Volume 02, Issue 2 Autumn 2021 / Winter 2022 Pg. 204 - 227

Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies

https://www.networkonculture.ca/activities/matrix

Mythological Narratives and Women's Expression in Northern Northwest Coast Art

KIERRA BEAMENT, MA

Abstract

Along the North American Pacific Coast, the Haida, Tsimshian, and Tlingit peoples produce artwork that expresses their rich, cultural history.[1] Material objects such as the Naaxin or Chilkat robes depict classical Northwest Coast clan crests in woven mountain goat wool. Crest designs were formerly described as traditionally created and drawn by men. Women then transferred these motifs onto the Naaxin robes in striking white, black, blue-green, and yellow colours. The Raven's Tail, an older style of robe which was also made by women, did not feature crests. Instead, it displayed geometric motifs designed by the weavers themselves using only white and black pigments and not referring to crests or myths. Similar geometric designs are found on basketry and textile artefacts.

Having just started my inquiry into Indigenous male and female participation in North American Pacific Coast artwork, I turned my attention to the available literature: mainly museum archives on the one hand and mythological texts on the other. Juxtaposing Tlingit, Tsimshian, and Haida mythology and women's concern with geometric design with figurative designs-said to be introduced by masculine concerns with crest images, this report explores mythological narratives about the origins of weaving and basketry, as an entry into a larger project intended to shed some light on women's artistic expression in Northern Northwest Coast art. So far, these narratives demonstrate a great respect for women and the high esteem in which weaving and basketry are held, while the binary gendered opposition between crest art and objects decorated with geometric designs appears attenuated.

[1] I use the term Tsimshian because it is the oldest and most widely used term in the literature and is the most inclusive.

Keywords: Tsimshian, Haida, Tlingit, oral traditions, women's art, men's art, weaving, basketry, Raven's Tail blanket, Chilkat blanket, Naaxin robe.

*****

Résumé

Le long de la côte américaine du Pacifique nord, les peuples Haida, Tsimshian and Tlingit produisent de nombreux objects dont les qualités esthétiques font traditionnellement partie de leur production, de leur valeur et de leur usage. Ces objets expriment une histoire culturelle et artistique riche et unique. Entre autres, ces objets incluent des capes ou robes tissées, les couvertures chilkat ou Naaxin, *dont les dessins reproduisent les blasons des clans auxquels appartiennent ceux qui les portent. Les blasons, selon les données ethnographiques classiques, sont typiquement dessinés, peints ou sculptés, par les hommes; les femmes copient ces images dans des couleurs vives (noir, jaune, turquoise et blanc) durant le tissage. Un style plus ancien de cape, aussi tissée par les femmes, appelé « queue de Corbeau », ne représente pas de blason, mais est décoré de motifs géométriques, créés par les femmes avec pour seules couleurs le noir et le blanc. On trouve des motifs similaires sur les paniers et la vannerie.*

À ce stade encore préliminaire de mes recherche sur la participation masculine et féminine dans la création artistique des peuple du Pacifique nord, je me suis trouvée forcée par les circonstance de me tourner d'abord vers les archives muséales, et la littérature, y compris la littérature orale dont les mythes. En juxtaposant les mythologie Haida, Tsimshian, et Tlingit, avec les questions que pose la distribution genrée, probable mais non encore avérée, de la création artistique, potentiellement attribuant le style plutôt figuratif des blasons aux hommes et le style géométrique de la vannerie et du tissage aux femmes, ce rapport de recherche examine les mentions relativement fréquentes des capes naaxin et « queue de Corbeau », ainsi que la vannerie, que l'on trouve dans les mythes. Les récits de l'origine mythique des ces objets montre un grand respect pour les femmes d'une part, et pour le tissage et la vannerie d'autre part, tout en atténuant la distinction entre les genres.

Mots clefs: Tsimshian, Haida, Tlingit, traditions orales, mythologie, arts masculins, arts féminins, tissage, vannerie, cape "queue de corbeau", couverture *Chilkat*, cape *Naaxin*.

Introduction

The Tsimshian, Haida, and Tlingit peoples dwell on the northern portion of the North American Pacific Coast, in northern British Columbia and southern Alaska. They share a similar environment, a great deal of their material culture, and social structures based on lineage clans. But they speak different languages that belong to three distinct linguistic families and they have developed very divergent worldviews, as exemplified by their varied shamanic practices. While all three societies share

matrilineal descent, their views on women and gender can differ. One commonality shared amongst all three communities is the importance of art in their lives and their social systems.

Most of the Northwest Coast Indigenous artwork noticed and discussed by collectors and acquired by museums can best be defined as crest art, that is, objects decorated with realistic designs representing the crests or heraldic figures identifying the kin that structure the social life of the three Northern Pacific Coast Peoples groups (matrilineal lineages, noble houses, or clans). A second category of ceremonial art recognized by collectors, that of shamanic art, uses a similar figurative style but does not refer to crests. The traditionally feminine arts of weaving and basketry are gaining recognition as a third category.

Led by a primary interest in material culture and the participation of women in the production of culturally and aesthetically significant artefacts, I was struck by a remark made by Haida weaver Delores Churchill in the short documentary "Raven's Tail Journey of Evelyn Vanderhoop," in which Churchill refers to the discontinuation of the Raven's Tail robes. In her opinion, the Naaxin robes were masculine, while the Raven's Tail were feminine, hinting at a fundamental gender difference in North American Northwest Coast art between objects displaying crests (hereditary heraldry) and objects decorated with geometric designs.[2] However, there is little information available in the literature on whether this gender difference is deeply rooted in the cultural context of the Haida, Tsimshian, and Tlingit peoples or how ancient it is. My doctoral research project will explore this question in more depth.

Following an initial exploration into the historical and anthropological research on the participation of women in the production of Northwest coast art, I am sharing the initial results of a preliminary exploration into information contained in myths pertaining to weaving and basketry, that is, Indigenous North American Pacific Coast art traditionally produced by women.

In his book *The Tlingit Indians*, George T. Emmons observes that the geometric designs found on basketry, different from the crest designs found on many Tlingit artefacts, were not abstract designs.

> Design in basketry was geometric, and constituted a noticeably fundamental exception to the characteristic art of the Tlingit, who, in carving, painting, and weaving in animal fabrics…employed only realistic or symbolic animal figures, totemic in character and connected with their social organization…[The basketry motifs] were so realistic in outline that they justify the belief that they were the result of a desire to represent an object, or some characteristic feature, as clearly as possible in geometric form. [3]

[2] "Raven's Tail Journey of Evelyn Vanderhoop," YouTube video, 14:21-14:27 posted by Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, October 11th, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtPDo-PVGTs&t=4s.
[3] George Thornton Emmons, "Art and Industries: Women's Work," in *The Tlingit Indians*, ed. Frederica de Laguna (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 220-221.

In *Spruce Root Basketry of the Alaska Tlingit*, Frances Paul discusses how material culture is endowed with spirit: "It is not surprising that the names of the decorative motives in basketry should be based upon the natural objects of his environment."[4]

In recent years, a growing number of studies have brought into question the division of Indigenous arts into 'men's art' and 'women's art'. In their book *Native North American Art*, authors Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips challenge the Eurocentric image of male art as predominantly sacred and women's craft as secular: Berlo and Phillips argue that, "Too often, items made by women and used in daily life – coiled baskets, beaded moccasins, woven blankets – were not seen to be connected to spiritual or political power, while men's carvings and paintings were."[5] Among all the Haida, Tsimshian, and Tlingit of the Northern Pacific Coast, both men and women are actively involved in the social, political, and ceremonial life of their communities; both wear heraldic regalia with crest designs and both participate in its confection, but perhaps using different materials and, therefore, distinct technology. If there is a strict separation between men's and women's art, could it be based on techniques rather than decorative style or meaning? For example, carving, metalwork, and painting are created by men, while sewing, weaving, beading, and basketry are created by women.

Yet we do not know if this gendered opposition actually exists, or, if it does, how it is defined and understood by the Tsimshian, Haida, and Tlingit peoples. In a separate chapter, "'Encircles Everything': A Transformative History of Native Women's Arts," Berlo and Phillips re-examine and present the bifurcation between men's art and women's craft as a purely European construction, emphasizing that "There is no evidence, linguistic or otherwise, to suggest that Indigenous North Americans ever made such distinctions; they make none today."[6] Similarly, authors Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse and Megan A. Smetzer echo that a gendered divide in creative arts was imposed on Indigenous artists in their article "Working to Change the Tide: Women Artists on the Northwest Coast." In their work, Bunn-Marcuse and Smetzer describe how artistic gender roles did not become restrictive until "…patriarchal laws and institutions of settler colonialism affected the customary status of women and devalued their tangible cultural expressions."[7] Centering their chapter on women's artistic contributions along the Northwest Coast, Bunn-Marcuse and Smetzer introduce the terms resilience, activation, and balance, stating, "Rather than impose art historical and anthropological categories of value, we use the concepts of *resilience*, *activation*, and *balance* as we consider artists who address the central roles of women in the transmission of 'Indigenous cultural knowledge.'"[8]

---

[4] Frances Paul, "Pattern Names," in *Spruce Root Basketry of the Alaska Tlingit*, ed. Willard W. Beatty (Lawrence Kansas: U.S Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Branch of Education, 1944), 46.
[5] Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, "An Introduction to the Indigenous Arts of North America," in *Native North American Art*, 2nd ed. (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 40.
[6] Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, "'Encircles Everything': A Transformative History of Native Women's Arts," in *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists*, eds. Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Teri Greeves (Minneapolis Institute of Art and University of Washington Press, 2019), 46.
[7] Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse and Megan A. Smetzer, "Working to Change the Tide: Women Artists on the Northwest Coast," in *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists*, eds. Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Teri Greeves (Minneapolis Institute of Art and University of Washington Press, 2019), 259.
[8] Ibid., 262.

