

“Ninstints” Village: A Case of Mistaken Identity*

STEVEN R. ACHESON

The Kunghit or “Southern” Haida village of Ninstints is located on a small island off the exposed southwest coast of the Queen Charlotte Islands. To the original inhabitants, the village was “SgA’ngwa-i lnaga’-i” — Red Cod Island Town. Subsequent to the close of the maritime fur trade, in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the village became known as “Ninstints,” after the then recognized head chief. The village was significant in size, with a population of 328 people, including 20 slaves, living in 20 houses (Douglas, 1853).¹ The island in turn was designated “Anthony Island” during a British survey of the region in 1853, approximately thirty years prior to the abandonment of the village.

SgA’ngwa-i village is the only Kunghit settlement generally thought to have been a multi-lineage village for at least part of its history. The village is credited, beginning with Howay (1941:97) and most recently MacDonald (1983), as the setting for an exceedingly violent episode in the history of the maritime fur trade on the Northwest coast. This paper contends that, although this conflict involved lineage heads historically associated with this community, the setting was not Anthony Island.

* This study draws upon a number of projects conducted over the years at Anthony Island. Accordingly, it involves many individuals and agencies for whom space does not permit adequate acknowledgement. Credit is first given to Richard Beauchamp of the Conservation Division, B.C. Provincial Museum, who introduced the writer to the southern Queen Charlotte Islands. For their interest and support, I thank my colleagues at the Heritage Conservation Branch, particularly Art Charlton for making my time available to the study, members of the Skidegate Band, Laurie Williamson and Sandra Zacharias. The particular projects, instrumental to this study, were funded by the Heritage Conservation Branch, B.C. Heritage Trust and Petro-Canada Resources.

¹ Straddling a terrace, seventeen contemporaneously occupied house sites are evident extending in several discontinuous rows around the entire bay (Acheson, 1984). In addition to these structures, there are the remains of five grave houses. Two are located to the back of the houses within the centre of the village and the remaining three on adjoining tidal islands. It is conceivable that several of these structures were included in Swanton’s record of twenty houses. Although much smaller in overall dimensions (ca 3m x 3m), the grave houses were architecturally identical to the larger structures and several had associated poles. According to Newcombe (1901), several houses also stood in the adjoining bay to the south.

To this end, the paper considers the socio-political status of SgA'ngwa-i village at the onset of European contact in 1787 as a case study in changing Haida village organization. Village organization both reflected and determined the complex manner in which kin, locality and class affiliation channelled socio-economic activities. Early historic changes in Haida demography and village social structure have significant implications for notions of time/space in archaeological research on the Queen Charlotte Islands.

The Haida were divided into two exogamous matrilineal moieties, Raven and Eagle. Each moiety was further divided into twenty-two and twenty-three named lineages, respectively (Swanton, 1905). The moiety did not constitute a social group. It had no organization of its own, but was a regulating device for the arrangement of relationships between persons. The lineage was primary, controlling both real and incorporeal property. Vested in the lineage were rights to certain fishing streams, berry-picking grounds, stretches of coastline where whales might strand, and tobacco patches. Fishing grounds and shell-fish flats were generally considered common property (Curtis, 1916:132). Swanton lists sixty-two distinct crest figures, ranging from zoomorphic forms to elements such as rainbow, moon, copper, cirrus and cumulus clouds, as incorporeal property owned by Haida lineages. Crests were the identifying marks of the lineage and in some cases of individual rank. Other forms of incorporeal property belonging to individual lineages included certain stories, songs, dances, and personal names.

Personal names were significant to the Haida. Their use provided a link to both one's lineage and ancestors, and thereby designated the continuity of the lineage. For this reason, a lineage head was usually given the name of his predecessor at death.

