

Athabasca University  Master of Arts - Integrated Studies

**GITKSAN CULTURAL RETENTION IN CHRISTIANIZED HOUSES AND
SPACE**

By

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Abstract

The Gitksan culture of the Northern British Columbia has survived in spite of religious and government assaults. Many First Nations have a pride towards their culture partly due to the early efforts of their elders who tried their best to resist assimilation. Yet in spite of assimilative methods and strategies of missionaries, the Gitksan took a proactive role in allowing the missionaries to assist them to cope with the expanding western institutions in British Columbia. Scholars such as Ronald Wright (1992)¹, Thomas Berger (1992)² and Elizabeth Furniss (1995)³ have centered their studies on the unequal relations that existed between various First Nations groups and Europeans. These interpretations serve to highlight the tragedies and the victimization of the Native/European experience, but specific studies of syncretism demonstrate that power was also shared within the colonizing process. In the Gitksan territory, the syncretism of culture and the acceptance of church ideals is demonstrated in the art and architecture within the contemporary reserve villages.

Introduction

The Gitksan were heavily influenced by the teachings of Methodist missionaries and that was made apparent in the transference of European building styles. The Gitksan sacrificed the traditional life in cedar longhouses, but evidence of traditional art and architectural forms still exist in all of the contemporary reserve villages. The Gitksan chose to embrace both cultures. Specifically, crest poles remained intact in front of European styled homes, many totem poles were never destroyed and memorials in graveyards started to take on aspects of Gitksan art. The retention of art forms was of extreme importance because they symbolized clan membership and organization. The

¹ Wright, Ronald. *Stolen Continents*. 1992. Penguin Books: Toronto.

² Berger, Thomas. *A Long and Terrible Shadow: White Values, Native Rights in the Americas. 1492-1992*. 1992. Douglas @ McIntyre: Vancouver.

³ Furniss, Elizabeth. "Resistance, Coercion, and Revitalization: The Shuswap Encounter with Roman Catholic Missionaries, 1860-1900". *Ethnohistory*. 42:2. 1995. 231-263.

power of the crest directly correlated to the status of a house or *wilp*. The loss of this important aspect of culture might have meant disaster for the survival of Gitksan culture if the chiefs were not as resistant as they were.⁴

The Gitksan lived in remarkable structures made of massive timbers hewn from red cedar. These large houses were visible reminders of a rich cultural technology that is no longer practiced. Only replicas exist as all original houses were abandoned. The Ksan historical village and museum at Hazelton, British Columbia showcases amazing examples of original art and housing styles.⁵ It is important to understand that the houses were not only structures that protected the occupants from the elements, but they represented the organization of families and clans. The Gitksan did not retain the longhouse, but the symbolic social organization purpose that is connected with it has remained as a cohesive cultural component. The ethnographic details like art forms and housing styles can be used to interpret the past, but the process of how these cultural details disappeared can also explain why historical social change dramatically affected the Gitksan. Early anthropologists, missionaries and traders have all lent their interpretations into the ethnographic record and that has provided a guideline for analyzing cultural shifts. The early missionaries were responsible for changing the Gitksan's life. Many aspects of their culture were lost, so I want to focus only on how their cultural space was affected. Where did they live and what did they live in, and how did they react to the missionaries wanting to change their cultural space? Through this

⁴ Adams, John W. *The Gitksan Potlatch: Population Flux, resource ownership and Reciprocity*. 1973. Holt, Rinehart and Winston: Montreal.42.

⁵ Ksan Historical Village. <http://www.ksan.org/>. April 10.2010.

specific study, we can understand how resistance to change helped the Gitksan to retain various cultural activities that are still practiced.

The Gitksan resisted assimilation when the missionaries came into their territory. When the Methodist missionaries introduced new Christianized settlements that were removed from traditional Gitksan village sites, a transformation started that ultimately led to cultural loss. The Gitksan transformation should be thought as being a continuum between two distinct poles: directed and non-directed change. The directed change was a direct attempt by the colonizers to assimilate the Gitksan. Non-directed change was how the Natives tried to adapt to new ways yet they still tried to keep traditions alive. David Nock contends that the Church Missionary Society tried to get the Ojibwa to administer their own congregations in 1868 and despite their intentions the innovation failed.⁶ The Gitksan were directed by the missionaries to accept total cultural replacement. Through non-directed change the Gitksan resisted total assimilation by combining new and old ways. Although the use of art was modest within the altered and Christianized space, some structures like gravehouses and totem poles were still being erected in spite of the condemnation of the missionaries.

For nearly twenty-five years Native historians have continually reiterated the notion that all Natives were helpless against the onslaught of western civilization.

Douglas Cole⁷, Ira Chaikin⁸, Tina Loo⁹ and J.R.Miller¹⁰ have all examined how the

⁶ Nock, David A. A Victorian Missionary and Canadian Indian Policy. 1988. Wilfred University Press: Waterloo.2.

⁷ Cole, Douglas and Ira Chaikin. *An Iron Hand upon the People: The Law against the Potlatch on the Northwest Coast*. 1990. Douglas & McIntyre. Vancouver.15.

⁸ Ibid.

potlatch in British Columbia came under assault, and in spite of colonial authority, the First nations continued to assert themselves, practicing potlatch in secret if necessary, and resisted assimilation.¹¹ More historians like Sarah Carter, Clarence Bolt and Jo-Ann Fiske are trying to show that Aboriginal people were able to react and act against government and religious initiatives that sought to eliminate the First Nation's culture.¹² This historical concept of Native agency relates to the survival of the Gitksan culture of Northern British Columbia. Celia Haig Brown has brought attention to the abuses of residential school by identifying how familial relationships and languages were destroyed.¹³ Jo-Ann Fiske also identifies the residential school as being instruments of colonial oppression, and students actively tried to subvert the rules as a way to cope with institutionalization.¹⁴ The acceptance of western civilization through missionary teachings was a sign that Natives sensed a massive cultural change. Rather than openly defying the missionaries, a more pragmatic approach was taken. New knowledge was needed to cope with the changing situation, because the Gitksan wanted to succeed within the new Canadian state.¹⁵ The Missionaries that worked with the Gitksan, like many missionaries who worked on the Northern Coast, had a sense of urgency to save

⁹ Loo, Tina. "Dan Cramer's Potlatch: Law as Coercion, Symbol, and Rhetoric in British Columbia, 1884-1951". *Canadian Historical Review*. 2, June 1992. 137.

¹⁰ Miller, J.R. "owen Glendower, Hotspur, and Canadian Indian Policy". *Sweet Promises: A Reader on Indian-White relations in Canada*. - 1991. University of Toronto Press. Toronto. 340.

¹¹ Brownlie, Robin and Mary-Ellen Kelm. " Desperately Seeking Absolution: Native Agency as Colonialist Alibi?". *Canadian Historical Review*, LXXV, 4, 1994.P 543-556. 544.

¹² Carter, Sarah. *Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers & Government Policy*. 1990, Kingston and Montreal; Clarence Bolt. *Shoes Too Small for Feet Too Large: Thomas Crosby and the Tsimshian*. 1992, Vancouver; Jo-Ann Fiske. "Gender and the Paradox of Residential Education in Carrier Society" in Jane S. Gaskell and Arlene Tigar McLaren. *Women in Education*. 2nd ed. 1991.Calgary.

¹³ Haig Brown, Celia. *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School*. 1988. Vancouver. 15-21.

¹⁴ Fiske. "Gender and the Paradox of Residential Education in Carrier Society".131-146.

¹⁵ Fisher,Robin. *Contact and Conflict*.1977,UBC Press: Vancouver.124.

the Native. In my analysis, the Gitksan participated in conversion in hopes of trying to assert their authority in face of the colonialism.

