

Tlingit Protocols: Forming a Tlingit World View

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Respect is at the heart of Tlingit protocol. Well-defined codes of Tlingit ceremonial protocols and practices are dictated by ancient customs, traditions, and oral tradition. These protocols have historically been taught by Tlingit parents, elders, uncles, grandparents, and clan leaders.



As they entered their teenage years, brothers and sisters were separated and were not allowed to see or speak to one another. They were assigned their own teachers. These educators were almost always close relatives.



Tlingit people are taught to speak with sensitivity, as thoughtless and careless use of words will harm the unity of the family, clan, and can harm other relationships. Words are powerful; they can cause trouble and unrest. The expression used to describe this concept is *Shx'adaat bundat*, which means “to weigh your words with care.” A Tlingit clan is required to pay damages to others for verbal or other errors of its clan members.



When a *Ch'áak'* speaks to a *Yéil*, the dialogue should always begin: “*Chaa kaa*, brother.” A *Ch'áak'* is a member of the Eagle moiety; *Yéil* is Raven. The term *Chaa* is used when addressing your wife's brother.

In the Klawock area, *Chaa* refers to one's brother-in-law. In many areas however, *Chaa* is a term only used for one's wife's brothers. The salutation is used as a special term of endearment.



When a *Ch'áak'* woman speaks to a *Yéil* woman, the latter person must be addressed with the proper kin relationship. These terms may include aunt (*ax aat*), my father's sister (*ax eesh*) and other terms. *Yéil* women must speak to *Ch'áak'* females in the same manner.



When a *Yéil* man is speaking seriously to a clan brother, it is proper to address the clan brother using the following phrase: “*An ax yakaamu.*” This means “my respected and worthy brother,” and will properly convey the gravity of the message. Northern Tlingit use this term for those adopted as clan brothers and for Tlingits of the interior.



Tlingit women from the same clan may address each other informally as “*An ax shaawat*”—my tribal or clan sister



A clan brother-in-law is usually chosen as a facilitator or moderator of the host clan during Potlatches and other Tlingit ceremonies. He is *gunateknaayi*, (**literal translation needed—an assistant from the opposite clan?**) as are the guests. This person is specifically chosen for his relationship with his relatives by marriage. They can take the liberty of joking with him.



When a Tlingit clan member dies, the bereaved clan requests members of an opposite clan (*gunateknaayi*) to assist them with all arrangements and memorials. Specific protocol is observed in the execution of a Tlingit estate. Tlingit law requires that a male's estate and ceremonial regalia be inherited by clan relatives rather than his children, who are of the opposite clan. A wife's estate is inherited by her children, who are of her own clan. This includes ceremonial regalia.



The clan is responsible for its clan houses. The rebuilding of a clan house occurs at the request of the *gunateknaayi*. The opposite clan is contracted and its members are rewarded in ceremony by clan house caretakers and occupants.



Should misconduct occur during a ceremonial, the host will rise. Out of respect for the host clan, the clan emblem or crest will be ritually presented or the imitation of a clan sound will be aired until proper behavior is restored.



Tlingit protocol requires the acceptance of invitations or gifts. Tlingit do not use the expression, “No thank you” as it is considered disrespectful.



When a Tlingit meets someone he or she does not know, they will ask: “What is your name? Who is your tribe and clan?” When this information has been given, the person can be respectfully addressed.



During a ceremonial event, a person is robed by *guneitkanaayi* participating in the activity and thereby can be acknowledged properly in the ceremony.



During ceremonials, a speech must have a response. Thus when oratory is being delivered, guests encourage and show respect for the speaker verbally. Responses may include “*Gunalchéesh*” (thank you), “*Áwé*” (that is it), or “*Yeikgwati*” (it shall be so) and other phrases. This practice also emphasizes the Tlingit tradition of balance and reciprocity.



Traditional Tlingit marriage practice dictates that a Yéil marry a Ch'áak' or that the inverse occur. Parents were involved in finding the proper match. A preferred type of traditional marriage was between a son and his father's niece. Within this type of union, no material things left the household; all remained within the family.

If someone of one moiety marries another member of the same moiety, it is regarded as though a brother and sister had married. In the past, marriage to someone of your own moiety was considered a kind of witchcraft. Death might be the consequence.



The clan selects an Elder, called *Naa shu ban*, as its spokesperson.



A clan selects a caretaker for the clan regalia. Clan owned regalia is not for sale.



There was a time when clan ownership included hunting territories and berry picking areas. These parcels of land were not utilized by non-clan members. If a transgression occurred, restitution was expected of those who had violated clan policy.



The world of nature is respected by the Tlingit. Unkind remarks toward non-human beings, to the land, or toward the cosmos will eventually bring punishment upon the person who violates these principles.



It is better to speak kindly. If you do not have anything good to say, your thoughts are better left unspoken.



Clan members should know their clan history and family relationships. This knowledge creates comfort during ceremonials and enriches the protocol of the event for the observer or participant.



Brothers must be respectful and kind to their sister's husband or future husband. They must demonstrate their affection for this man by offering him gifts. This underscores their love for their sister as well.



Tlingit clans own specific songs. Other clans who wish to sing these songs must obtain permission. Each clan owns many objects and properties, each of which requires appropriate protocol when used or addressed.



There are particular facets of Lingit culture which command respect, dignity, and honor of a sacred nature. These aspects of Lingit culture are never to be spoken of lightly or dealt with carelessly. The Tlingit term that best describes this concept is *ka kwlitsígwaa*.



When speaking of your own *du shuká* (clan crests) and other clan owned items, do not include reference to another clan's territory or property informally or casually. The other clan may jokingly admonish you, embarrassing you for your mistake if you violate these principles.



At.óow ceremonial property including clan crests and items like *naaxein* (Chilkat robe), *kaayakóot'i x'óow* (wool robes), *shakee.át* (dance hat with

ermine tails) are used only during ceremonial events unless special permission has been granted.



On history: The general tribal and settlement history of Southeast Alaska is widely available for tourism, promotion, and education. Clan history and other Tlingit knowledge is classified as intellectual property, however, and is for clan use only.

Source: Celebration 2000, Restoring Balance Through Culture. Copyright 2000, Sealaska Heritage Institute.