

This article was originally published in *Arctic Anthropology*, Volume 43, No. 2 (2006), pp. 14-19. This is a REPRINT of that article, with permission of the author.

This is Kuxaankutaan's (Dr. Frederica de Laguna's) Song

CHEW SHAA (ELAINE ABRAHAM), PhD, and JUDITH RAMOS, MAT

Abstract

From 1949 to 1954, Dr. Frederica Annis de Leo de Laguna, then Chair of Sociology and Anthropology, Bryn Mawr College, recorded from our Yakutat elders the history and culture of the Yakutat Tlingit. This paper describes the other side of Freddy, as an adopted clan member who was fascinated with Tlingit music. In the dedication to the song, she acknowledged Olaf Abraham (Elaine's father) from whom she learned methods of composing Tlingit songs. With the help of John Ellis, a Gineix Kwaan / Kwaashk'i Kaagwaantaan man, Freddy composed this song in honor of the Yakutat people.

Keywords: Yakutat Tlingit, Frederica de Laguna, potlatch, adopted family

Résumé

De 1949 à 1954, Dr. Frederica Annis de Leo de Laguna, alors directrice du département de sociologie et d'anthropologie à Bryn Mawr College, enregistra l'histoire et la culture des Tlingit de Yakutat par la voix de leurs aînés. Ce texte-ci décrit un autre aspect de Freddy (comme l'appellent les gens de Yakutat). Fascinée par la musique Tlingit, et membre adoptif d'un clan local, elle composa ce chant cérémoniel en l'honneur des gens de Yakutat, avec l'aide de John Ellis, un homme appartenant au Gineix Kwaan / Kwaashk'i Kaagwaantaan, Dans sa dédicace, elle remercie Olaf Abraham (le père d'Elaine Abraham) qui lui enseigna comment composer ce genre de chant.

Mots clefs: Yakutat Tlingit, Frederica de Laguna, potlatch, famille adoptive

Introduction

Xan Kootaan (Freddy's Tlingit name, short for Kuxaankutaan) composed a song in Tlingit for the people of Yakutat. The song was in honor of the children of the Gineix Kwaan, a clan of the Raven moiety¹ that owns and occupies the Yakutat area, and of Luknaxadi, a Raven clan from the Dry Bay area. She finished the song just before she left Yakutat the summer of 1954, when the ethnological research that she started in 1949 in Yakutat was completed.

In 1986 my mother, Susie Bremner Abraham, invited Freddy to attend her granddaughter Sharon Goodwin's memorial potlatch. A potlatch is usually held a year after burial to "pay off" a clan's obligations to the opposite moiety. Freddy was pleased and came several days before the memorial potlatch. While the family prepared for the ceremony, my mother informed us that Freddy would open the "pay off" portion of the potlatch by singing the song she had composed. Freddy was excited and yet nervous about her clan role. She began humming her song, then whispered to me, (see Image 1) "My dear educated granddaughter in the western and Tlingit world, did you think I went native with the song?" I replied, "Of course, we all know you are Tlingit."

When a person is adopted and given a name the adoption and naming is validated at a public ceremony so guests can be witnesses. My mother wanted to validate Freddy's adoption by Katy Dixon Isaac into the Gineix Kwaan clan of Raven Moiety and the name Katy Dixon gave her, Katy's own personal name, Kuxaankutaan. The Gineix Kwaan is also known in Yakutat as the Kwaashk'i Kwaan clan, from when the clan bought Humpy Creek in Yakutat Bay. Freddy was also to be adopted into the Moon House. Because Katy Dixon Isaac² was an elderly matriarch of the clan, her adoption of Frederica was unquestioned but un-validated.

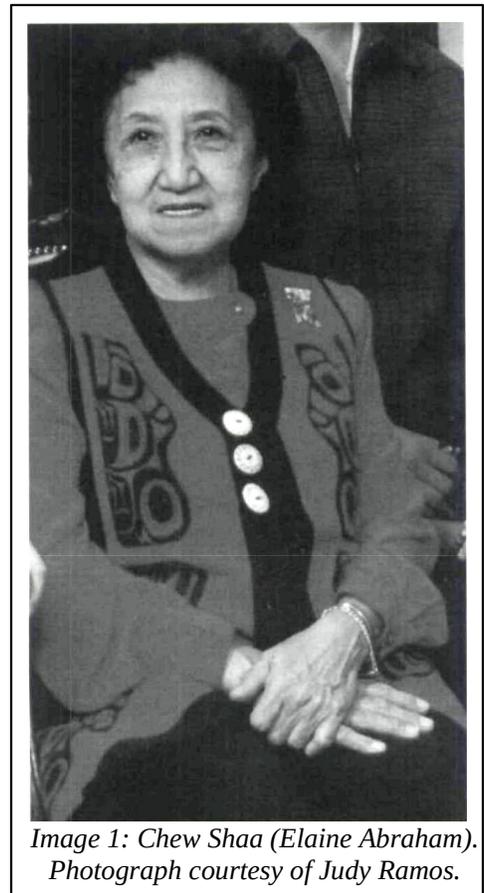


Image 1: Chew Shaa (Elaine Abraham).
Photograph courtesy of Judy Ramos.