The Methodists were one of the first denominations to try to make contact with northern coastal tribes. The Gitksan embraced the Methodist faith provided that the relationship was consistent with their desire to change. In the 1880's, the government agencies had little control in the remote areas; as a result, Methodist missions could not afford to be heavy handed in demanding direct change of their new converts. Partnerships and trust had to be created to ensure the mission's success. The Gitksan borrowed ideas that seemed to 'make sense' in regards to adapting to the encroaching White society. A syncretism of ideas and beliefs has evolved since the relationship started. From as early as 1885, when Methodist missionary William Henry Pierce started the initial contact, the Gitksan way of life began to change dramatically. The Gitksan tried their best to adapt and would soon live in similar houses, share common public facilities and amenities with their Anglo-Canadian neighbors. The older villages were abandoned and entirely new locations were set-up to establish new Christianized villages. The missionaries were the first to get the Gitksan to move into more "civilized" living arrangements. They abandoned the longhouses, but they still tried to incorporate some art into their new surroundings.



Fig.1 Village of Kispiox, British Columbia 1909.¹⁶

¹⁶ George Thornton Emmons Collection. No.131. 1909. <http://content.lib.washington.edu/loc/image/NA3370.jpg>



Fig.2 Gitksan people at Hazelton. 1901.¹⁷

Methodology

The methodology will rely on a thematic reading of archived materials from missionaries and other contemporary observers. Secondary sources will be used in the analysis. The Methodist and later United Church missionaries were the main denominations of focus. The United Church Archives at the Vancouver School of Theology provided most of the sources for my research. In 1925, The Methodist church amalgamated into the United Church so all pre-1925 sources can be found there. My reading will emphasize evidence of the ways that the Gitksan resisted assimilation

¹⁷ BC Archives Call#e-08391.Gitksan people at Hazelton. 1901.

through the retention and use artistic forms and traditional activities in the Christianized landscape. I will follow an approach similar to that taken by historian Bruce Trigger. Trigger practices a qualitative form of archival analysis that begins with a well defined question and that is used to focus the analysis of all relevant research sources.¹⁸ Although, the missionary accounts may not represent Gitksan perspectives favorably, information on the reception of their ideas by their would be converts can be gleaned from their recorded successes and failures. In this way I want to deconstruct the self-serving notions of the missionary and try to focus on the difficulties of achieving conversion of the local people. And though the missionary accounts may indicate failure in the endeavour in terms of their goals, these accounts can be analysed to reflect the perspective of Gitksan cultural survival.

A comparative analysis of primary sources from journals, letters and texts will be carried out to assess the validity of discourse and a chronological reference that existed during the early contact years between the Gitksan and missionaries. The journals and notes from Thomas Crosby and Henry Pierce will be especially useful for this period. The Gitksan have been involved in the land claims process for many decades. Researchers have represented the nation and have tried to present ethnographic details that would help their case. Anthropologist Richard Daly represented the Gitksan during the Delgamuukw trial and he expanded on the importance of house organization. He presented evidence about feasting and how important it was that authority was diffused through reciprocal gifting between clans and their respective houses, villages

¹⁸ Palys, Ted. *Research Decisions. Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives*. 2003. Thomas Nelson: Scarborough. 252.

and sometimes neighboring peoples.¹⁹ Robert Galois was also involved in the trial and he researched the documentary records of economy and society as it pertained to encounters with non-Indian society.²⁰ Similarly, Galois believes that the Gitksans' perseverance to continue feasting under White pressure to eradicate it was an important dimension of protest.²¹ In 1991, Chief Justice Allan MacEachern dismissed anthropological evidence and only accepted evidence from an historical viewpoint, because historians were deemed to be far more credible due to their perceived impartiality as 'collectors of archival, historical documents'.²² Since, cultural anthropologist perspectives were not taken seriously, important cultural perspectives of a society will continued to be left out. Holistic and interdisciplinary methods need to be embraced in research. Although the Gitksan were disappointed with the 1991 ruling, Daly feels that the plaintiffs tried to push back the boundaries of what constituted admissible evidence:

They hoped to call on Canada and British Columbia to redress some of the injustices of colonial and postcolonial practices by recognizing alternative Aboriginal ways of being human and the values to be found in Aboriginal stewardship and management practices on the land.²³

Official statistics can be drawn from government and missionary records but they convey a privileged reality that is perceived to be a "true objective" view of the

¹⁹ Daly, Richard. *Our Box Was Full: An Ethnography for the Delgamuukw Plaintiffs*. 2005. UBC Press: Vancouver. 31.

²⁰ Galois, Robert. "History of the Upper Skeena region, 1850 to 1927. *Native Studies Review* 9. No.2(1993-1994). 113-183. 116.

²¹ Galois. 118.

²² Brownlie, Robin and Mary-Ellen Kelm. "Desperately Seeking Absolution: Native Agency as Colonialist Alibi?". *Canadian Historical Review*, LXXV, 4, 1994. P 543-556. 543.

²³ Daly. *Our Box Was Full*. 3

changing Gitksan society.²⁴ With this challenge in mind, the official records will be interpreted in terms of how the recorders used the information, who was expected to read them and for what purposes the information was to be used. It is hoped that the interpretation will not merely demonstrate how history justifies present realities, but it will demonstrate how historical interpretation must be decolonized.²⁵ The research will help sensitize the reader to some of the contexts of the missionary documents. Missionaries were religiously motivated to justify their work, but past research of missionary activity has revealed that many concealed failure as a way to satisfy European donors. Negative portrayals of natives only helped to amplify the challenge that missionaries faced.²⁶

An analysis on symbolic forms in the environment will help link any social processes associated with change. The geographical study of space is often the analysis of transformation, whereby the cultural identity and reality are created.²⁷ In this research the traditional Gitksan cultural landscape changes, but essentially it is still in the same location. A further analysis of cultural space can be interpreted in tangible or intangible constructs that are manipulated by cultures through time. Obviously, the missionary experience would indicate a radical shift in behavior, and as a result the landscape undoubtedly changed because of their influence. This interpretation of social geography

²⁴ Palys, Ted. *Research Decisions. Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives*. 2003. Thomas Nelson: Scarborough. 218.

²⁵ Daly. *Our Box Was Full*. 3.

²⁶ Palys, 2003. 250.

²⁷ Rowntree, Lester B. and Margaret W. Conkey. "Symbolism and Cultural Landscape". In *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 1980: 70(4). 459-476. 459.

or the study of assimilation and spatial change can help to answer how the Gitksan tried to resist and keep some semblance of tradition alive.

In Susan Neylan's, *The Heavens are Changing*, she examines the experiences of missionaries that worked with Tsimshian tribes. In an effort to replicate some strong images of conversion and social change, Neylan has observed the dichotomy of before and after conversion as being an important and perhaps misunderstood view of how conversion has changed Natives. Neylan has focused on physical records of change that happened in the Tsimshian villages. The signifier of Christian presence was represented in the European architecture that was represented in all structures after conversion. She has identified the modified space as being mission spaces. Natives and Missionaries drew upon their own cultural frameworks to interpret new conceptualized meanings of family dwellings and village social groupings.²⁸

Visual analysis of archival photographs is another source of evidence. Methods of analysis of visual images are described in Sarah Pink's *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research*.²⁹ The black and white photos of Gitksan villages help to convey important aspects a change in culture and society. Ways of seeing are structured in various ways that create social differences that change over time.³⁰ The photos provided (Figures 1 and 2) are useful primary sources that help to form strong perceptions of context. Figure one is a photo of Kispiox in 1909 and it shows that European housing is adopted, but it is also complemented with the

²⁸ Neylan, Susan. *The Heavens Are Changing Nineteenth-Century Protestant Missions and Tsimshian Christianity*. 2003. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press. 235.