Further, in their chapter in the sub-section "Activation," Bunn-Marcuse and Smetzer describe the artistic gender bias located in archives and numerous literary sources, asserting, "When the majority of publications, most written by men who had limited access to or interest in the practices of women, say that 'men carve, women weave,' that becomes the narrative, closing out the possibility of expressive freedom and creativity by *all genders*" (emphasis in original).[9] While the chapter "Working to Change the Tide" goes into a more detailed analysis on women artists along the Northwest Coast, from some of the earliest historical records to the twenty-first century, Bunn-Marcuse and Smetzer's work highlights the potential fluidity of women's and men's artistic tangible expressions.[10] Finally, in her article "The Scientist and the Polymath: Tlingit Weavers Teri Rofkar and Clarissa Rizal," author Aldona Jonaitis pays tribute to two highly skilled Tlingit weavers, the late Teri Rofkar and Clarissa Rizal. In her essay, Jonaitis draws attention to the lack of recognition concerning women's textile art. Referring to balance within Tlingit culture, Jonaitis describes how Tlingit women's art follows the cycles of nature and are "considered analogous to women's ability to bear children."[11] According to Jonaitis, a Chilkat robe can take as long as four years to complete.[12] The act of weaving is not the only process in the fabrication of the robe. Women must first gather the necessary materials like the wool and cedar bark and process the materials to begin weaving.[13] In the video, "Presentation on Chilkat and Ravenstail Weaving, Celebration 2016," from the Sealaska Heritage Institute, weaver Marsha Hotch offers a detailed account of the work that goes into processing mountain goat wool.[14] Similarly, Della Cheney remarks that the images on the Raven's Tail robes can take three to four months to design.[15]

Several scholars have noted the participation of women in the making of traditionally masculine artefacts. In "Tlingit *At:óow*: Tlingit Traditions and Concepts," Nora Marks Dauenhauer discusses the importance of Tlingit *at:óow* and some of the objects identified as *at:óow*.[16] The unusual Emaciated Shaman Daggar likely was made by a woman.[17] Robin K. Wright's chapter, "The Early Contact Period, 1774 to 1799 *gannyaa*, *gu.uu*, *yaahl dàajee*, *and the Maritime Fur Traders*," examines the journal

[9] Ibid., 264.
[10] Ibid., 258-272.
[11] Aldona Jonaitis, "The Scientist and the Polymath: Tlingit Weavers Teri Rofkar and Clarissa Rizal," in *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists*. eds. Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Teri Greeves (Minneapolis Institute of Art and University of Washington Press, 2019), 125.
[12] Ibid., 125.
[13] Ibid.
[14] "Presentation on Chilkat and Ravenstail Weaving, Celebration 2016," Youtube video, 16:18- 34:19, posted by Sealaska Heritage Institute, January 24th, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1q_ITTgrEY&t=7s.
[15] Ibid., 49:33.
[16] Nora Marks Dauenhauer, "Tlingit At.óow: Tlingit Traditions and Concepts," in *The Spirit Within: Northwest Coast Native Art from the John H. Hauberg Collection*, eds. Helen Abbott, Steven Brown, Lorna Price, and Paula Thurman (Seattle: Rizzoli New York, 1995), 20-29.
[17] Ibid., 42. Other sources that mention the dagger are: Bill Holm, *The Box of Daylight: Northwest Coast Indian Art*, ed. Susan Pelzer (Seattle, Seattle Art Museum and University of Washington Press, 1983), 98; Nancy Harris, "Reflections on Northwest Coast Silver," in *The Box of Daylight: Northwest Coast Indian Art*, ed. Susan Pelzer (Seattle, Seattle Art Museum: University of Washington Press, 1983), 133; and Bunn-Marcuse and Smetzer, 260. In Harris' essay and in Bunn-Marcuse and Smetzer's bibliography (329n14), it is mentioned that the tradition of the dagger's origin was recorded by Russian priest Ivan Veniaminov.

entries of Samuel Burling, clerk to Captain James Rowan. In the entry dated March 20th, 1799, Burling describes "the children waiting upon the old folks and several of the females who were not slaves making wooden pipes."[18] Finally, in the autobiography *During My Time: Florence Edenshaw Davidson, A Haida Woman*, transcribed and edited by Margaret B. Blackman, Edenshaw Davidson recounts when she painted a canoe made by her husband. In her narrative, she expresses her apprehension to paint the canoe, professing, "I don't think women ever used to draw designs in the old days, just men. That's why I was scared when I started painting the canoe."[19]

Whether or not the classification of creative arts has actual historical or pre-historical roots, the gendered division of artistic production is undoubtedly of secondary importance in the contemporary cultural context, which makes it difficult to investigate the matter today. The tradition on which it is supposedly built has to be re-examined. A new perspective on the question is available in the mythological texts that support the Northwest Coast ceremonial life.

What follows is an examination of a potential opposition between ceremonial crest art designed by men and "geometric" or non-crest art designed by women, which could be readily found in the co-existence of two styles of mountain goat wool woven robes. Both are linked to high status, one with geometric designs, the other with crest designs, and both are part of the regalia worn by noble people in all three Indigenous societies.

Raven's Tail Weaving

Thought to have originated among the northern Tlingit nations of Alaska, the Raven's Tail robes predate European contact.[20] In their book *Soft Gold: The Fur Trade and Cultural Exchange on the Northwest Coast*, Thomas Vaughn and Bill Holm confirm the early existence of the Raven's Tail robes, stating, "When European explorers first met the Tlingit and Haida in what is now southeastern Alaska they were deeply impressed by handsome robes woven in complex designs of the wool of some unknown animal."[21]

---

[18] Robin K. Wright, "The Early Contact Period, 1774 to 1799 *gannyaa, gu.uu, yaahl dàajee, and the Maritime Fur Traders*," in *Northern Haida Master Carvers* (University of Washington Press: Douglas & McIntyre, 2001), 79. A reference to Haida pipe carving by women is also mentioned in "Working to Change the Tide: Women Artists on the Northwest Coast," 260.

[19] Florence Edenshaw Davidson, "I Quit Having Babies: My Later Years (1939-1979)," in *During My Time: Florence Edenshaw Davidson, A Haida Woman*, transcribed and edited by Margaret B. Blackman (University of Washington Press and Douglas & McIntyre, Ltd., 1982), 126. In the footnotes, Blackman corrects the date from 1939 to either 1936 or 1937. Bunn-Marcuse and Smetzer also discuss the painting of a canoe by Florence Edenshaw Davidson in their chapter, "Working to Change the Tide: Women Artists on the Northwest Coast," 260.

[20] "Three Hundred Years of Tlingit Art," YouTube video, 16:25-16:29, posted by Sealaska Heritage Institute, January 29th, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6nzvdu1msEM&t=128s.

[21] Thomas Vaughan and Bill Holm, "Textiles and Ceremonial Dress: The Swift Blanket," in *Soft Gold: The Fur Trade and Cultural Exchange on the Northwest Coast of America* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society, 1982), 110.