Freddy's Song

Freddy's favorite birdsong was the Golden-crowned Sparrow's song. The tune to the song she composed was inspired by this bird, *Shakida Tinna*, the Golden-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia aticapilla*). Although she identified more than a dozen Yakutat songbirds, she adored what she

¹ Tlingit are divided into matrilineal moieties, clans, and houses. Children belong to their mother's clan, so this reference is to the father's clan.

² Tlingits believe in reincarnation. Katy Dixon Isaac was reborn as Katie Lord, the daughter of Nellie Lord of the Moon House.

referred to as “the most beautiful sparrow,” with a golden crown and with black stripes on the side of the crown. Most of all she enjoyed its song.



Image 2: JOM Mr. St. Elias Dancers. Left to right, front row: Martha Mallot and Sylvia Schumacker; 2nd row: Kalen Adams and Maka Monture (Judy Ramos' daughter); 3rd row: Nathan Bremner, Kai Monture (Judy Ramos' son), Sharnel Vale, and Kirsten Slate; 4th row: J.P. Buller, Alin Vale, Shane Brown, and Tim Brown. Photograph courtesy of Yakutat Tlingit Tribe.

The winter of 1954, Freddy's last spring in Yakutat, was a good year for songbirds. My parents, who also enjoyed the bird's song, said there were more birds than usual that spring. The birds arrived in March and congregated in the back of their house among the spruce, alders, and willow trees that were also near Freddy's rented house. Early in the morning, my father would go outside to chop wood or get water from the lake behind Freddy's house. She would be out on the side of the house replenishing the bird feeder. Sometimes when a bird would start singing, Freddy would come running out with her recorder. My mother said that it always brought a smile to my father, a man that was known in the community not to show any emotion. Some of the birds she recorded that spring include: the Varied Thrush, the Song Sparrow, the Yellow-crowned Sparrow, the Yellow Warbler, and the Robin.

At a celebration sponsored by Sealaska, the regional Native corporation for Southeast Alaska, Freddy was honored for her work. She sat in one of the front row seats whenever her “grandchildren,” the Mount Saint Elias Dancers, were going to dance (see Image 2). She cheered louder than anyone, however she lamented to me that all her old Tlingit teachers from Yakutat had passed on to the spirit world. With tears in her eyes, she added, “now all my grandchildren are orphans,” nodding toward the dancing children, she added with pride, “but look at them now.”

In her article “Field Work with My Tlingit Friends” she wrote:

After Olaf's death, Susie invited me to visit her on my way home from Copper River, and I brought her a blanket I'd been given at a potlatch, which pleased her. But our last reunion was when I attended the potlatch she gave in 1986. At that time I got to know and appreciate her daughter, Elaine Abraham, who acted as Susie's “executive officer” in charge of the complicated logistics of the ceremony. Susie suffered from a bad heart, and Elaine was most solicitous. All of “our” clan, including myself, were taught a few songs and simple dances, but Elaine's pretty daughter, Judy Ramos, and her son

David Ramos, costumed alike, performed an impressive shaman's dance. (de Laguna 2000)



Image 3: Susie Abraham (l) and Freddy de Laguna (r) at Sharon Goodwin's memorial potlatch. Photograph courtesy of Eva Sensmeier.



Image 4: Judy Ramos and her daughter Maka. Photograph courtesy of Judy Ramos.

This was the night Freddy sang her song for the first time in Yakutat, and the applause lasted a long time. Thus she opened the “pay off” time and the “happy time” at her clan’s potlatch (see Image 3).

Ten years later, when David Ramos was doing an internship in research and care of collections at the National Museum of American Indian in New York, he went to Bryn Mawr College outside Philadelphia to see Gram Xakootan. It was a surprise visit, yet as soon as she saw him she

recognized him, greeting him with a hug and speaking in Tlingit, *ax dachxank'*, *goosu ee tlaa* (my grandchild, where is your mother?). She took David to lunch introducing him as her grandchild.

When Judy Ramos (see Image 4) received her Bachelor's and Master's degrees, Freddy was also proud of her. When Judy did a Traditional Ecological Knowledge study on salmon for the Yakutat Tlingit Tribe, Judy wrote to her for advice. Freddy wrote back:

Dear Judy, of course I know who you are. Your grandparents were among the great leaders of the Yakutat and some of the nicest people I know. You are undertaking too much, I think in your studies. Please remember that you are to explain the Native ways of thinking about territorial rights, fishing and all the other topics on your list. Give up the jargon of "resource management." That is the white man's way of thinking about such matters. If you could only consult "Under Mount Saint Elias" you would see that the Tlingit and other Native peoples felt that they were in one world with the plants and animals and fish. (de Laguna 2001)

Grandma Xankootan composed and recorded a song in 1954 (see Image 5) to honor her clan and the people of Yakutat. Her song, translated below from Tlingit into English, will always be part of the clan's oral tradition. Her memory will live on; at her clan's potlatches when "fire dishes" are brought out, her name will be called: "Kuxaankutaan, Kuxaankutaan."

