁵⁰ Grinev, p. 151 citing Khlebnikov 1985:185

this whole period, even when the Russians stopped sending their Aleuts out to hunt otters in Tlingit territory, they were still sending them out hunting and fishing for their own sustenance, and to maintain the Russian settlement.⁵¹

“According to Kan’s sources, the theft of firewood that belonged to the RAC was, from the Tlingit point of view, a distinct form of revenge and compensation for the various offenses and insults that the Russians had committed earlier, especially those regarding Indian women.”⁵² Also according to Grinev, “Pacifying the Tlingit after 1855 was achieved not only by the transferring of a new military contingent to *Novo-Arkhangel’sk* but by the epidemic of typhoid fever that struck in 1857,” a plague that continued till May, 1858.⁵³

“Despite the nature of relations between the Russians and the Tlingit, the latter never considered themselves subjects of the Russian Empire and were convinced of the fact that Southeast Alaska belonged to them. They viewed the Russians only as “newcomers” and not as countrymen—and even less as masters of the land.⁵⁴ After learning that the Russians had sold Alaska to the Americans, the Tlingit chiefs gathered to protest this act because, in their opinion, the Russians did not have the right to “sell the country of the Tlingit.”⁵⁵

⁵¹ Grinev

⁵² Grinev, e173, citing Kan 1999:142.

⁵³ Grinev e176

⁵⁴ Grinev citing Golovin 1863b:330; Kostlivtsov 1863:238

⁵⁵ Grinev, e179 citing Drucker 1965:207.