In *The Raven's Tail*, Cheryl Samuel describes the fabrication and weaving techniques of the Raven's Tail robes. Woven using only mountain goat wool, Raven's Tail robes are rectangular in shape with linear and geometric line patterns emphasized through the use of black/brown and yellow wool, dyed using hemlock bark and wolf moss, on a plain white backdrop (see Image 1).[22] On most Raven's Tail robes, long black tassels hang from the corners of the central design patterns.[23] While analyzing the robes collected by Cheryl Samuel (*The Raven's Tail*, 1987), I noticed that the tassels present on a number of the Raven's Tail robes were also added to blankets depicting both geometric and crest patterns.[24]

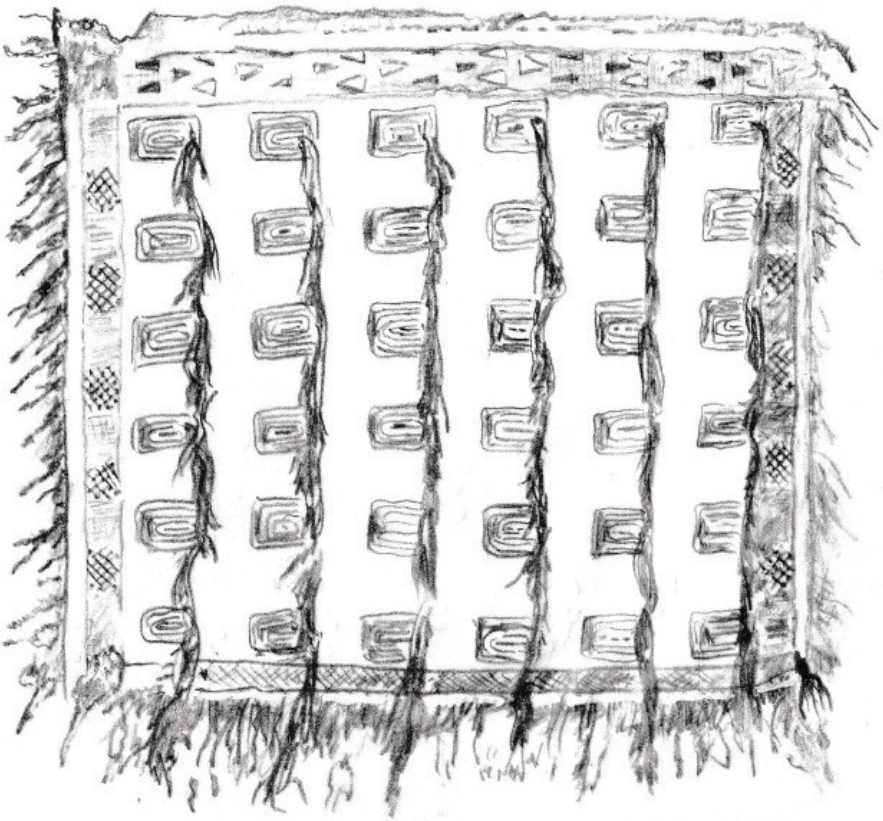

Image 1: "One within Another Fur Sided Robe", a Raven's Tail robe." © Marie-Françoise Guédon 2021. Drawn image derives from the photograph of the original robe; for photograph, see Cheryl Samuel, The Raven's Tail, *78-79; original robe is held in the Kunstkamera Museum, Russia. http://collection.kunstkamera.ru/en.*

'Geometric' patterns are not necessarily simple patterns; their complexity is evident in the elaborate details of their fabrication that requires using more than nine variations of two and three strand

[22] Cheryl Samuel, *The Raven's Tail* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987), 16 and 24.
[23] Ibid., 16, and Vaughan and Holm, 111.
[24] For more information, see Cheryl Samuel, 12-13.

twining.[25] Contemporary authors such as Cheryl Samuel (1987), Bill Holm (1990), Evelyn Vanderhoop (2020) and Megan A. Smetzer (2020) agree that the weaving techniques and geometric designs adorning Raven's Tail robes reflect the twined variations and patterns captured on basketry, variations and patterns which were noted in the early twentieth century by George T. Emmons (1991 [1903]).[26] These designs are often named and identified as stylized representations of plants, animals, and other objects; such motifs include, among others and for instance, the "butterfly" pattern, the "lightning" pattern meant to represent the lightning produced by the thunderbird and the "trail of the land otter."[27] In Tlingit oral narratives only one basket uses motifs displaying crests or hereditary possessions. This basket is called the "Mother Basket" and will be discussed in the section below "Tlingit Oral Narratives."

Raven's Tail robes were also adopted by the Tsimshian peoples, as well as having been woven by the peoples of Haida Gwaii, where they were known as "sky blankets" or "cloud blankets."[28]

Chilkat Weaving

Chilkat dancing blankets, also woven from mountain goat wool and strengthened with yellow or red cedar bark feature elaborate crest designs and were first woven by Tsimshian weavers. The style then spread north to the Tlingit and Haida people, where the Chilkat blankets became known as Naaxin robes.[29] According to Bill Holm, the Naaxin robes derive from woven yellow cedar bark and the Raven's Tail robes.[30] For the most part, the Chilkat robes depict the crest of the local matrilineal clans and noble houses. Using patterns painted on cedar boards by men, women weavers translate the primary images into the weaving.[31] Unlike the Raven's Tail, the wool of the Chilkat robes is twined with cedar bark, which gives the yarn a tenser, more durable form;[32] according to Raven's Tail and

[25] Cheryl Samuel, 16; George T. Emmons, *The Basketry of the Tlingit*, in Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History, vol. 3 part 2 (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1991 [1903]), 228.
[26] Samuel, 14, 17, and 26; Bill Holm, "Art," in *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 7, Northwest Coast, gen. ed. William C. Sturtevant, vol. ed. Wayne Suttles (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1990), 627; Evelyn Vanderhoop, "Soft Robes of Thundering Power: Mountain Goat Fiber Textiles of the Northwest Coast," in *Unsettling Native Art Histories on the Northwest Coast*, eds. Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse and Aldona Jonaitis (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020), 243; Megan A. Smetzer, "Copper Seaweed and Woven Octopus Bags: Shgen George and the Art of Resilience," in *Unsettling Native Art Histories on the Northwest Coast*, eds. Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse and Aldona Jonaitis (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020), 125; Emmons, 228.
[27] Emmons, *The Basketry of the Tlingit*, 263-77.
[28] The "sky blanket' and "cloud blanket" are discussed in Evelyn Vanderhoop's chapter "Soft Robes of Thundering Power: Mountain Goat Fiber Textiles of the Northwest Coast," 242-58.
[29] Cheryl Samuel, *The Chilkat Dancing Blanket* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 22.
[30] Bill Holm, "A Wooling Mantle Neatly Wrought: The Early Historic Record of Northwest Coast Pattern-Twined Textiles–1744-1850," in *American Indian Art Magazine*, vol. 8 no. 1 (Winter, 1982): 36.
[31] Aldona Jonaitis, "Nineteenth-Century Northern Coast Art," in *Art of the Northwest Coast* (University of Washington Press: Douglas & McIntyre, 2006), 139.
[32] Evelyn Vanderhoop, "Soft Robes of Thundering Power: Mountain Goat Fiber Textiles of the Northwest Coast," 243-44.

Chilkat weaver Lily Hope, the cedar bark strips act as a natural insect repellent.[33] The wool is then dyed using vibrant colours of black, yellow, and blue-green.[34]

Among the Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimshian people, the crest designs are represented in a unique style which Bill Holm refers to as a kind of calligraphy. Holm coined the term *formlines* to describe the curvilinear lines that capture the heraldic representation of the crest animals. Subsequently, the term was adopted by anthropologists and art specialists as well as artists themselves. The advanced techniques of carving and painting the formlines have to be adapted to the more rigid media of weaving. The iconography of the Chilkat robe is specific in its design and execution and follows the calligraphic style of the Northwest Coast ceremonial art (see Image 2).[35]