Kuxaankutaan's Song

To the People of Yakutat:
Song for Ginexqwaan-Children and TI'uknaxadi-Children³

Composed by Frederica de Laguna

Yaci kwaxwhei yici 'aya. Łdakat Kwackqwan-yatxi qa TI'uknaxadi-yatxi qa Tlukwaxadi-yatxi dadax 'aya, kwxwhei 'aya. Kunxanguwutan xa ciyi.

This song is for all Kwackqwaan-children and TI'uknaxadi-children and Tlukwaxadi-children. It is Kuxaankutaan's song.

Whereas Yakutat birds are supposed to have learned their songs from those of human beings, I have based my melody upon the song of the golden-crowned sparrow. I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to John Ellis for his assistance with the words.

³ The explanation and the song were composed by Frederica de Laguna and were first published in the third volume of *Under Mount Saint Elias* (De Laguna 1972: 1362-63). Elaine Abraham has a recording of this song as sung by de Laguna. She has transcribed it for this article and has added to the translation by de Laguna. De Laguna and Abraham have used different orthographies.

♩=116

C#

Refrain:

Ha ya ha ya ya ya ha-ni ha-ya
Ha ya ha ha ya ha ya ye ya he ha ya ha.
He ya ha ya ha ya ha ya ha ya ha ha ya ha
Ha ya ha he ha hay ha ya hee—A-ni 'a—ya yee a-ni 'a—ye

Stanza I (sung twice):

Ha ya ha ya ye, Ye Ha-ni 'a Ya
Kawa Yikde quk'w ati ne -
(When I go away) To the unknown (space) (meaning the whole universe)

'I da de tu wu nik o Ginexqwani yatxi
for you I am sad children of Ginexkwaan (clan)

'ida tuwutc xat ku-qw'a-djaq -
longing for you will kill me

Tlaxayik de ts'uk' quk'w qa - tin -
Inside Tlaxayik (Yakutat) I will look for (come again),

'e 'a-ni 'a ya e'--- 'ani 'a--- ye -
this is your (land) dwelling, your dwelling

Stanza II (sung twice):

Ha ya he ha he he 'a-ni 'a -ya
a_x gutch na qadjun-ne
My wolf (clan) I dream of

A_x tu wu 'a Łi ki, o TŁuk na xadi yat xi
My inner being you make well (happy), child of Łukna_xa.

di 'u wa ya gagan ku gani
It is as if you are the sun beam (the sun is shining)

I yeŁi tuwu yi si gu
Your Raven you have made happy

'e 'ani 'a ye 'e 'ani 'aye
this is your land (universe)

End

Ha ya ha ya he he 'ani 'aya

1954, 4-2-B Frederica de Laguna's Song for G̃ñexqwan-Children and T̃h̃uknaʔadi-Children

♩ = 118
C#
Refrain

drum: ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩

ha ya ha ya ya ya ha - ni ha - ya

etc.

ha ya ha ha ya ha ya ye ya he ha ya ha

he ya ha ya ha ya ha ya ha ya ha ha ya ha

ha ya ha he ya hay ha ya he-- 'a-ni 'a-- ya ye- 'a-ni 'a-- -ye

Stanza I (sung twice)

ha ya ha ya ye-- ye- ha-ni 'a - ya ka-wa-yik-de qukʷ-qa - ti - ne

'i - da-de tu-wu-nik o-Gi-nex-qwa-ni yat-xi 'i-da tu-wutoʔat ku-qʷa-djaq

T̃a-ʔa-yik de t̃ukʷ qukʷ-qa-tin 'e 'a-ni 'a -ya 'e--- 'a-ni 'a-- -ye

Stanza II (sung twice)

ha ya he ya he--
ha--

ye 'a-ni 'a -ya 'ax gu -tci na-qa-djun-ni

'ax tu - wu 'a - li -ke c-Tluk-na - xa - di yat - xi

'u- wa' ya ga - gan ku - gan-i 'i ye - li tu - wu yi - si - gu

'e 'a-ni 'a -ye 'e 'a-ni 'a -ye haya haya he ye 'a-ni 'a -ya

Image 5: The music score from De Laguna's *Under Mount Saint Elias* (1972: 1368-69).
Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution Press.

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge Elaine's father and mother, the late Olaf Abraham and Susie Bremner Abraham and Harry K. Bremner, Elaine's maternal uncle, for teaching Freddy and us the history, culture, and mythology of Yakutat's Tlingit.

Biography

Chew Shaa or Elaine Abraham is a retired professor from University of Alaska. She is the daughter of Olaf and Susie Abraham, the last surviving member of the Abraham family and also the niece of Harry K. Bremner.

Judith Ramos is Elaine's daughter. She works for the Yakutat Tlingit Tribe and has also collaborated on subsistence and Traditional Knowledge projects with the USDA Forest Service and the National Park Service.

References

de Laguna, Frederica

1972 *Under Mount Saint Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit*. Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology, 7. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.

2000 Fieldwork with My Tlingit Friends. *In Celebration 2000: Restoring Balance through Culture*. Susan Fair and Rosita Worl, eds. Juneau: The Sealaska Heritage Institute.