

Xíxch' ká Gágaan Keili

The Frog Sitting in the Sun Dog Aura

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Introduction

From within regal ancient tribal rain forest lands of Southeast Alaska and during Alaska Gold Rush c. 1880 days and setting along the resourceful 52 mile Chilkat River valley, resided a quiet remote Tlingit village of Klukwan. The Gaanaxteidí clan of that village was in the process of building a new tribal family-ceremonial longhouse. This village clan house would become a fortunate home of 'The Frog Sitting In The Sun Dog Aura' drama. It comes to us today through the arts, songs, dance and oral traditions of the Chilkat-Tlingit's.

In these bold country tribal lands, the Tlingit society excelled in two national icons of the Eagle and the Raven crests along with their respective clans. The Gaanaxteidí, Gaanax.ádi, and Taakw.aaneidí houses are of the Raven (Yéil) crest. They migrated up the coast from Duncan Canal and according to their oral tradition, thousands upon thousands of years ago. Their cultural artifacts of patrimony for which they are famous, are:

- Strong Man Totem – Dukt'óotl'
- Woodworm Bowl – Gantutl'uk'xu X'ayeit
- Frog Sitting In The Sun Dog Aura – Xíxch' Gágaan Keitli Toot Yá s ein
- Whale House – Yaay Hít
- Land Otter House – Kooshdaa Hít
- Sentinel House – Kutís'Hít
- Valley House – Xaak Hít

The above are just some of their houses and their artifacts they have many more. Their clan starts in Klawock, Saxman, then to Angoon and then to Klukwan, Alaska.

After the great flood that happened upon the earth the clans/families, Eagle and Raven, Haida and Tsimshian fled to the interior to survive and some made it to the highest mountains.

It was after this great Tlingit-world-flood, the Gaanaxteidí, and Gaanax.ádi came back to their communities through the great Stikine River and the powerful Taku River area. A lot of the Gaanax.ádi settled in what is now known as Juneau, Alaska. The Tlingit name for Juneau is Dzantik'í Heeni. They were one of the four primary families that settled here, the rest returned to Klukwan, and those from Klawock that came down the Stikine and some from Taku (T'aaku) returned to Klawock.



The primary families settling in the Juneau/Taku area are:

- ❖ Yanyeidí
- ❖ Gaanax.ádi
- ❖ Wooshkeetaan
- ❖ L'eeneidí/Yaxté Hít Taan

There were other families but they were not the primary settlers of the Juneau/Taku villages. This return migration demonstrates the power of community. The following story is of the Chilkat Tlingit Gaanaxteidí/Gaanax.ádi Raven family.

Story (Shkalneek)

A Yéil-Yaay Hit (Raven/Whale) tribal longhouse was in the building process in Klukwan, an ancient era residence of the Chilkat's (Jilkáat Kwáan) who settled there for thousands of years.

On one summer day, one of the young men of the Gaanaxteidí awoke with the sunrise as his light dancing friend (ts'ootaat) and was in the day breaking friendliness of his village. He was on his way to check out the site where the house was being constructed. He was remembering that the house is called Naa Kahidi, which means a clan/family house, and *oh how the sunrise upon him and this site made such family sense somehow*, he thought.

He started with checking out the house postholes (kook) that were dug the day before and he saw a big frog (xíxch') trying to get out of one of the postholes, and each time it jumped it would almost make it, but would slide back into the hole because the sand walls were too loose and too deep.

When the jumping frog saw the young man, it became anxious and tried to get out of the posthole even more. Finally the young man jumped into the posthole with the frog to help it, but it became even more frantic, jumping all over in the limited space!

Finally, the young man yelled, "Be still!" (tleyee yei i natí). The frog, stunned, stopped suddenly as if it understood the Tlingit language. It sat suspended, but you could see it was in silenced fear.

The young man reached out to the friendly creature and gently lifted it up, (kei awsitaa) out of the posthole and placed it on the ground above the hole and the



frog went jumping off into the morning sun dancing forest. The *Gaanaxteidí* young man felt good in the sun-surrounding friendliness about helping this helpless frog, but he soon forgot all about it as he made his way around the *Naa Kahidi*.