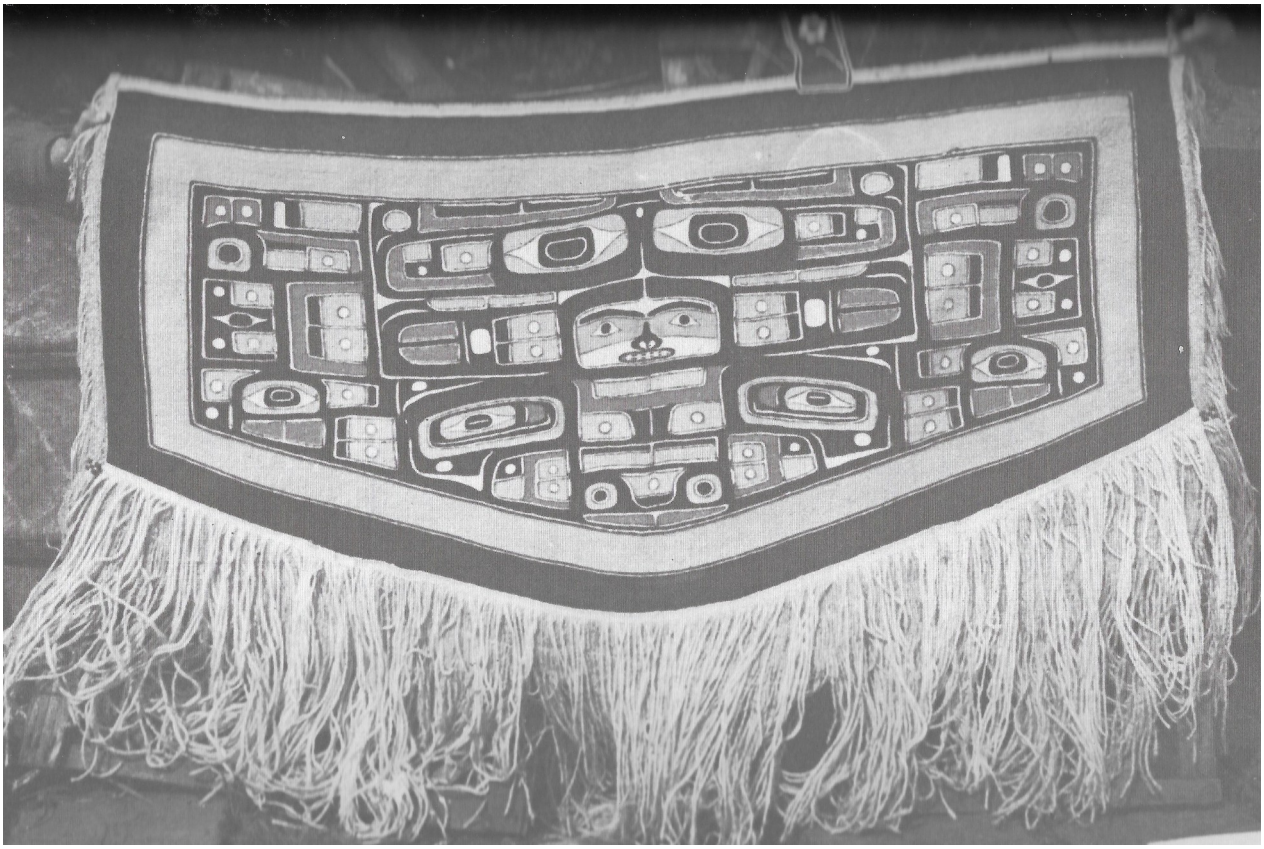

Image 2: Naaxin robe depicting the Raven. According to Frederica de Laguna's description, the blanket had formerly belonged to Anna Daknaqin, Tl'uknax̲adi. The robe has a Raven design and a beaded Raven neckband (not shown in the photograph). The image was taken at Yakutat, 1949. © Frederica de Laguna (1972; 2018), Under Mount Saint Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit, *Vol. 3, Gatineau, QC: Frederica de Laguna Northern Books, p. 1065; reprinted with permission.*

[33] "Lily Hope Chilkat Weaver" Youtube video, 1:15, posted by Lily Hope Weaver, March 1st, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YraJBuYfRgk&t=3s
[34] Cheryl Samuel, "Materials, Spinning, and Dyeing," in *The Chilkat Dancing Blanket*, 66-70.
[35] Bill Holm, "Elements of the Art," in *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form, 50th Anniversary Edition* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 35.

Holm further elaborates on the complex techniques used by weavers when composing the central design field by describing them as *configurative*, *expansive*, and *distributive* - terms through which he captures the degree of realism in the woven designs of the Naaxin robes. Configurative designs showcase the crest animal in its original form and are easy to identify as the Killer Whale, Raven, Frog, etc. The expansive designs produced by weavers only slightly distort the original image and fragments of the animal's original anatomy are still visible to some extent. However, distributive designs are intended to fill the given space of the Naaxin robes, and therefore the shape of the animal is unrecognizable within the final product. Thus, the images are intended to be representative of the animal while, at the same time, unidentifiable.[36]

Wearing a crest design publicly announces an individual's name, rank, and position within his or her kin groups. Among the Tlingit, tangible objects such as the Naaxin robes displaying *at:óow* (crests) belong to a specific family or clan. Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer describe *at:óow*, as follows:

> The word at:óow means, literally, "an owned or purchased thing." The concepts of "thing" on the one hand, and "owned," or "purchased," on the other, are equally important. The "*thing*" (emphasis in original) may be land (geographic features such as a mountain, a landmark, an historical site, a place such as Glacier Bay) a heavenly body (the sun, the dipper, the milky way) a spirit, a personal name, an artistic design, or a range of other "things." It can be an image from oral literature such as an episode from the Raven cycle on a tunic, hat, robe or blanket; it can be a story or song about an event in the life of an ancestor… At.óow can also be spirits of various kinds: shaman spirits and spirits of animals.[37]

Whether tangible or intangible, owned or purchased, the right by an individual, or a kin group to *at:óow* is essential in the Tlingit social and ritual system. A similar importance is attached to kin groups' tangible and intangible ceremonial property among the Haida and Tsimshian. In *Structural Anthropology*, Claude Lévi-Strauss notes that the meaning of art among all Northwest Coast peoples is an extension of social organization. He explains that "Motifs and themes express rank differences, nobility privileges, and degrees of prestige…organized along similar hierarchical lines and their decorative art functioned to interpret and validate the ranks in the hierarchy."[38]

A new context for the question, explored here, is available in the mythological texts that support Northwest Coast ceremonial life and worldview. The two types of robes are present but find distinct expressions in the mythological narratives. Also present in the mythological narratives are other items of regalia such as aprons, cedar bark robes, spruce root hats, and basketry, which are treated with

[36] Bill Holm, "Symbolism and Realism," in *Northwest Coast Indian Art*, 11-12.
[37] Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer, eds., *Haa Tuwunáagu Yis, for Healing Our Spirit: Tlingit Oratory*," Classics of Tlingit Oral Literature 2 (University of Washington Press, 1990), 14-15.
[38] Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Split Representation in the Art of Asia and America," in *Structural Anthropology* (Basic Books, 1967), 256.

equivalent respect, thus enlarging the context to other artefacts produced by women (see Images 3 and 4).

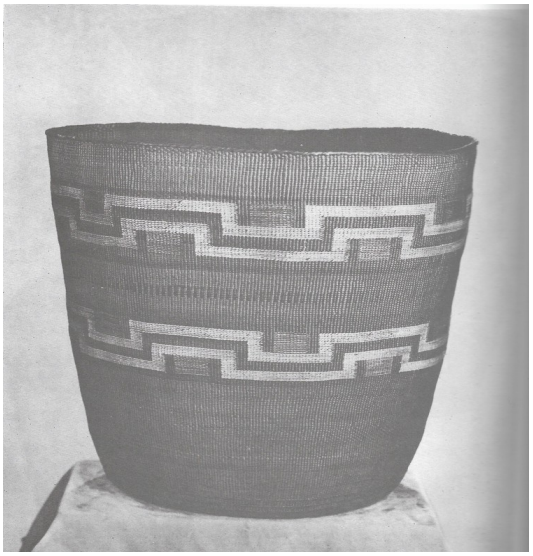

Image 3: Spruce root basket decorated with coloured grass using a false embroidery technique. Collected by George T. Emmons at Yakutat prior to 1888. The dimensions of the basket are unknown. (AMNH E/2318; neg. No. 31667). © Frederica de Laguna (1972; 2018), Under Mount Saint Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit, *Vol. 3, Gatineau, QC: Frederica de Laguna Northern Books, p. 1050; reprinted with permission.*

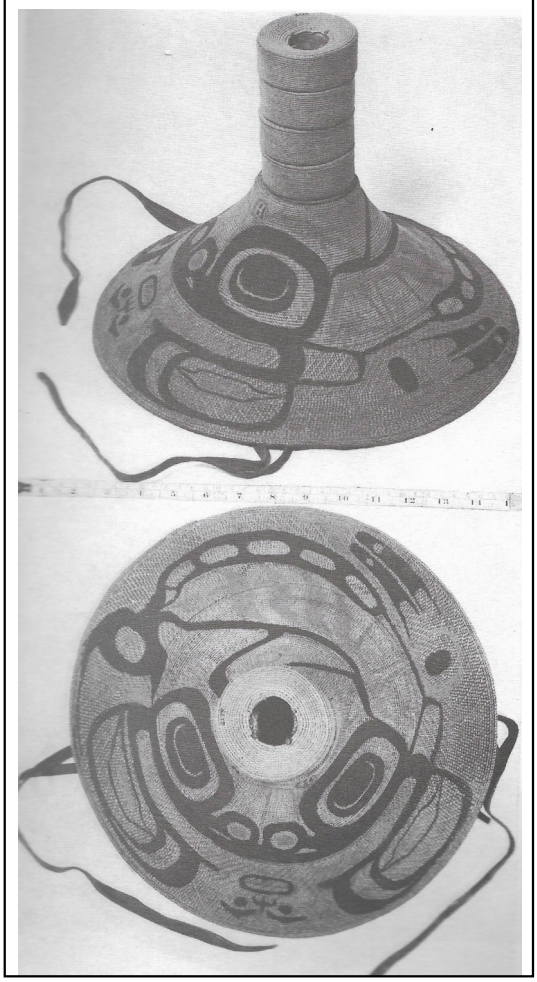

Image 4: Yakutat crest hat with four cylinders on top. The hat is a woven spruce root hat with a killer whale design painted in black, red, and blue. Collected by William S. Libbey, Yakutat 1886 (PU 5179). © Frederica de Laguna (1972; 2018), Under Mount Saint Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit, Vol. 3, Gatineau, QC: Frederica de Laguna Northern Books, p. 1071; reprinted with permission.

Furthermore, it must be mentioned that the mythological literature of the North American Pacific Coast, whether Tsimshian, Haida, or Tlingit, features women as key protagonists and sometimes as main characters. The oral traditions outlined below represent only a small fraction of the narratives

recited along the Northern Northwest Coast, along with the mentioning of women's art, as this foray into mythology is still very much in its beginning stages.