Lineage groups were self-sufficient and autonomous. The head of each recognized unilineal group was the "chief." The chief was the trustee of the lineage and the resources owned by it. Deference to lineage chiefs was variable and their authority, being partly personal and achieved, was limited. The title "town chief" or head chief was held by the highest ranking, wealthiest house chief of the lineage that owned the town site (Blackman, 1981:17). Murdock (1936:16) suggests that multi-lineage villages and, therefore, town chiefs were "quite exceptional" in pre-contact times.

Kunghit social relations, as political arrangements, involved tenuous, often changing alliances between lineages. Accordingly, the relative ranking of lineage chiefs was equally varied. The complexity of this social

structure is manifest both in the events of the late 1700s involving Kunghit and maritime fur traders and in the ambiguity of the ethnographic record concerning the status and recognized head chief of SgA’ngwa-i village during this period.

Historically, SgA’ngwa-i village appears as a multi-lineage community comprising all nine Kunghit Raven and Eagle lineages and sublineages.² The ethnographic record indicates a major population coalescence occurred at SgA’ngwa-i during the contact period. Newcombe recorded in 1901 that “Sgungwai Inagai [was] made of three towns [inhabited by] “hunters of sea otters.” According to Swanton (1905), members of numerous smaller Kunghit communities (Swanton’s “towns”) gathered at SgA’ngwa-i Inaga’-i as late as the middle decades of the nineteenth century.

Purportedly, the Sa’ki Eagles at Gowgaia Bay, with Ninstints as chief, were the first to have moved to SgA’ngwa-i Inaga’-i (Swanton, 1905: 94). The site was, therefore, understood to have been owned by this leading Eagle lineage (Duff and Kew, 1958:43; MacDonald, 1983). In addition to this site, Ninstints was the recognized chief of the “country south of XajiltE kun” — an area extending south along the west coast of Moresby Island from Gowgaia Bay (Newcombe, 1903). However, by Swanton’s own account, the Sa’ki occupation of SgA’ngwa-i was relatively late. Specifically, the Sa’ki acknowledged only four successive lineage chiefs with the name Ninstints since their relocation:

In the very old days, time of go’dun xe’was there was a town at sgungwai from which the people subsequently scattered along the coast and more recently concentrated there again. There are said to have been only four nin’stints since the last event. The main town on the “mainland” before this seems to have been sgi lgi l’nagai [north of the entrance to Gowgaia Bay]. (Swanton, 1900-01)

The suggested historic resettlement of this lineage at SgA’ngwa-i is consistent with Newcombe’s (1903) remark: “the south end of the village belonged to Ninstints people who originally lived at gao-gia

² The Raven moiety included two main lineages: the Xa’gi la’nas [“Striped-Town-People”] and the Ta’dji la’nas [“Sand-Town-People”]. Affiliated with the former group were two sublineages: the XAlda’ngats [“Slaves”] and the Q!e’da la’nas [“Narrow-strait Town-People”]. The Qai’dju qe’gaqa-i [“Those born at Songs-of-Victory-Town”] were a sublineage of the Ta’dji la’nas. The Eagle moiety was similarly represented by two main lineages: the Sa’ki qe’gawa-i [“Those born up the inlet”] and the Ga’next qe’gawa-i [“Those born in the southern part of the islands”]. The latter lineage was also further divided into two additional sublineages: the Skida’-i la’nas [“Powerless Town-People”] and the Sta-gi la’nas [“Sta’gi Town-People”] (Swanton, 1905:268, 272).

[Gowgaia Bay] and moved down when that place was depopulated by an epidemic of smallpox long before the white men were seen upon the coast." The information is credible, given that smallpox had reached the Haida at Cloak Bay on the northern Queen Charlotte Islands by 1791 (Marchand, 1801:294) and possibly as early as 1774 among the Kaigani (Cutter, 1969:207-09, 219, 245). Not surprisingly, many native accounts concerning their first sighting of a trading vessel envisaged its approach as the "pestilence" (see Swanton, 1905:105).