²⁹ Pink, Sarah. *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research*. 2001. London: Sage.

³⁰ Ali, Suki. "Using Visual Materials" in *Researching Society and Culture 2nd ed.* Ed. Clive Seale. 2004. London: Sage. 266.

abundance of carved crest poles. One other point is that few log houses exist, and that great efforts were made to build houses in milled lumber. In figure two, the environment not only portrays a similar mixture of clapboard houses and crest poles, but it also indicates the Gitksan participation in the capitalist economy because of the goods that are being shipped to the village. Even the villagers have adopted the clothing styles of the Europeans. These photographs serve as texts and are as useful as any cultural artifact, because they help us to appreciate the socially constructed nature of what and how we see.³¹

In the following section, the ethnographical examples will be presented as they are described by scholars who sought to explain the cultural contexts of Gitksan life especially in regards to territorial description, and the significance of the *wilp* social organization. I will then move to descriptions of traditional longhouse villages to help to establish a vision of pre-contact life. Following this, I will review church archival evidence which establish the motives and the specific parameters of the Christian missions. I will then examine evidence from missionary documents to provide evidence of the frustration they had in trying to force change on the Gitksan and other Northwest Coast Indigenous groups. Lastly in part five, Gitksan participation and Gitksan defiance will be focused on in an examination of how they syncretised the old ideas with the new.

³¹ Ali, Suki.2004. 266.

Ethnographic Background and Environmental Context of Gitksan territory

The Gitksan are a group of peoples who are closely related linguistically and culturally to the Tsimshian cultural group. The group inhabits an area in Northern B.C along the Upper Skeena River. Linguistically, the Gitksan are closely related to the Nisga'a and to a lesser degree are mutually intelligible to the Southern and Coastal Tsimshian. The word 'Gitksan' refers to the people of the Skeena River. Five villages are still inhabited while the last two settlements have been abandoned. These settlements are Kitwanga, Kitsegukla, Gitanmaax, Kispiox and Kitwancool; Kisgegas and Kuldo were deserted by 1949 and 1939 respectively.³² Since 1899, Glen Vowell Band (or Sik-e-dahk) formed. The Salvation Army created the settlement and it is located five miles downstream from Kispiox on the Skeena River. Two more short-lived new villages were Andimaul and Carnaby, founded by rival mission factions. The villages were occupied in the early 20th century and were abandoned by 1924 when the villagers returned to a site adjacent to their historic village site at Kitsegukla. Meanskinisht was also a mission village that was set up by Anglican minister Robert Tomlinson in 1888. An agreement with a local chief led to Tomlinson setting up a village that would welcome Christian converts. By the first year a schoolhouse was set up and later a church would be built.³³

³² Inglis, Gordon B., Dougl R. Hudson, Barbara R. Rigsby and Bruce Rigsby. "Tsimshian of British Columbia Since 1900". In Handbook of North American Indians. Vol.7. Northwest Coast. Ed. Wayne Suttles. 1990. Smithsonian Institution: Washington. 291.

³³ Tomlinson, George with Judith Young. *Challenge the Wilderness. A Family Saga of Robert and Alice Tomlinson Pioneer Medical Missionaries*. 1993. Northwest Wilderness Books: Seattle. 288-291.

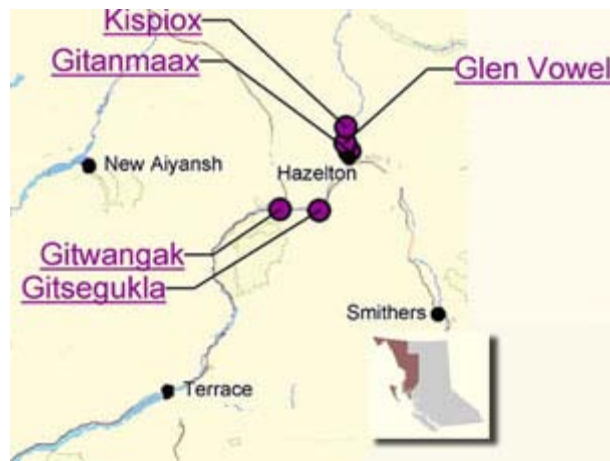


Fig. 3. Gitksan village map ³⁴

The environment of the Gitksan is characterized as being mostly a coastal forest biotic area, which is noticeably moist. The ecological setting is riverine rather than being strictly coastal.³⁵ The land is divided up into territories that encompass watersheds that run into the major Skeena drainage area. Their land is mountainous and its slopes are densely clothed in coniferous forests dominated by hemlock and red cedar in the southern regions and spruce in northern sections. In the valley bottoms, coniferous and deciduous forests exist alongside contemporary settlements and farmlands.³⁶

The traditional life patterns are based on residence in winter and summer homes which are in different locations. The spring activities would be dominated by a short migration to the Nass River to fish for oolichan fish (*Thaleichthys pacificus*). These fish were then processed into oil for use as a trade items and food. Later on in the spring, fishing for salmon would take place. Care was taken to make

³⁴ http://www.gov.bc.ca/arr/firstnation/gitksan/images/gitksan_map.jpg

³⁵ Johnson, Leslie Main. *Health, Wholeness, and the Land: Gitksan Traditional Plant Use and Healing*. 1997. National Library of Canada. 2.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 2.

sure that people fished in their own territories.³⁷ Salmon was then harvested and prepared by drying and smoking. Hunting and trapping was also employed when they were not fishing. Huckleberries(*Vaccinium*), saskatoons(*Amelanchier alnifolia*) and high bush blueberries(*Vaccinium ovalifolium*) were also picked in the summer months and they were dried into cakes and stored for the winter .³⁸ In the late summer, weirs would be constructed to trap the last salmon runs and these streams were also owned by specific crests.³⁹ By the time winter came, the stored up fish and berry reserves would be complemented by the hunting of caribou, deer, mountain goat, beaver, lynx and rabbit.⁴⁰

The territories belong to house groups called *Wilp* which is the term for the physical structure as well as the social group in Gitksanimx. A chief administered the land on behalf of members of the particular house. All tribal members respected boundaries of territory, because the penalty for trespassing was death.⁴¹ Each house belongs to a single village and each house has its own history or *adaawk*.⁴² The *adaawk* are like oral histories and they are symbolized through crests(*ayukws*) and songs(*limx'oo'y*).⁴³ When feasts(*yukxw*) are held, the *adaawk* are revealed and performed for all to witness, as it serves to educate others of the knowledge of history,

³⁷ Cassidy, Maureen. *From Mountain to Mountain: a History of the Gitksan Village of Ans'pa yaxw*. 1984. Kispiox: Ans'pa yaxw School Society. 11.

³⁸ Cassidy. 1984. 12.

³⁹ Ibid. 12.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 12.

⁴¹ Johnson Gottesfeld, Leslie M. 1994. "Conservation, territory, and traditional beliefs: An analysis of Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en subsistence, Northwest British Columbia, Canada". *Human Ecology* 22(4): 448.

⁴² Johnson, *Health, Wholeness*. 28.

ceremonies, and territory. The important concept of the wilp is related in the words of Chief Delgam Uukw:

My power is carried in my house's histories, songs, dances and crests. It is recreated at the feast when the histories are told, the songs performed, and the crests displayed. With the wealth that comes from respectful use of the territory, the house feeds the name of the chief in the feast hall. In this way, the law, the chief, the territory, and the feasts become one.⁴⁴

Gitksan pre-contact architecture and building styles

In order to understand the changes that were made in building styles, the pre-contact Gitksan house styles need to be examined. The acceptance and willingness to change housing conditions provide some indication of how much of the missionaries' culture was accepted, yet the examples of the European style houses can be contrasted with prior forms to reveal what symbolism is stated in the new forms. The changes in architecture serve to reveal how Christian teachings modified the Gitksan's cultural landscape. Missionaries and Natives each drew upon their own cultural frameworks to interpret the new mission space; the cultural landscape therefore is a modification of space that includes Christian and Indigenous elements.⁴⁵

Gitksan houses in the pre-contact phase were constructed in a similar fashion to many Tsimshian and Nisga'a house styles. The houses were of a moderate size: typically thirty feet long with a gable supported by two main beams constructed of cedar, the floor being lined with cedar planks (see fig.4).