Tsimshian Oral Traditions

The Tsimshian oral traditions relating the origins of weaving usually give the main role to a woman who returns home with the knowledge of weaving robes after visiting supernatural beings.

In *The Chilkat Blanket*, Emmons offers two different versions of the Tsimshian story on the origin of the Chilkat Dancing Blanket.[39] The narrative begins with he marriage between the daughter of a Chief and a member of the Bear family. Some time after the marriage, the young woman escapes and runs to the shore, where she sees a fisherman in his canoe. The fisherman refuses to come to shore unless the young woman marries him. Agreeing, the young woman boards the canoe, then realizes that the fisherman is not human but rather Ḳonaqadē't, a benevolent spirit recognized throughout the Northwest Coast. Ḳonaqadē't takes her to his house under the sea:

> Upon reaching his abode, he wrapped her in his canoe-mat of cedar bark, and carried her through the house to the rear apartment, telling her that she must pay no attention to anything she might hear or see. Looking through the cracks in the partition, she saw the Lynx wife weaving a beautiful robe, which was the original Chilkat blanket.[40]

When the young woman manages to go home, she takes with her the knowledge of Chilkat weaving and a crest figure that might be that of Ḳonaqadē't.

In the second version, a young woman married to Ḳonaqadē't decides one day to leave her house under the sea to return to the human world. She takes her son and a new crest with her.

> As the prevailing system of matriarchy gives the children wholly to the mother, and requires that the boy be trained by the maternal uncle, he [Ḳonaqadē't] consented to let his wife return to earth, on the condition that she should not forget him; and to this end she promised to weave for him a ceremonial robe commemorative of their meeting and courtship. (…) And this was the origin of the Chilkat blanket.[41]

In both versions, the Chilkat blanket has a supernatural origin. In "The Scientist and the Polymath: Tlingit Weavers Teri Rofkar and Clarissa Rizal," Aldona Jonaitis examines these narratives and notes that the robe and its motifs are designed and fabricated by the young woman. There is no mention of a pattern board being created by Ḳonaqadē't and later used by the young woman.[42]

---

[39] George T. Emmons, *The Chilkat Blanket*, Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History, vol. 3. Part 4 (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1903), 329-30 and 330.
[40] Ibid., 330
[41] Ibid.
[42] Aldona Jonaitis, "The Scientist and the Polymath: Tlingit Weavers Teri Rofkar and Clarissa Rizal," 124.

In the story "The Kikiata and his Wooden Wife," related in 1954 by Dan Gosnell, recorded by William Beynon, and later published in Marius Barbeau's *Tsimshian Narratives: Volume 1*, the narrative follows a young hunter who comes across a rich valley with an abundance of hunting game, salmon, berries, and "rice."[43] Judging that this is the ideal place to live, the hunter decides it is time for him to marry before settling in. After refusing many young women, the young hunter marries the daughter of a poor widow. Every day the hunter goes out hunting and returns with a mountain goat, which is prepared by both himself and his wife. Eventually, there is enough wool to be spun for weaving, so the young hunter makes a weaving board for the young woman so she can begin weaving dancing blankets while her husband is away. But the hunter is too greedy and kills too much game; as a result, the animals of the valley and forest curse the hunter's wife. She sickens and dies. In his sadness and grief, the young hunter paints an image of his wife onto wood and places it in front of the loom so that she may continue to weave the dancing robes. One day, while he is away visiting his village, two sisters from a nearby hunting party enter the young hunter's house, where they find the wooden wife. They decide to hide in the hunter's home and, upon his return, find him talking to his wooden wife. The hunter discovers the two women hiding under a pile of animal furs and offers them food, then decides to marry the youngest sister. The story concludes: "So the young hunter took his new wife and her sister lived with them and the man taught these two women the art of weaving and they were better than his first wife."[44]

This particular ending deserves further attention since here it is a man who teaches the women to weave. The narrative suggests the possibility that in the past, gendered divisions may not have played as significant a role in artistic production as currently assumed.

In *The Dancing Chilkat*, Cheryl Samuel recounts the tale of the fabrication of 'The First Dancing Apron' (an apron is woven using the same materials as the Chilkat robes).[45] This origin story features a widow and her daughter who reside along the Skeena River. One time, during the winter months, both animals and people grow very hungry. In the Chief's house, the young woman likes to sit at the back of the house and look at the paintings on the house screen, which come to life with the glow of the fire. Absent-mindedly, she begins to weave the images found on the screen into a robe. As she does this, the snow begins to melt and spring arrives, ushering in an abundance of food. As she continues to weave, the young woman creates an apron which she attaches to caribou hide and adds layers of leather fringes to the border; this gains much attention and admiration from guests for its intricacy and craftsmanship. To the bottom, she carefully sews puffin beaks along with deer hooves, thus finishing the garment. When summer arrives, and the robe is finished, the Chief's son marries the widow's daughter, and a celebration and feast are held. The Chief dances in the apron, which gains much attention and admiration from guests for its intricacy and craftsmanship. After the celebrations, news of the apron spreads throughout the Northwest Coast, where talented women begin to be commissioned to create such robes in the same style. The young woman and her mother teach

[43] Dan Gosnell. "The Kikiata and his Wooden Wife," in Marius Barbeau et al., *Tsimshian Narratives: volume 1: Tricksters, shamans, and heroes* (University of Ottawa Press, 1987), 217-9.
[44] Ibid., 219.
[45] Cheryl Samuel, "Origin, Ceremony, and Design," *The Chilkat Dancing Blanket*, 20-21.

weavers the art of weaving Chilkat robes. According to the narrative, as retold by Samuel, this is how the Tsimshian became renowned weavers of the Chilkat robes.

As in other narratives, this story emphasizes the importance of the Chilkat robes as originating in the supernatural world and their value to the community. It is worth considering that the creative act resulting in the new apron is attributed to a young woman.

Tlingit Oral Traditions

While the geometric designs that adorn the Raven's Tail may have been inspired by basketry, basketry itself, like the Naaxin blanket, is also grounded in mythology. According to Tlingit mythological narratives, there was once a young woman who was married to the Sun.

> For long years they lived happily together, and many children came to them; but these were of the earth, and their future filled the mother's mind with anxiety. One day, sitting idly thinking, she picked up some strands of a root, and carelessly plaited them together, twisting them in and out until a small basket was formed. The Sun increased its size until it was large enough to contain the mother and her eight children, and in it they were lowered to the earth near Yakutat. This was the first basket, and from it was learned the art of weaving.[46]

While the historical origins of basket-making remain a mystery, the importance of basketry in the cultures of the Pacific Northwest is undeniable. Baskets are made from spruce roots harvested at different cycles of the plant's growth and decorated with an assortment of grasses and other plants.[47] The images on the baskets are mostly geometric and are the source of inspiration for the designs on the Raven's Tail (see above).

A basket itself could become a crest, as related in several versions of the origins of the Mother Basket, a widespread Tlingit myth. One version, "Mountain Dweller," tells the story of two sisters who are not allowed to eat between meals.[48] One day, their mother catches the two sisters eating food between meals and she takes the food out of her eldest daughter's mouth, scratching her as she does this. In anger, she shouts at her eldest daughter that she should marry Mountain Dweller, known for his reputation as a skilled hunter, if she is so hungry. That night the two sisters run away into the forest; they come across Mountain Dweller, who invites them into his home and gives them plenty of food. Mountain Dweller eventually marries the eldest sister and, after several months, suggests that the two sisters visit their family. He instructs his wife to weave a tiny basket, which he then shakes until it is large; Mountain Dweller fills the entirety of the basket with food and gifts for his in-laws. He shakes

[46] Emmons, *The Basketry of the Tlingit*, 229.
[47] Ibid., 233.
[48] John R. Swanton, "Mountain Dweller," in *Tlingit Myths and Texts* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1909), 222-24.

the basket again so that it will resume its original size.[49] When arriving at their village, the sisters leave the basket in the woods until they have seen their family and then go themselves to retrieve the basket. The eldest sister takes the basket and expands it in front of her family to show her mother all the food that she has brought for her relatives and her community. The basket given by Mountain Dweller is called the Mother Basket.[50]

The Mother Basket also receives a mention in *The Whale House of the Chilkat* by George T. Emmons. He writes: "The basket, although at least two generations old, has been carefully cared for so that it is in an excellent state of preservation. It is named Kuhk-claw 'basket mother' on account of its great size, measuring 33 inches in both height and diameter."[51]

Again, in his reflection on Emmon's work, Frances Paul in *Spruce Root Basketry of the Alaska Tlingit* expands on the description of the Mother Basket mentioned by Paul:

> All the choicest heirlooms of the respective families were brought out from their storage boxes in honour of the occasion… The Tlingit were accustomed to identify all articles of special totemic value with names. Ordinarily basketry has no totemic significance, but this particular basket was an unusual one in that it had a name and a history. It was called "Mother-basket" (kuhku-klah), and it was famous throughout the Tlingit country.[52]

A further detailed analysis is offered by Bill Holm in his chapter "Art" in *Handbook of North American Indians* on the Northwest Coast. In it Holm refers to the imagery woven into the Mother Basket, stating, "Like most Chilkat baskets it was undecorated except of self-patterning in the weave, but many Tlingit baskets were more or less elaborately patterned with a combination of self-designs produced by variations in the twinning, dyed weft, and false embroidery with coloured grasses in geometric bands."[53]

Haida Oral Traditions

The term used by the Haida peoples for the Chilkat robe is Naaxin. A second blanket, frequently referred to within Haida oral traditions and often linked to supernatural beings is the "sky blanket" or "cloud blanket."[54] In his translation of original Haida material, *Haida Texts and Myths, Skidegate Dialect*, John R. Swanton relates numerous early Haida stories that mention the sky blanket and the Naaxin.