Later on that night he had a dream. He dreamt he was in a wealthy *Naa Kahidi* palatial longhouse. It was cleanly spacious with strong house posts and a master artisan painted wall screen in the back. A man of position came out from behind the screen dressed in a tailored moose hide clothing. He was tall and slender and the clothing he wore had a spectacular flower and stem motif sewn on to the hide. It was balanced in color and geometric symmetry. The fringes on his sleeves and the side of his side and leggings were artistically spaced with everything working together in harmony to make regal attire for any person.

This princely man of the house, looking at the *Gaanaxteidí* young man, said, "*Gunalchéesh* for helping my son the other day." The young man stood stunned still and a bit confounded because he was trying to remember who he helped but he could not remember.

The wealthy-dressed gentleman said to the *Gaanaxteidí* young man, "My son is the one that you took out of your house posthole the other day. "*Gunalchéesh áwé*" he continued, "And, because you did this you will have good fortune pursue you and overtake you. You will see a large wolf and it will lead you to what you need and are looking for."

The *Gaanaxteidí* young man awoke and thought about the dream because it seemed so vividly real to him. He told his brothers about it in the morning and instead of joining him in the awe of the dream, they teased him and joked with him about being a big dreamer.

Not very long after this dream his uncle and brothers decided that they would trek into the interior and search for summer gold like everyone else. The interior of Alaska is called *daḱká*. They prepared, packing their food, water, blankets and tools (*has du yáanayi*).

They started off up the mountain trail to get to the interior by the early morning sunrise. They walked their ancestral ancient path and began searching for the summer gold that had everyone excitedly coming to Alaska and packing the Chilkoot



Pass (Lkoot Deiyi). The Chilkat's went up their trail where the Canadian border is today.

The uncle and his nephews searched and searched for many days, looking here and looking there without any gold fortune. No summer gold! They were running out of food and most importantly water. Water for any human being is more precious than gold. They began to get concerned over the lack of water. They ran out!

They were really troubled because their bodies were beginning to get dehydrated. They would go to one dry riverbed to the next not finding any water. It was just as bad as looking for the precious gold. Water was now precious, most desirable.

Suddenly, in their searching for water, they came upon a great wolf standing off in the mountain trail distance. The brothers all stopped and stood as still as a totem house posts. Their eyes were fixed on the wolf. One of the brothers said in a silent whisper, "Lets take this animal at least we won't go back home empty handed." The young man looked at his kin and said in a hushed whisper, "No, don't take it. It might lead us to the water that we need so desperately."

Listening to the young man, they followed the wolf as far back as they could, so they would not frighten their new forest friend away. It went along the path that it had followed since it was a puppy. The wolf stopped and lowered its head as if to be sniffing something, but it was actually lapping up glacier cold water from a natural artesian spring. The men waited patiently off in a distance.

When the wolf trotted off the men went to where it had stopped and found a large pool of clear cold artesian spring water. *Goon héen* is what it is called in the Tlingit language. The men were very happy that they had finally found something they were looking for. They hollered out -"Gunalchéesh á! To the great wolf" What they said to interpret this phrase is "...without question, it is settled, it is not debatable many thanks." This is what the á at the end of the word means.

The *Gaanaxteidí* young man got down on his knees to drink water by cupping the water into his hands. When he bent down to drink he could not believe his eyes! Not only did the wolf lead them to water, but to some of the biggest gold nuggets that anyone has ever seen! They began to yell, laugh, jump for joy and dance in thanksgiving Tlingit excitement at finding water for life and the sun gold nuggets.



The story goes that these people found so much gold that it filled their Naa Kahidi house. Their longhouse is shown in the Winter and Pond collection. Their artifacts are among the most valuable collection in the world. It has been sought after by some of the greatest museums and art collectors worldwide.

The animal that is called a great wolf is actually the Sun Dog of the Shangukeidí clan family. The Sun Dog is known by his encircling rainbow aura around the Sun, a rare sun gold phenomenon resulting in a circle shaped rainbow. Chilkat Tlingit tradition says, whoever sees this, can expect good fortune for all who witness this amazing natural Tlingit Sun Dog visit (kooligeeyi át).

In conclusion this story represents kindness (toolá aan) and empathy in helping animals and practicing the word yaa át wooné, respect. It also shows the priorities in life. Water is more precious than gold, sparing the life of an animal instead of killing it led to what they were looking for in more community ways than thought.

Toolá aan and yaa át wooné will always build greater community Naa Kahidi house posts and yield better family community benefits for one and all. The gold has long since been gone but the Gaanaxteidí still occupy the community of Klukwan to this very day.