⁴³ Ibid. 29.

⁴⁴ Gisday Wa and Delgam Uukw. *The Spirit in the Land*. 1989. Nanaimo: Phantom Press. 7

⁴⁵ Neylan. *The Heavens Are Changing*. 235.

In William Pierce's inaugural visit to Kitsegukla, Chief Cooksun (Guxsen) graciously loaned out his house for Sunday school and day school. The house was described as being:

...quite large, and consisted of one big room about sixty to fifty feet, with a huge fire place in the centre, the smoke escaping through a hole in the roof. As a substitute for shingles, split boards and cedar bark were used. Five families, besides the Chief resided in it.⁴⁶

See Figure 4 for diagram of exterior and interior arrangements.

⁴⁶ Pierce, William Henry. *From Potlatch to Pulpit*. 1933, Vancouver Bindery. 53.

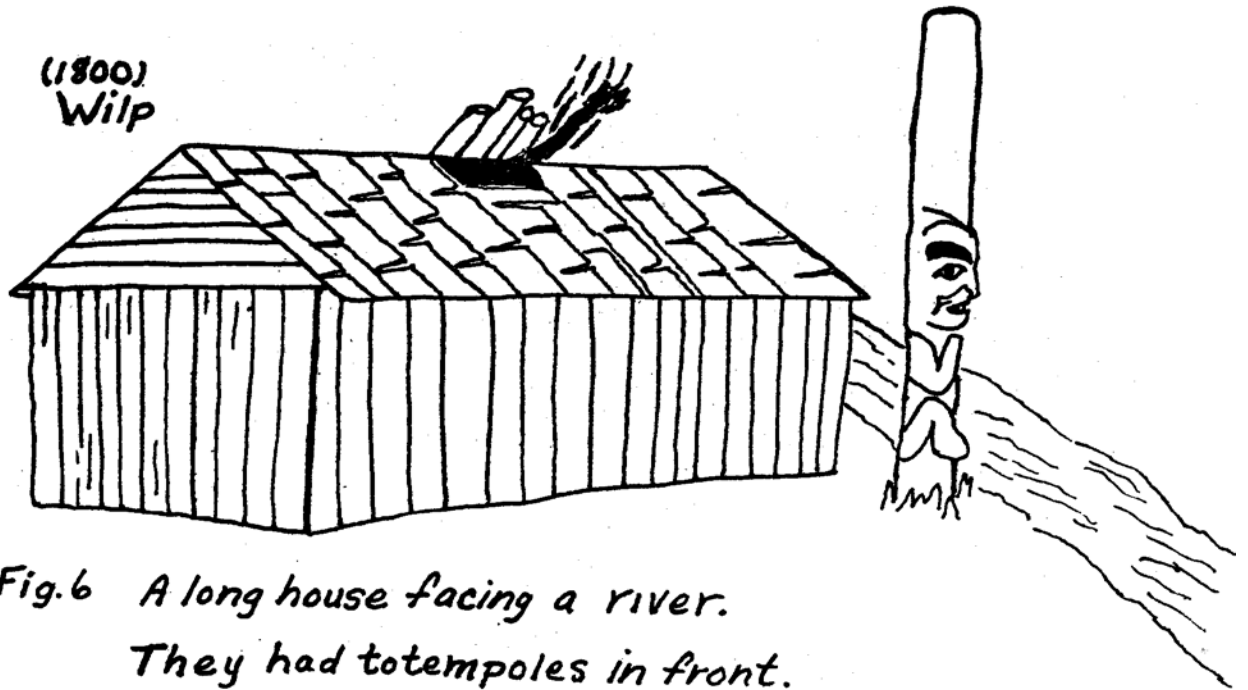


Fig.6 A long house facing a river.
They had totempoles in front.

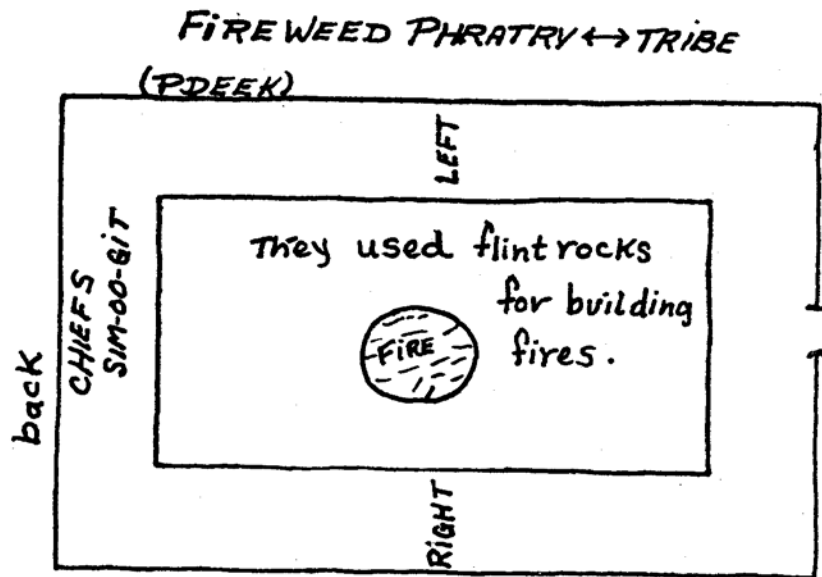


Fig.7 There are 2 chiefs (sim-oo-gigyat)
in each house.

Fig.4⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Adawohl Gitsegukla: Gitsegukla History. 1979. Kitsegukla Band.

In a similar description the granddaughter of Robert Tomlinson, Agnes Johnson describes the Gitksan housing styles at Minskinisht:

The Indians used to build their house by selecting trees of about ten inches in diameter and cut them off for posts, the outside ones lower than the middle ones. Then they would take smaller cedar trees and put them across the top of the posts and then use hand-split cedar planking put in lengthways, that is from the eave of the roof to the ridgepole, leaving a space of about two feet in the centre of the building which served for cooking and heating. In the wintertime they hung skins around the outside to keep the wind and snow and so-on. When the Tomlinsons arrived at Cedarvale-Minskinisht-they did the same thing. They screened off part with blankets so the ladies would have a little privacy, then eight natives slept on the side of the fire, the eight Tomlinsons slept on the other side.⁴⁸

The arrangements in houses also reflected hierarchical organization in the family. A chief's quarters occupied the rear of the house and people of lesser rank occupied the side walls.⁴⁹ Building art was also painted on house fronts. These planks were painted with large crest designs. Similarly a design was also located on inner back walls inside the longhouse. Sometimes these fronts could be false fronts that could be removed for storage. In a visit to the Ksan historical village in Gitanmaax in 1999, I went on a tour to see how replica longhouses were built and decorated. The interior and exterior were recreated in an authentic style to represent the traditional longhouses. Other structures that incorporated art were menstrual huts, summer houses, sweat lodges and underground caches.⁵⁰ All of these structures contained varying elaborations of animal crest designs. Crest poles were also erected in front of European styled homes (see figs. 1,2). Gitksan

⁴⁸ Whitehead, Margaret. *Now You Are My Brother: Missionaries in British Columbia*. 1981. Victoria : Provincial Archives of British Columbia.19.