[49] Ibid., 223.
[50] Ibid., 224.
[51] George T. Emmons, *The Whale House of the Chilkat* (New York: The Trustees, 1916), 19.
[52] Frances Paul, "The Mother-basket of the Chilkat," *Spruce Root Basketry of the Alaska Tlingit*, 69.
[53] Bill Holm, "Art," in *Handbook of North American Indians*, 623.
[54] In her article "Soft Robes of Thundering Power: Mountain Goat Fiber Textiles of the Northwest Coast,"Haida weaver Evelyn Vanderhoop points to the possibility that the "sky blankets" or "cloud blankets" may or may not be referring to the Raven's Tail Robes. Vanderhoop also focuses on Haida oral narratives and question whether the robes presented in the narratives are, in fact, the Raven's Tail. Vanderhoop, 245.

The first story, 'Raven Traveling', narrates the story of Raven and his encounter with supernatural beings.[55] At the beginning of the saga, Raven notices a woman in the water. After approaching her three times, Raven takes the woman into his canoe where she is described as wearing a "dancing skirt and dancing leggings."[56] After removing the woman's apron and leggings, Raven leaves her in a house he has been carrying with him. While continuing on his journey, Raven throws off his hair tie and walks across it until he reaches a house now called "House point." Peeking through the cracks of the House point walls, he sees a newborn baby. Waiting until nightfall, Raven slips into the skin of the newborn child, whereby he himself becomes the newborn.

One morning, Raven fastens together a string of shells and makes a pair of rattles. He then goes to a grave and unravels part of the grave mats and strings the shells along the unwoven fringes creating a dancing apron. The story gives no information regarding how Raven weaves the dancing aprons and whether he was taught the art of weaving by the woman he found in the lake or if he already had prior knowledge of weaving textiles. Raven then awakens the ghost of the grave and instructs him to start dancing and waving the rattles; as in shamanic performances, Raven tells the ghost, "Walk in front of the town. When you reach the middle wave the rattle in front of you toward the houses. A deep sleep will fall then upon them."[57] Raven then spends the night with three women, including Floodtide Woman.

When news of their cohabitation spreads throughout the community, Floodtide Woman and Raven have to leave their community. After some time, Floodtide Woman and Raven come across her brothers' home, where she is invited to stay with her brother and sister-in-law. In the morning, while the uncle is away hunting, Raven goes outside and puts on two sky blankets. "He (Raven) then went out and stood up out of himself (i.e., changed himself). He put on two sky blankets and painted his face."[58]

One day, Raven enters his uncle's home and declares that he is to be adopted. As he says this, ten canoes appear, all carrying people who are dancing. Raven puts on two sky blankets and begins to walk on the retaining planks. As he does this, Raven kicks his foot on the right side of his uncle's house, and the earth cracks open. He does the same to the left side, and the earth cracks open again; he continues this at the back of the house as well. From his uncle's house, members of the Tsimshian, Haida, Kwakiutl, and Tlingit peoples come singing different songs.

The second Haida narrative, entitled 'A-Slender-One-Who-Was-Given-Away', recounts the story of a young woman who is taken to the edge of the sky by a supernatural being and later rescued by her father's servant.[59] The story begins with a Chief's young daughter to whom ten canoes mysteriously

[55] Sky, John, of Those-born-at-Skedans, 'Raven Travelling', in John R. Swanton, *Haida Texts and Myths, Skidegate Dialect* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1905), 110-50.
[56] Ibid., 115.
[57] Ibid.,119.
[58] Ibid., 121. Throughout the story, Raven often changes skins.
[59] John R. Swanton, "A-Slender-One-who-was-given-away (NAÑĻDĀ'SLAS) in *Contributions to the Ethnology of the Haida*, ed. Franz Boas, Vol 5 (The Jesup North Pacific Expedition, Memoir of the American Museum of Natural History, 1905), 185. A more detailed account of the narrative can be found in John Sky of Those-born-at-Skedans, 'A-

start coming to visit every day. In the canoes, passengers dance until they arrive in front of the young woman's village; each day she refuses them, and they are sent away.[60] After many visits, one day, a Chief 'wearing a broad hat' arrives in a hair-seal canoe; the hat is a surf-bird and Swanton notes that hair-seal canoes are generally used by supernatural beings in these tales.[61] As happened with the other visitors, the young woman refuses the Chief in the hair-seal canoe and sends him away.

When the Chief's young daughter rejects him, the hat of the Chief in the hair-seal canoe begins to swirl with foam, and water bubbles up from the earth. In fear of being swallowed up by the rising water, the people of the town dress up one of the young woman's servants: "And they painted her. And they put red cirrus clouds[62] on her and two clear-sky blankets." However, the Chief in the hair-seal canoe knows that the woman dressed in two clear-sky blankets is not the Chief's real daughter and he refuses her. Then the Chief disguises his daughter's ten servants with marten-skin blankets and sends them to the Chief in the hair-seal canoe; the Chief in the hair-seal canoe refuses them. Finally, the young woman herself goes down to the shore along with her ten servants and they board the Chief in the hair-seal's canoe. The Chief in the hair-seal canoe then offers his hat, which belongs to his father and is covered with surf birds, as a gift to the young woman's father.

After a little bit, the Chief asks one of his servants to find his daughter. With the help of the young woman's mother, the servant embarks on his journey to find the Chief's daughter. Before leaving on their quest, the servant, skilled at hunting, takes his sea-otter spear and throws it into the water. The spear begins to glide through the water, leading the servant and the young girl's mother to "the edge of the sky."[63] Eventually, the two come to the village in which the daughter now resides. Once on the shore, the young woman's mother hides beneath the overturned canoe. Going to the village of supernaturals, the servant encounters Property Woman, who informs him that the Chief of the supernatural community, father of the young man who has married the Chief's daughter, has 'thought grease' into the young woman's head for being the reason his hat was lost.[64]

When the servants finds the young woman, she is now residing in a cave. Unable to persuade the young woman to move, the servant puts on his two yellow cedar bark blankets and walks among the beings in the village. Upon entering the Chief of the supernatural community's house, the servant sees a weaver weaving a chiefly dancing blanket (Naaxin robe). The robe begins to whisper to him,

---

Slender-One-Who-Was-Given-Away,' in John R. Swanton, *Haida Texts and Myths, Skidegate Dialect* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1905), 151-59. I will be using this narrative for my research report.

[60] John Sky of Those-born-at-Skedans, 'A-Slender-One-Who-Was-Given-Away,' 151. For ease of identification, here the father of the young daughter is referred to simply as the 'Chief', the supernatural being in the canoe is referred to as 'Chief in the hair-seal canoe', and the father of the supernatural being in the canoe is referred to as the Chief of the supernatural community.

[61] Ibid., 148.

[62] The context of the text does not indicate whether the red cirrus clouds are part of the painted design or whether they refer to another style of robe.

[63] John Sky of Those-born-at-Skedans, 'A-Slender-One-Who-Was-Given-Away,' 152-3.

[64] Ibid., 153. In his field notes, Swanton states that specific actions can be accomplished by the mind or thinking the action into existence. Swanton, *Haida Texts and Myths, Skidegate Dialect*, 171n7.

saying: 'To-morrow, too, one of my eyes [will still be] unfinished, unfinished."[65] As the young man is looking through the screen of the house, he is almost recognized by Mink Woman, who mistakes his scent for one of the ten companions that were with the young woman when she left her home. Mink Woman states, "It was the yellow cedar-bark blankets of the Chief's child's ten servants whom they ate, which I am wearing, that I smelt."[66] Walking through the Chief's house, the young man learns that if he returns the surf-bird hat to the Chief of the supernatural community, the young woman will be able to return home.