⁴⁹ Halpin, Marjorie M. and Margaret Seguin. "Tsimshian Peoples: Southern Tsimshian, Coast Tsimshian, Nishga, and Gitksan." In *Handbook of North American Indians. Vol.7: Northwest Coast*. 1990. Washington: Smithsonian Institution. 267-284.271.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 272.

villages still have poles to remind them of the past. The retention of these cultural forms is symbolic of resistance to assimilation. The Gitksan never gave up their recognition of clans. Crests denoted membership in certain clans. The chiefs were especially resistant to change as their possession of crests during stages of assimilation symbolized their status in traditional Gitksan organization.⁵¹

Gitksan cultural transformation

The behaviour and conduct of the missionaries determined the Gitksan acceptance of Methodism. Methodist missionaries found the bringing of a new faith and culture to the Gitksan a challenge. These missionaries were not unlike many of the other religious agents who were operating in early British Columbia; missions were often started by one or two personnel. The Gitksan were certainly not going to be subjugated by one representative of any church. At the time the Methodists arrived in the 1880's, few whites lived in the Upper Skeena area. In order to understand how the early clerics transformed the social order in Gitksan villages, the significance of their strong grounding in Methodist doctrine has to be understood. They believed that their way was the only way for Gitksan survival.

The Methodist missionary initiated a continuum of change that lasted at least twenty to thirty years. The period begins in 1885, when William Henry Pierce initiated contact, and ends in 1925 when the Methodist Church joined with the Presbyterians and Congregationalists to form the United Church of Canada. During this period, change was dramatic. Most missionaries who did initial forays into the British Columbia interior did so with little resources and they travelled by foot or canoe. Indeed Reverend

⁵¹ Adams, John W. *The Gitksan Potlatch: Population Flux*. 42.

William Henry Pierce relates the first trip to the Upper Skeena in 1885 to Reverend Thomas Crosby (Methodist missionary to the Tsimshian of Fort Simpson) as being an arduous journey:

Mr. Crosby had received several letters from some of the young people up there, urging him to send them a missionary. Lack of funds was the only reason for the long delay. It was getting rather late in the season to make the trip. We could not get off before the first of November and in that month there is always danger of the river beginning to freeze over at any time. There was no other way of taking the journey except by canoe which required a crew of five men besides Mr. Crosby and myself. With everything in our favor we could expect to reach the forks of the Skeena (known as Hazelton) in less than ten or twelve days. However, we made a good start, six of the Tsimpsheans having volunteered to take us up the river free of charge. We loaded up our canoe with provisions, sufficient to last about three weeks and left Fort Simpson early in November. The weather was not very favourable and our progress was slow. The days were short and we had to camp early.⁵²

Missionary contact with Natives was very limited because of the constraints of transportation; word of mouth was the only other way to disseminate the word of the Lord. For this reason, the first three to four decades were an early exploratory stage, a stage from which massive cultural change would become firmly entrenched. The space of time is comparable to one generation; many changes would be observed and recorded.

As one example, in 1885 William Henry Pierce, the son of a Scottish Hudson's Bay trader and a Tsimshian mother and one of the first Methodist missionaries to contact the Gitksan people, journeyed to the upper levels of the Skeena River to proselytize to the Gitksan. This initial foray ultimately led to the Gitksan accepting Christianity and British culture. As a youth Pierce worked on the British coastal steamer "Otter", and during his travels he came to know about William Duncan's Metlakatla

⁵² Pierce. *From Potlatch to Pulpit*. 51.

model community and Christianity.⁵³ He later converted from Tsimshian spirituality to Methodism and was then trained by Thomas Crosby. He accompanied Crosby to the Upper Skeena in 1885 and he stayed there with the intention to start a mission at Kitsegukla. Dr, R.G. Large grew up in the Northern Skeena areas and he has done research on the early missionaries. He observes that Pierce labored for fifteen years at Kispiox to try to get Natives to set aside their old beliefs to accept a new faith.⁵⁴

Although Pierce was knowledgeable of his Tsimshian heritage and his language, he shared the beliefs of his Methodist mentors that Natives prior to Christian instruction, suffered from a life that was “ignorant, superstitious, degraded, wild and cruel.”⁵⁵

Pierce believed that he had a duty to guide the Gitksan with a unique Christian method which would help them with the transition from the past to the future. The Methodists tried to protect the Native peoples from the negative effects of unscrupulous Whites. As early as 1871, the Omineca gold rush initiated a period of development and settlement in the area.⁵⁶ Pierce, along with other Methodist missionaries knew that in order to approach Native tribes had to demonstrate their belief that it was their duty to help others and that demonstration must be obvious. Pure theology would not be enough to win the hearts and minds of prospective converts. Their devotion and motivation of their particular Christian faith and cultural background guided the Methodists in their activities within the territory of the Gitksan. The missionaries were dedicated to changing the Natives’ way of life to prepare them for White settlement.

⁵³ Large, R.G. *The Skeena: River of Destiny*. 1996. Heritage House: Surrey, B.C. 105.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 106.

⁵⁵ Pierce. *From Potlatch to Pulpit*. 108.

⁵⁶ Specht, Allen. *Skeena Country. Sound Heritage Volume V. No.1* Ed. W.L. Langlois. 1976. Provincial Archives of British Columbia: Victoria. 7.

There was more than a little Social Darwinism underlying the belief adopted by many missionaries that it was their responsibility as well as that of the colonizer to nurture their Native peoples across the globe. Missionaries believed that Natives could only survive by emulating White culture. A negative trade-off would be that Indigenous cultures would be irreparably damaged or destroyed. There was a sense of urgency for all missionaries to save the Indian.⁵⁷ Each denomination felt compelled of course to spread their own versions of Christianity throughout the British Columbia. Methodist teachings which originated in England had an important impact on the creation of a missionary movement that tried to convert Aboriginal peoples across the world. Their teachings combine spiritual and secular beliefs. The missionaries knew it would be difficult for Natives to accept their ideas, but the results were tantamount to attaining godliness. Methodism combined the spiritual significance of religion with attaining the ideals and culture of British civilization. The growth of Christianity in the Upper Skeena from the late nineteenth century took hold as a result of the fervor of the missionaries to spread Christianity and civilization.

Methodism stressed the universal availability of God's saving grace and people's responsibility to seek salvation and complete holiness.⁵⁸ Created out of the Church of England in the late 1730's; John Wesley, brother Charles Wesley and George Whitefield believed that one was responsible for one's own salvation as well as that of his or her brother or sister. They were particularly concerned about reaching society's disadvantaged. Many church members were inspired to spread their faith to the new

⁵⁷ Fisher, Robin. *Contact and Conflict*. 142.

⁵⁸ Semple, Neil. *The Lord's Dominion: The History of Canadian Methodism*. 1996. McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal. 14.

world and to new cultures. The mixing of theological and secular ideas was at the foundation of how the Methodist missionaries proselytized to the British Columbia Natives. Secular ideas were those aspects of British culture and western civilization that were introduced to all indigenous peoples. Important correlations can be made between Thomas Crosby's Methodist teachings and their practical day to day to his applications to the Tsimshian of Fort Simpson. To Crosby conversion meant a combination of personal Christian salvation as well conversion to Anglo Canadian cultural values and norms. Any mission would fail without success in both imperatives.

The Tsimshian acknowledged in later years, that their acceptance of Crosby's mission work was directly related to a desire to participate in the merging economic, political and social environment of late nineteenth-century British Columbia.⁵⁹

The gaining of material items and wealth and the integration into a new economy seemed to be the impetus for many tribes wanting to convert.