The servant returns to his canoe, where he discovers years have passed and the young woman's mother has died; only her skeleton remains. He rubs the skeleton with one of his yellow cedar-bark blankets to rub the skeleton, which restores her to life. He and the mother return to their own community, where they inform the Chief that the surf-bird hat is the price of his daughter's return. Organized by the Chief, several men and women, including the young woman's brothers and their spouses Mouse Woman and Chief Woman (who wears a copper blanket), take the surf-bird hat to barter for the young woman. Upon arriving at the Chief of the supernatural community's village, the people are greeted by the Chief of the supernatural community's son (who was the Chief in the hair-seal canoe); he accepts his father's hat in return for the young woman. Before departing, all the humans are invited to join the supernatural community in a feast, where the Chief of the supernatural community splits in two pieces; feathers pour out from his body. Before leaving, the young woman hears her father-in-law's voice, the Chief of the supernatural community, telling her that she will give birth to him. He instructs her that, after he is reborn, she is to place him in a cradle made by a master carver and painted with cumulus clouds. The young woman follows the instructions and delivers the baby as warned; on the day of his birth, the master carver carves the cradle using cumulus cloud patterns and he baby is dressed in two sky blankets.

A third narrative in which sky blankets and, later, the dancing blanket play a central role is 'Supernatural-Being-Who-Went-Naked.'[67] In the story, Super-Natural-Being-Who-Went-Naked goes on a quest to bring his brothers back home. Before leaving, his mother gave two sky blankets to him. While walking, Supernatural-Being-Who-Went-Naked comes across Mouse Woman, who gives him medicine and tells him where to find his younger brothers. As he continues to search for his brothers, Super-Natural-Being-Who-Went-Naked begins to hear a noise that sounds like a drum. Pursuing the noise, he comes upon a trail that has been recently walked on and decides to follow the trail to find the source of the drumming sound. Eventually, Super-Natural-Being-Who-Went-Naked sees a house and looking inside he sees a woman wearing a brownish red cedar bark blanket with twisted threads. Supernatural-Being-Who-Went-Naked enters the house of Gā'gix.īt woman and finds two of his brothers stuck together.[68] Unable to separate the two, Supernatural-Being-Who-Went-Naked departs.

---

[65] John Sky of Those-born-at-Skedans, 'A-Slender-One-Who-Was-Given-Away,' 153.
[66] Ibid., 154.
[67] John Sky of Those-born-at-Skedans, 'Supernatural-Being-Who-Went-Naked,' in John R. Swanton, *Haida Texts and Myths, Skidegate Dialect* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1905), 210-26.
[68] According to Swanton, Gā'gix.īt are creatures deprived of their senses by land otters. Swanton, *Haida Texts and Myths, Skidegate Dialect*, 225n9.

Upon returning home, Supernatural-Being-Who-Went-Naked is “deprived of both his blankets” and, in one instance, does not recognize them when they are returned to him.[69]

Later, Supernatural-Being-Who-Went-Naked comes across what appears to be an abandoned town. Inside one of the houses lives an older man who offers food to Supernatural-Being-Who-Went-Naked, but nothing to drink. While getting himself some water, Supernatural-Being-Who-Went-Naked finds himself inside a stomach. He stretches himself until the stomach bursts. Out from the stomach with him come the bones of those from the abandoned town. Supernatural-Being-Who-Went-Naked spits healing medicine on the bones, and the people are resurrected. As a gift, the older man paints Supernatural-Being-Who-Went-Naked’s face and gives him two sky blankets. The story concludes with Supernatural-Being-Who-Went-Naked returning home, where he gives a sky blanket to his sister and dons a dancing blanket and dancing leggings. In her article, “Soft Robes of Thundering Power: Mountain Goat Fiber Textiles of the Northwest Coast,” Evelyn Vanderhoop describes the gifting of the sky blankets and the adorning of the dancing blanket as a sign of the hero’s transformation.[70]

All three narratives, ‘Raven Traveling,’ ‘A-Slender-One-Who-Was-Given-Away,’ and ‘Supernatural-Being-Who-Went-Naked,’ are far too long to be given in full for this research report. However, the summaries provided above highlight that the importance of woven objects in the supernatural world is undeniable and demonstrate that such objects have a life or power of their own.

A fourth story, entitled ‘Tc!AAWU’NK!^{A},’ describes the events in the life of a young child who is raised by his grandmothers and extended family.[71] One day while hunting, he sees a heron with a broken beak. Unsure of what to do, he tells his grandmother; she instructs him that “When you again see it, sharpen its bill.” After helping the heron, the bird says, “I will help you, grandchild.” After saving the heron and with help from his grandmother, the young boy becomes skilled at deadfall traps. As the young boy grows older, he begins acting like a shaman, which means that, upon questioning by his grandmother, he tells her that he has found it easier to gather things since sharpening the heron's bill. In response, his grandmother fashions for him a “dancing skirt from an old mat. She took off the edge on one side and fastened something to it. She also made a shaman’s bone for him.”[72] The young man later becomes a shaman and is credited for saving the life of a Chief's son.

Although relatively short in comparison to the other narratives described, the story of ‘Tc!AAWU’NK!^{A}’ potentially offers a window into women’s art production and materials, where the grandmother makes her grandson a dancing skirt and shaman’s bone. It is not mentioned whether the

[69] Ibid., 215-216, and Swanton, *Haida Texts and Myths, Skidegate Dialect*, 225n19.
[70] Evelyn Vanderhoop, “Soft Robes of Thundering Power: Mountain Goat Fiber Textiles of the Northwest Coast.” 252.
[71] Jimmy Sterling of the StA’stas family, ‘Tc!AAWU’NK!^{A},’ in John R. Swanton, *Haida Texts and Myths, Skidegate Dialect*. (Washington: Smithsonian Institute, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1905), 58 – 69.
[72] Ibid., 60. Swanton refers to the edge of the dance skirt as being fastened with a “fringe or row of puffin beaks.” Swanton, *Haida Texts and Myths, Skidegate Dialect*, 69n3.

grandmother carved the bone. However, the bone itself is of great value to the young man and is used in his performances and rituals.[73]

Finally, the last narrative in this research report is 'How Power-of-the-Shining-Heavens (Sîns Sgā'nagwa-i) let Himself be Born' from John R. Swanton's *Contributions to the Ethnology of the Haida*.[74] The short story begins with a young woman and her servant being abandoned on the beach by her community. On the beach, the young woman digs in the sand and finds a cockle-shell with an infant inside. As the child begins to grow quickly, the young woman fashions for him copper arrows and a copper bow which the young man uses to hunt birds. One day the young man goes fishing with his father, the Master-Carpenter; while fishing, his father catches the Chief of halibut. The father then paints the young man, and the young man visits his (maternal) uncle. After trying on his blankets (which in this story are described as 'cloud blankets'), he tells his mother that if he stands in certain inlets wearing his 'cloud blanket,' the weather will be nice. In this story, the young woman engages in metal work to produce copper arrows and a copper bow.

The story, as the other stories recounted above, suggests women's historical contribution to Northwest Coast artistic material culture. Supporting this suggestion, in "Soft Robes of Thundering Power," when Vanderhoop refers to the story 'How Shining-Heavens-Caused-Himself-To-Be-Born,' she states, "Haida world view encompassed the idea that designs could influence elements of the natural world."[75]

In the four Haida narratives, many objects made by women hold immense value to both human and mythical beings and hold important functions in both human and non-human realms. One of these functions is to act as mediators between the two realms. These objects include the sky blankets and a marten-skin blanket, both of which are used to indicate rank and status, as well as the Chief of the supernatural community's surf-bird hat with its supernatural powers, and, prominently, the "dancing blankets" or Naaxin robes which are worn by mythical beings and endowed with the ability to communicate with people.

---

[73] Jimmy Sterling of the StA'stas family, 62. For a detailed discussion, see, Nika Jisgang Collison, "Stl'inll~Those with Clever Hands: Presenting Female Indigenous Art and Scholarship," in *Unsettling Native Art Histories on the Northwest Coast*, eds. Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse and Aldona Jonaitis (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020), 95-116. In her analysis of the narrative, Collison argues that the success of 'Tc!aawu'nk!A' as a shaman is attributed to the dancing apron, carved bone, and songs provided by his grandmother. She writes: "That it took the potent ability of an elderly woman to propel the young man's talents into public acceptance is grand testament to the power of women's creations.", 99.

[74] John R. Swanton, "How Power-of-the-Shining-Heavens (Sîns Sgā'nagwa-i) let Himself be born," in *Contributions to the Ethnology of the Haida*, ed. Franz Boas, Vol 5 (The Jesup North Pacific Expedition, Memoir of the American Museum of Natural History, 1905), 189-90.

[75] Evelyn Vanderhoop, "Soft Robes of Thundering Power: Mountain Goat Fiber Textiles of the Northwest Coast," 250. The story 'How Shining-Heavens-Caused-Himself-To-Be-Born,' can be found in John R. Swanton, *Haida Texts and Myths Skidegate Dialect*. In this version, the young woman takes her copper bracelets and hammers them out to create the copper arrows and copper bow used by the young hunter. For the full narrative, see Walter McGregor of the Sealion-town people, "How Shining-Heavens-Caused- Himself-To-Be-Born," in John R. Swanton, *Haida Texts and Myths, Skidegate Dialect* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1905), 26-31.

Conclusion

The brief literature review introducing this report emphasizes two questions: The first concerns the possible separation of women's art from men's art; the second question focuses on the difference between crest art style and geometric art style and their potential gendered expression. The brief examination of a few of the Northern Northwest Coast mythological narratives challenges the gendered divide between women's craft and men's art, illuminating the role of women in all three cultural settings, and the immense value of women's woven art, poised as it is between the human and spiritual (or non-human) worlds.

Haida, Tsimshian, and Tlingit mythological traditions reveal a sacred connection between the human and the non-human worlds established through basketry and/or weaving. The objects made by women under the original guidance of non-human beings are endowed with power, whether they are carrying crest designs that are mediating tools between human and ancestral figures or whether these objects are themselves the signs or manifestations of the ancestral or natural power. Also common to all three groups is the presence of women, not only as background figures and simple makers of the artefacts in question, whether baskets, aprons, or robes, but as active and primary protagonists in the stories. Finally, in three cultural contexts, no distinction exists between craft and art: all artefacts are manifestations of power.

Biography

Kierra Beament is a PhD candidate at the University of Ottawa, Canada. As a Canadian non-Indigenous researcher, she is interested in Indigenous matrilineal material culture and matrilineal Indigenous cultures around the world. For her PhD thesis, she is focusing on woven materials such as textiles, basketry, and spruce root hats made by Haida, Tsimshian, and Tlingit women. Her research is at its preliminary stages, and her research report is a reflection of her early studies. The oral traditions mentioned in this research report are only a few. A more in-depth examination of Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimshian narratives will have to be made in order to capture the importance of woven material culture in the oral traditions of all three nations.

Bibliography

Berlo, Janet Catherine, and Ruth B. Phillips. *Native North American Art*. 2nd ed. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

___. "'Encircles Everything': A Transformative History of Native Women's Arts." In *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists*. Edited by Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Teri Greeves. 43-72. Minneapolis Institute of Art: University of Washington Press, 2019.

Barbeau, Marius, William Beynon, John J. Cove, and George F. MacDonald. *Tsimshian narratives: volume 1: Tricksters, shamans, and heroes*. University of Ottawa Press, 1987.

Edenshaw Davidson, Florence. *During My Time: Florence Edenshaw Davidson, A Haida Woman*. Transcribed and edited by Margaret B. Blackman. Seattle: University of Washington Press and Douglas & McIntyre, Ltd. 1982.

Bunn-Marcuse, Kathryn and Megan A. Smetzer. "Working to Change the Tide: Women Artists on the Northwest Coast." In *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists*. Edited by Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Teri Greeves. 258-272. Minneapolis Institute of Art: University of Washington Press, 2019.

Collison, Nika Jisgang. "Stl'inll~Those with Clever Hands: Presenting Female Indigenous Art and Scholarship." In *Unsettling Native Art Histories on the Northwest Coast*. Edited by Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse and Aldona Jonaitis. 94-116. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020.

Dauenhauer, Nora Marks, and Richard Dauenhauer, eds. "Haa Tuwunáagu Yis, for Healing Our Spirit: Tlingit Oratory." In *Classics of Tlingit Oral Literature*. Vol. 2. 3-153. University of Washington Press, 1990.

___. "Tlingit *At.óow*." In *The Spirit Within: Northwest Coast Native Art from the John H. Hauberg Collection*. Edited by Helen Abbott, Steven Brown, Lorna Price, and Paula Thurman. 20-91. Rizzoli New York: Seattle Art Museum, 1995.

De Laguna, Frederica. *Under Mount Saint Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit*. vol. 3. Gatineau, QC: Frederica de Laguna Northern Books, 2009.

Emmons, George T. *The Basketry of the Tlingit*. In Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History, vol. 3 part 2. New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1991 [1903].

___. *The Chilkat Blanket*. In Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History, vol. 3. American Museum of Natural History, 1903.

___. *The Whale House of the Chilkat*. New York: The Trustees, 1916.

___. *The Tlingit Indians*. Edited by Frederica de Laguna. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991.

Gosnell, Dan. "The Kikiata and his Wooden Wife." In Marius Barbeau, William Beynon, John J. Cove, and George F. MacDonald. *Tsimshian narratives: volume 1: Tricksters, shamans, and heroes*. 217-219. University of Ottawa Press, 1987.

Harris, Nancy. "Reflections on Northwest Coast Silver." In *The Box of Daylight: Northwest Coast Indian Art*. 132-136. Edited by Susan Pelzer. Seattle, Seattle Art Museum and University of Washington Press, 1983.

Holm, Bill. "A Wooling Mantle Neatly Wrought: The Early Historic Record of Northwest Coast Pattern-Twined Textiles– 1744-1850." In *American Indian Art Magazine*, vol. 8 no. 1 (Winter, 1982):34-47.

___. *The Box of Daylight: Northwest Coast Indian Art*. Edited by Susan Pelzer. Seattle, Seattle Art Museum: University of Washington Press, 1983.

___. "Art." In *Handbook of North American Indians*. Vol. 7 Northwest Coast. General editor William C. Sturtevant, volume editor Wayne Suttles. 602-632. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1990.

___. *Northwest Coast Art: An Analysis of Form, 50th Anniversary Edition*. 2nd ed. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014.

Jonaitis, Aldona. *Art of the Northwest Coast*. University of Washington Press; Douglas & McIntyre, 2006.
___. "The Scientist and the Polymath: Tlingit Weavers Teri Rofkar and Clarissa Rizal." In *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists*. Edited by Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Teri Greeves. 116-125. Minneapolis Institute of Art: University of Washington Press, 2019.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*. Basic Books, 1967.

"Lily Hope Chilkat Weaver" Youtube video, 1:15, posted by Lily Hope Weaver, March 1st, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YraJBuYfRgk&t=3s

McGregor, Walter, of the Sealion-town people. "How Shining-Heavens-Caused-Himself-To-Be-Born." In John R. Swanton, *Haida Texts and Myths*, *Skidegate Dialect*. 26-31. Washington: Smithsonian Institute, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1905.

Paul, Frances. *Spruce Root Basketry of the Alaska Tlingit*. Edited by Willard B. Beatty. Lawrence, Kansas: Department of the Interior. Bureau of Indian Affairs, Branch of Education, 1944.

"Presentation on Chilkat and Ravenstail Weaving, Celebration 2016," YouTube video, posted by Sealaska Heritage Institute, January 24th, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1q_lTTgrEY&t=7s .

"Raven's Tail Journey of Evelyn Vanderhoop," YouTube video, 14:21-14:27 posted by Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, October 11th, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtPDo-PVGTs&t=4s.

Samuel, Cheryl. *The Chilkat Dancing Blanket*. University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1982.
___. *The Raven's Tail*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987.

Sky, John, of Those-born-at-Skedans. 'A- Slender-One-Who- Was-Given-Away', in John R. Swanton, *Haida Texts and Myths*, *Skidegate Dialect* . 151-159. Washington: Smithsonian Institute, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1905.
___. 'Supernatural-Being- Who-Went-Naked,' in John R. Swanton, *Haida Texts and Myths*, *Skidegate Dialect* . 210-226. Washington: Smithsonian Institute, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1905.

Smetzer, Megan A. "Copper Seaweed and Woven Octopus Bags: Shgen George and the Art of Resilience." In *Unsettling Native Art Histories on the Northwest Coast*. Edited by Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse and Aldona Jonaitis, 117-132. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020.

Sterling, Jimmy, of the StA'stas family. 'Tc!AAWU'NK!A.' In John R. Swanton, *Haida Texts and Myths, Skidegate Dialect* . 58- 69. Washington: Smithsonian Institute, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1905.

Swanton, John R. *Haida Texts and Myths, Skidegate Dialect*. Washington: Smithsonian Institute, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1905.

___. *Contributions to the Ethnology of the Haida*. Edited by Franz Boas. Vol 5. The Jesup North Pacific Expedition, Memoir of the American Museum of Natural History, 1905.

___. *Tlingit Myths and Texts*. Washington: Smithsonian Institute, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1909.

"Three Hundred Years of Tlingit Art." Youtube video, 16:25-16:29, posted by Sealaska Heritage Institute, January 29th, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6nzvdu1msEM&t=128s

Unsettling Native Art Histories on the Northwest Coast. Edited by Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse and Aldona Jonaitis. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020.

Vanderhoop, Evelyn. "Soft Robes of Thundering Power: Mountain Goat Fiber Textiles of the Northwest Coast." In *Unsettling Native Art Histories on the Northwest Coast*. Edited by Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse and Aldona Jonaitis. 242-258. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020.

Vaughn, Thomas, and Bill Holm. *Soft Gold: The Fur Trade and Cultural Exchange on the Northwest Coast of America*. Portland: Oregon Historical Society, 1982.

Wright, Robin K. *Northern Haida Master Carvers*. University of Washington Press and Douglas & McIntyre, 2001.