In the midcentury period, too, mission thinking had often been dominated by a belief in the essential concomitance of Christianity, commerce, and civilization. Missionary ideology, as a consequence, had been integrated with politico-economic ideas and with policies related to slave-trade abolition; the same people, frequently, had been interested in all these things. Missionary ventures had reached principally into independent African and Pacific states whose rulers held the power to admit or reject them, and who needed to be convinced of the value of missions. Since such leaders were unlikely to be convinced in the first instance by purely spiritual considerations, attempts at 'structural' change, attempts to increase material prosperity, the development of cash crops and export outlets- all had seemed a legitimate part of mission.⁶⁰

The Tsimshian were willing to accept religious and social change only if it allowed them to live more effectively within the new British Columbian Anglicized society:

⁵⁹ Bolt, Clarence. *Thomas Crosby and the Tsimshian: Small Shoes For Feet Too Large*. 1992. UBC Press: Vancouver.xii.

⁶⁰ Walls, Andrew F. *British Missions in Missionary Ideologies in the Imperialist era: 1880-1920* Ed. Torben Christensen and William R. Hutchison. 1982.Christensens Bogtrykkerii, Bogtryknergarden a-s, Struer: Denmark.1162-163.

...the Natives themselves often saw Christianity as a means of acquiring greater access to European goods and the benefits of citizenship and protecting land and legal rights. In Port Simpson, for instance, although many Natives became sincere and devout Christians, Crosby was successful as long as it appeared that he represented the secular interests of the Tsimshians and had influence with the provincial and federal governments.⁶¹

Christianity in the Landscape

Christianity had a definite influence on the buildings and architecture of the Gitksan. The dynamism that was inherent reflected the influence that missionaries had or at least appeared to have. The dramatic changes that the Gitksan experienced can be attributed to the teaching of Methodist ideology, the promulgation of Victorian English culture, and the adoption of Christian symbols in a modified Gitksan cultural landscape.

The culture of Victorian England was heavily influenced by Wesleyan Methodism. The burgeoning middle class ascribed to ideals from which man was judged on his personal relationship with god. Progress was his ultimate goal and required a work ethic - a 'Gospel of Work'.⁶² The culture of Victorian society combined evangelical Christianity with the economic aspirations of the middle class.⁶³ The missionaries were filled with the spirit and sought convert all Natives to accept the superiority of British religion and culture. However Robert Choquette cautions that the Methodists became so conservative that the message of progress and civilization lost its spiritual dimension and instead increasingly stressed their own infallibility and

⁶¹ Semple. 1996.296.

⁶² Usher, Jean. "Duncan of Metlakatla: The Victorian origins of a Model Indian Community". In *Sweet Promises: A Reader on Indian-White Relations in Canada*. 1991. University of Toronto Press. 296.

⁶³ Usher. 1991. 297.

superiority.⁶⁴ In this way Civilization and religion were one and the same thing. The missionaries who went to the Skeena River in the latter half of the nineteenth century certainly ascribed to this view. However, the missionaries who were chosen for the British Columbia missions were more fervent and zealous. Their emphasis on service could not be as easily realized in the home missions given the diminishing number of potential converts.⁶⁵ The new world offered a better outlet to spread the virtues of their faith.

William Duncan the first missionary to the North Coast started out as an Anglican supported by the Church Missionary when he arrived in 1857 but several decades later had so deviated from the communion that he founded the first “independent Native Church” free from any influence other than his own. While he worked specifically with Tsimshian tribes his prototypical experience helped to pave the way for missionary expansion into the Skeena watershed. While his attempt to organize Natives to build houses was met with indifference, over the next five years his efforts culminated in the establishment of a model community in New Metlakatla.⁶⁶ The description of the model representation of British culture was directly represented in the appearance of the settlement.

With its parallel rows of neat white houses, gardens, and picket fences, its school. Store, street lamps, gaol, and dominated by a church reputed to be the largest west of Chicago and north of San Francisco, the village presented an imposing picture of civilized life in the wilderness.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Choquette, Robert. *The Oblate Assault On Canada's Northwest*. 1995. University of Ottawa Press: Ottawa. 1995.117.

⁶⁵ Bolt.1992.34.

⁶⁶ Murray, Peter. *The Devil and Mr. Duncan: A History of the Two Metlakatlas*. 1985.Son Nis Press: Victoria.46.

⁶⁷ Usher.1991.295.

The mission village helped to teach the Natives about the formal definitions of public roles and concepts of citizenship.⁶⁸ Duncan felt that they must try to imitate the Whiteman for in order to become citizens one had to have a house, a yard and a fence. These were characteristics of a British society which valued individual property, which while not entirely foreign to the Tsimshian who valued group ownership, were reinforced by the missionary. The creation of the model community in Metlakatla helped to set off other imitations on the North coast. The news of Duncan's model settlement spread to the Nisga'a in 1864. Spurred by the desire of the Nisga'a to have their own missionary, the CMS sent a deacon named Robert Doolan.

Doolan's Mission has been examined from the perspective of his aims and intentions to bring substantial changes in the material and non-material life of the Nisga'a at Quinwoch. The everyday life, the religion, values, physical and social culture were to be made over. For him, Christianity and European culture were virtually if not explicitly equated. To be Christian a major transformation in the life of the people was required.⁶⁹

Doolan's work at Quinwoch was not as successful as Duncan's at Metlakatla, but his experience was a prelude to the model community at Kincolith.⁷⁰

Robert Tomlinson put in charge of the community at Kincolith in 1867 spurred the Nisga'a to build a church, school and a residence for the missionaries in a very short time. Nine houses were built for the first Native arrivals at the settlement and .⁷¹ after five years, twenty to thirty homes were built to house single family occupancies.⁷²

While Tomlinson lost his position at Kincolith due to internal problems and funding, he did not lose the desire to set up another mission. Minskinisht later known as

⁶⁸ Cooper, Carol. "Native Woman of the Pacific Coast: An Historical Perspective, 1830-1900". *Journal of Canadian Studies*. 27(4) Wint.92/93, 44-77. 68.

⁶⁹ Patterson, Palmer E. *Mission on the Nass*. 1982. Eulachon Press: Waterloo. 37.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*48.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*50.

⁷² *Ibid.*59.

Cedarvale the chosen location for his non-denominational mission was the first permanent settlement that brought in converts from the Gitksan villages of Kitwancool and Kitwanga.⁷³

Pierce in his initial experience in Kitsegukla in 1885, managed to gain converts by first pointing out the benefits of a superior life through adopting Victorian modelled clapboard houses. In 1895, he was transferred to the Gitksan village of Kispiox. Pierce attempted to eradicate ‘heathen’ ways; by “assisting in organising the Indians into a model village with elected council and modern homes (in the construction of which their Native owned sawmill played no small part)”.⁷⁴ In Pierce’s autobiography he relates how the converts embraced Christianity by changing their old ways:

As heathen renounced their old life, it was their desire to move out from their old surroundings and build Christian homes at the other end of the village. This meant both money and hard work. After the logs had been cut and hewn, lumber for flooring, doors and windows were required, and as it all had to be done by hand, progress was slow.⁷⁵

The missionaries’ accounts all show that the civilizing influences were pushed on to the Natives with considerable zeal. All missionary evidence indicates that the building of the model villages required a great deal of persuasion on the missionary’s part. The degree in which the Gitksan embraced the new changes to their lifestyle will be examined later. What is of prime importance in the initial step of this interpretation is to understand what precepts, mindsets and ideologies that are exhibited by the missionaries and how did it affect their duty to proselytize Natives.

⁷³ Whitehead, Margaret. *Now You Are My Brother: Missionaries in British Columbia*. 1981. Provincial Archives of British Columbia: Victoria. 18.

⁷⁴ Large, R.G. *The Skeena: River of Destiny*. 1996. Heritage House: Surrey, B.C. 106.

⁷⁵ Pierce. 1933. 69.

Judith T. Kenny has analyzed the importance of colonial authorities in India trying to reinforce the power of the state through cultural landscape symbolism. The British Hill Station symbolized the marked differences between British and Indian culture. These buildings, their architecture, and associated private schools and recreational facilities were all not only reminiscent of English country life but more were important tangible images of British superiority made even more evident in their prominent location high above the surrounding Indian villages.⁷⁶ The British did not simply transplant microcosms of their homeland out of necessity:

The hill stations built some two hundred years after the British Raj arrived in India were not simply a transplanted British landscape. They were expressive rather of broader nineteenth century beliefs that set the colonial world apart from Europe. The hill stations reflected and reinforced assumptions of social and racial difference, and in so doing naturalized the separation of rulers and ruled.⁷⁷

The cultural attitudes expressed by the British through their architecture and building forms reinforced the apparent benefits and the superior nature of their lifestyle. Methodist reformers may have criticized the conduct that brought on wealth, but in India, these symbols evidenced Britain's duty to develop India.⁷⁸ The hill stations promulgated the image of civilization which should be attained. Buildings and architecture were the ultimate tangible symbols in the cultural landscape of success.

Lester B. Rowntree and Margaret W. Conkey have both studied symbolism and the cultural landscape. In the case of the Methodist Gitksan's communities in British Columbia, the Methodist missionaries' influence on the Gitksan's building styles is evident in any analysis of landscape symbols. It was the process of cultural assimilation

⁷⁶ Kenny, Judith T. "Climate, race, and Imperial Authority: The Symbolic Landscape of the British Hill Station in India". *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 1995:85(4).694-714. 694.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 1995. 695.

⁷⁸ Kenny. 1995. 697.

and acculturation directed the actions of the Gitksan to participate in and enable change.

In comparison, Rowntree and Conkey state that the cultural landscape does not only reflect a pattern of power (in this study: church influenced building styles) but also creates social identity and reality.⁷⁹ In regards to the processes that create symbols:

Symbols are created, elaborated upon, and modified (and hence the process whereby the cultural landscape is created and transformed) is rooted in- and a part of- societal processes, one cannot describe or explain either without reference to the other.⁸⁰

The missionaries tried to create a new reality for the Natives to save them from their “backward ways”. The missionaries wanted the Natives not only to convert to Methodism, but to dispose of their traditions as a way to redeem themselves to God and ultimately the dominant culture. The first tangible signs of the conversion could only be demonstrated in the adoption of European styled homes.

The influence of Christian teachings was made apparent in the transference of European building styles in Kitsegukla. The traditional Gitksan way of life was sacrificed in some cases as new adherents adopted a British civilized way of living. William Pierce convinced some of the villagers to leave the old settlement and try to adopt the trappings of civilization, for example a vegetable garden was planted. The Indian agent surveyed out individual lots per family: logs were hewed for the building of a new church and houses.⁸¹ Changes to the house styles were becoming more apparent as the teachings of Pierce took hold.

The efforts of Pierce to start a mission in Kispiox in 1895 were aided by the hard work of the Epworth League. The Epworth League was a group of Christians who were

⁷⁹ Rowntree, Lester B. and Margaret W. Conkey. 1980. 459.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 1980.459.

⁸¹ Pierce. 1933. 62.

dedicated to promoting Methodism through the formal church. They demonstrated that industriousness was part of their Christian beliefs. The formation of the group in Kispiox greatly improved the ability of the village to build houses and a church.

The Indians responded to Pierce's appeal, and before long it was necessary to enlarge the building. A number of prominent Indians were received into the church, and in 1897 the Epworth League hall (40' x 25') was erected. The Indian people built a new village, and under the Missionary's direction a sawmill was operated. In 1901 a new church was built and dedicated.⁸²

Pierce recollects in his autobiography that a converted chief by the name of Shakeant tore down his longhouse and totem poles as a symbolic act to adopt new ways - "He did not wish to see a vestige of darkness and cruelty left behind."⁸³ One example of Christian symbolism was the erection of a flagpole "to be an object lesson to the heathen, for when the flag was hoisted on the Sabbath it would remind them of how the day was to be kept."⁸⁴ Pierce was overjoyed when a traditional Gitksan man named 'Louis' signalled his intention to convert one day by hoisting his own flag - "Thank God we have lived to see the day when that abomination has been destroyed in this village".⁸⁵ Another tangible symbol was the size and prominence of the church in the community. In Kispiox, the imposing spire of the church could be seen for miles. It symbolized the growing influence and domination the church had on the Gitksan's lives.

The collective life of the longhouse was also beginning to collapse. There were two families who lived by themselves in single family residences. The census (1881) showed sixteen other houses in the village. Some of these houses were large. One had eleven families and forty-one

⁸² Raley, G.H. *Kispiox Vertical File*. United Church Archives: Vancouver.

⁸³ Pierce. 1933. 68.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 80.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 84.

people living in it. Others were smaller with as few as nine people living together.⁸⁶

The Gitksan culture was under stress. The Gitksan knew White settlement was coming particularly since the Hudsons Bay traders, gold miners and surveyors all indicated that more settlement was planned. Hazelton the initial settlement started in 1871 was a symbol of what was to come.

During these early years the history of this pioneer settlement is meager. The Indians were not very favorably disposed to the Whiteman and altercations were frequent. Open violence was only narrowly averted on many occasions, and appeals were made to the government at Victoria to intervene...The Indian problem was largely solved when the Dominion Government appointed R.E.Loring as the first Indian agent, with a district from Kitselas to Babine: and in 1890 the provincial government sent in survey parties to map the country.⁸⁷

It was this stress that made the Gitksan pragmatic; change would be needed in order to accommodate indeed to flourish in the near future. That stress of change was symbolized by a transformation to a different cultural landscape.⁸⁸

By the beginning of the twentieth century most of the houses in Kitsegukla took on the European style. Bishop Black, a former United Church Reverend describes the evolution of Kitsegukla in 1939,

We have one of the best Indian villages on the Skeena River. The houses are two stories, with brick chimneys, also lined with wall board inside, and lined with good rustic on the outside. They have modern gables and windows with cedar sawn shingles. Almost all the houses are well painted with white, green or brown colours and trimmings to match. Many of these homes have white curtains around the windows, green shades, and the people have modern beds, clothes as white as many other women's.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Cassidy, Maureen. *From Mountain to Mountain*. 1984. Ans'payaxw school Society: Kispiox. 23.

⁸⁷ Large. 1996. 53.

⁸⁸ Rowntree. 1980. 474.

⁸⁹ Black, Bishop. *Kitsegukla Vertical File*. United Church Archives: Vancouver.

The adoption of the European building styles was a way to adapt to the coming of the Whiteman. The Gitksan helped to realize the missionaries' efforts but did so voluntarily. There was no coercion involved. The Gitksan are not unlike any other culture today; cultures change and are dynamic. The Gitksan were free to choose a building style that was beneficial to their new existence in a changing world.

Gitksan Syncretism

The Gitksan chose to embrace both cultures and that is made evident in early turn of the century photographs.⁹⁰ The traditional longhouses might have been abandoned but some vestiges of art and *Wilp* connection could still be found. In Kispiox, many crest poles remained intact in front of European styled homes. Even to this day, the Gitksan have a high proportion of their totem poles intact. Memorials in the graveyards also started to take on aspects of Gitksan art. Even the European styled homes were built with some kind of cultural purpose that reflected clan membership, prestige and responsibility.

The retention and production of art forms is an act of protest and it symbolizes resistance to change. The Gitksan never gave up their recognition of clans and *Wilp*. Membership in certain clans was extremely important to the identity of the Gitksan. The chiefs were especially resistant to change as their possession of crests symbolized their

⁹⁰ Cassidy. 1984. 25.

status in traditional Gitksan organization⁹¹ The graveyard at Hazelton had chiefs and their relatives well recognized through small gravehouses and carved headstones.⁹²

With the advent of the potlatch law in 1884, cultural practices like potlatch were suppressed. Some of the prosperous families circumvented the law by erecting memorials carved in marble. Constance Cox (Hankin) known as the first white girl born in Hazelton in 1881 recalls several prominent and carved gravestones in Hazelton in memory of Chief Charles Koudimkt which features a bear and wolf and Daniel Skawil's memorial which features a frog.⁹³ Bruce Hutchison in 1931 remarked about the same two memorials as being surrounded by a 'city' of gravehouses and possessions that disguised traditional art with a synthesis of White beliefs :

All the imagination of the Natives seems to have been concentrated on these memorials to their dead, which are rapidly falling into ruin. But the result of this mixture of Native genius and White man's learning is not happy. The graves have lost the sure touch and vigor of early totem poles, which were genuine art, which placed it with a flimsy imitation neither Indian or white.⁹⁴

It is an interesting comment coming from a reporter who admires the 'real' traditional art, but does not realize that the Gitksan have had to hide their technique and practice as a result of Christian influence.

The introduction of Christian graveyards changed the cultural landscape, but it also provided a context in which Gitksan culture could be retained and synthesized with Christian beliefs. A new graveyard industry was created to produce carved crests, art and architecture that could be as a way to circumvent control yet the embracing of

⁹¹ Adams, John W. *The Gitksan Potlatch: Population Flux, resource ownership and Reciprocity*. 1973. Holt, Rinehart and Winston: Montreal. 42.

⁹² Hutchison, Bruce. "At the end of the road: magical old Hazelton". *The Province*. November 29, 1931.

⁹³ E.R.Cox. *Hazelton Vertical File*. March 29, 1940. United Church Archives Vancouver.

⁹⁴ Hutchison. 1931.

Christian ideals would still be intact.⁹⁵ By the nineteen forties, many respected the use of stone monuments because they were one of the last vestiges left of the past, but many wanted to participate more in older ceremonies associated with Totem poles.⁹⁶ The younger generations were still going to church, but they were no longer fearful of government control and potlatch suppression. Even the children were acting out the old dances much to the approval of elders who advised them for the correct technique.⁹⁷

A great deal of the missionaries' work stemmed in trying to stamp out this ceremony. Bishop Black in his correspondence to Reverend John Goodfellow (former United Church archivist) relates his former work:

Is Christianity worthwhile? Contrast this progress even socially with conditions in 1884 when the first missionary came to these people. Re: my letter on the Totem Pole; it was, and still is, in the interests of the young people that I deplore the revival of the old potlatch customs. Our modern educated young people do not want these customs old customs. They resent the cost and economic waste and it is for them I pleaded and still do plead with the Church to take a definite stand against these obsolete customs.⁹⁸

There seemed to be a diminution of missionary zeal by the 1920's, because not all vestiges of Gitksan culture were abandoned. The Potlatch was outlawed but feasts were not entirely abandoned. Sometimes the feasts were held in the guise of Christian events or functions. In 1926, Reverend Victor Samsun observed the Sunday social as being a synthesis of two cultures: money was raised in a Potlatch fashion to raise funds for missions abroad.⁹⁹ Similarly, Chief Amos Williams, held a potlatch (or a feast) and asked the Reverend T.H.Wright to offer a prayer of consecration.¹⁰⁰ The Gitksan

⁹⁵ Hawker, Ronald William. "A Faith of Stone: Gravestones, Missionaries, and Culture Change and Continuity Among British Columbia's Tsimshian Indians". *Journal of Canadian Studies*. 1991,26:3. 85.

⁹⁶ Beynon, William. *Potlatch at Gitsegukla: William Beynon's 1945 Notebooks*. 2000. Vancouver: UBC Press. 69.

⁹⁷ Beynon. 2000, 192.

⁹⁸ Black, Bishop. *Hazelton Vertical File*. 1939. United Church Archives: Vancouver.

⁹⁹ Raley, G.H *Kispiox Vertical File*. 1939. United Church Archives: Vancouver.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

recognize the dominant culture and participated in it, but they still retain vital aspects of a traditional life. It was a process of syncretism that missionaries would have to accept if they wanted some measure of success.

The adoption of European styled homes did not necessarily mean that the Gitksan accepted total conversion. The framed houses may have appeared to have resembled a typical Canadian home of the period but interior layouts often conformed to traditional living arrangements that were abandoned in longhouses. Many of the house interiors contained few partitions and that suggests cultural continuity, because interior space was consistent with longhouse interiors having few sleeping areas and a large communal area.¹⁰¹ The Gitksan much like their Tsimshian neighbors also retained the used of crest and mortuary poles in front of their Victorian modelled homes. Often the role of chiefs to protect the status of their *Wilp* was translated as being a reflection of village wealth and demonstration of hard work accomplished by Gitksan or Euro-Canadian means.¹⁰²

It might be argued that the Gitksan also wanted to take control of sawmill industries as a way to improve the means of producing better homes. The missionaries were impressed with the work, but the Native owned sawmill also helped to create status for individual homeowners who wanted quality building materials for their homes. Reverend Pierce noted in 1901 that the industrious sawmill in Kispiox helped to create 45 log houses, 40 framed houses, a \$300 profit and that he believed helped to keep the residents in the community and away from the seasonal canneries and other

¹⁰¹ Neylan, Susan.2003.241.

¹⁰² Ibid. 241.

migrant work.¹⁰³ Similarly, the Tsimshian also added hinged doors, windows and even painted facades that symbolized prestige and wealth.¹⁰⁴ The Gitksan always had an industrious nature and that was reflected in their desire to acquire houses and goods, and within the feast hall public acknowledgement came with being a responsible hard worker.¹⁰⁵ The *Wilp* does not own individual homes, businesses or boats, but during times of feasts, the leaders within the *wilp* can exert a moral demand on its members to contribute a portion of their cash income and belongings to the proper conduct of house affairs.¹⁰⁶ The acceptance of Western material culture did not mean that the Gitksan wanted to replace their former culture, rather it was a way to subvert Christian influence and syncretize the beliefs that they deemed necessary to preserve their culture.

Conclusion

The Methodist missionaries work culminated in a series of experiences in the Gitksan villages that changed the Indigenous culture and replaced it with an English one. Religion went hand in hand with this process. In order for the Natives to attain “civilization” the Methodists believed that a total conversion was required. Inevitably change did take place; it was made most obvious by the Gitksan abandonment of their traditional longhouses. The influence that the church had on the Gitksan was reflected in clapboard buildings and structures that were symbolic of a new adopted British culture. The Gitksan did not entirely cooperate with the church though, as they continued to retain some of their art and totem poles. There was a give and take relationship whereby

¹⁰³ Pierce, W.H., H.C. Wrinch. “The Upper Skeena: Report”. *The Missionary Outlook*. V.20. N.2. February 1901. 35.

¹⁰⁴ Neylan. 238.

¹⁰⁵ Daly. 2005.177.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 165.

participation did not mean they had to deny their whole culture. The manifestations of building styles symbolized the Gitksan's willingness to be dynamic and thus adapt to change on their own accord.¹⁰⁷ Cultural loss is often considered to be an inevitable part of assimilation. However, this text tries to suggest that cultural gain is part of that process as well.

¹⁰⁷ Harkin E. Michael. The Heiltsuk: Dialogues of Culture and History on the Northwest Coast. 1997. University of Nebraska Press. 47.

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