Historic records dating to 1789, on the other hand, acknowledged a "head chief" by the name of "Xo'ya" for that same area later occupied by Ninstints' Sa'ki Eagles — the extreme southern region of Moresby and adjacent Kunghit Island. In 1791, Ingraham (1971:118) remarked on sighting a canoe off the southeast shore of Moresby Island that "they came from Koyah's, the S.E. inlet of the isles." Xo'ya, a Qai'dju Raven, played a key role in the violent encounters thought to be directly associated with the site of SgA'ngwa-i village.

A Hudson's Bay Company census, compiled by John Work during the period 1835-41 (Douglas, 1853), identified a major village by the name "Quee-ah" which has been interpreted as an anglicized form of "Xo'ya" (Duff and Kew, 1958:60). Many writers (Howay, 1941; Duff and Kew, 1958; MacDonald, 1983) in turn, concluded that the village in question was SgA'ngwa-i. Moreover, Newcombe (1903) did designate Xo'ya chief of SgA'ngwa-i, in addition to Sge'dE, Su'wuasi, Stinjin, and Nodaskun Inaga'-i, village in the vicinity of Rose Harbour.

The lineage to which Xo'ya belonged derived its name from Qai'dju Inaga'-i ("Songs-of-Victory-Town"), a Ta'dji Raven village. In reference to the large and important Ta'dji Raven lineage, Newcombe (1903) noted that the north end of SgA'ngwa-i village "belonged to 'lkadlinen' [Kia'nskina-i] people from 'K!aiju' [Qai'dju]." The resettlement of this second major lineage of the opposing Raven moiety at SgA'ngwa-i also appears relatively late. Newcombe (1901) noted the relocation of three poles, including "Lkatliyuwen's [Kia'nskina-i] pole at N. end of Ninstints," from Qai-dju to SgA'ngwa-i in the mid-1800s — a period falling between the major smallpox epidemics of 1837-39 and 1862.

Historic records further attest to a shift in lineage dominance within the region, corresponding to the arrival and eventual rise of Ninstints at SgA'ngwa-i. The evidence, in turn, shows that the events contributing to this change did not occur at this site.

In 1789 Xo'ya was held responsible for the minor pilfering of goods by kinsmen from Kendrick's *Lady Washington*. He was severely punished

for behaviour which was beyond his authority to control as a lineage chief. A Haida recounted:

. . . he took Coyah, tied a rope round his neck, whipt him, painted his face, cut off his hair, took away from him a great many skins, and then turned him ashore. Coyah was no longer a chief, but an ‘Ahliko’, or one of the lower class. They have no head chief, but many inferior chiefs. . . . (Hoskins in Howay, 1941:200)

On their second meeting in 1791, Xo’ya attempted to capture the *Lady Washington*. The confrontation, intended to regain Xo’ya’s lost prestige, resulted in the death of approximately forty Kunghit, including a wife of Xo’ya and two of his children.

Four years later Boit acknowledged the presence of eight chiefs, including Xo’ya, while trading in the vicinity of Houston Stewart Channel. Xo’ya’s authority, however, was no longer unequivocal given Boit’s entry in the 1795 log of the *Union* that “Skoich Eye appear’d to be head man of the Sound & Coyar the 2d.” (1981:49). This meeting, and the subsequent failed attempt by the Kunghit to capture Boit’s ship a day later, ended this series of violent confrontations that spanned six years. The last attempt also cost Skoich Eye his life.

The evidence does not support the interpretation that these events occurred at SgA’ngwa-i Inaga’-i. Haswell’s log offers the earliest observations of Xo’ya’s village. On entering Houston Stewart Channel on 11 July 1789 on board the *Lady Washington* Haswell remarked:

We stood into the sound and saw the village on the southeast part of a bay a little behind a small island, and nigh it appeared a good cove for our vessel to lay. . . . We bore up and anchored in 14 fathoms water with a hard bottom of sand. (Howay, 1941:97)

The log continues:

I landed to take an excursion in the woods when I met with a fortified rock which I suppose in case of invasion is their place of refuge. It was perpendicular, about forty feet high. The top was flat, about twenty yards wide. It was inaccessible on all sides except by an old rotten ladder that was erected by its side. (Howay, 1941:200)

The fortification Haswell speaks of is not evident at SgA’ngwa-i Inaga’-i. His comments more closely describe one identical in type located at Si’ndas kun, a Qai’dju Raven village in proximity to the village of Xe-uda’o (Acheson and Zacharias, 1985), besides one associated with Na’gAs Inaga’-i [“town inhabited”] at the entrance to Flamingo Inlet (Newcombe, 1901). In the case of SgA’ngwa-i village, Newcombe

(1901) and Swanton (1905) identified the island fronting SgA'ngwa-i village as a fortification (S'kastE qi taoj'i). Newcombe also illustrated a second fortification on a prominent, more defensible island to the north of the village. In neither case, however, are these fortifications of the type described by Haswell.

Nautical observations entered in the logs of the *Columbia*, however, offer more conclusive evidence that the site in question is not SgA'ngwa-i. Specifically, SgA'ngwa-i does not provide the protected water that Haswell first describes in 1789 as suitable for a "vessel to lay." When the *Columbia* "stood into Sound" July 1791, the vessel had entered Houston Stewart Channel nearing Rose Inlet not Anthony Island. Hoskins remarked: "the western shore was about a furlong distance: the eastern, two miles, and the village, south east six miles" (Howay, 1941:199). He further adds:

I advise any vessel . . . to run in behind an island, just at the entrance, on his *starboard hand* [emphasis mine]: there cast anchor before the village; where he will find from ten to fifteen fathoms water over a sandy bottom . . . there is good passage either side of the island, so that a vessel may at any time put to sea. there are several small islands scattered about the Sound; particularly one in the western passage, or rather a huge barren rock [Flatrock Island]. . . . (Howay, 1941:203)

Contrary to earlier interpretations (Howay, 1941; Duff and Kew, 1958; MacDonald, 1983), the island both Haswell and Hoskins refer to is Gordon not Anthony Island. This becomes evident when considering the direction of the ship's approach and dimensions of relevant landmarks observed by the writers, particularly Haswell's reference to the village being a "little behind a small island." Boit entered in the Log of the *Union* on reaching "Coyars sound" 19 June 1795: "Came to an Anchor behind an Island on ye East side of the Sound . . . Coyar the cheif [*sic*] did not come of." He further remarked that this location was the "identical spot where the indians try'd to cut off Capt. Kendrick in the brig Lady Washington" (1981:49).

The Gordon Islands are situated northwest of Bowles Point off the west shore of Kunghit Island (i.e., the east side of the "Sound") at the entrance to Houston Stewart Channel. Lying further to the northwest in the "western passage" is Flatrock Island. The eastern passage, therefore, is between the Gordon Islands and Kunghit Island. For a vessel entering the "Sound," the Gordon Islands would lie to the east or starboard side. Anthony Island lies to the west.

Within a large bay located to the north of Bowles Point, and facing

the Gordon Islands, is the town site "Ta'dasL!in." A second town site, identical in name to the major Qai'dju Raven village at Benjamin Point and the namesake of Xo'ya's lineage (Swanton, 1905), is shown just to the south along the west shore of Kunghit Island (Newcombe, 1901; Swanton, 1905).³ The location of Ta'dasL!in Inaga'-i corresponds to the observations entered in Haswell's, Hoskins' and Boit's logs. The site lies to the southeast corner of the bay in proximity to a promontory at Bowles Point, an area designated by Newcombe (1901) as "Ta'dasL!in Fort." This feature is identical in type to the defensive site described by Haswell.

Further, as a member of an earlier venture, Boit remarked in 1791 that they "landed at one of their villages" (Howay, 1941:373). On the day following the attempted seizure of Boit's *Union* in June 1795, Boit stated: "At daylight took up the anchor and came to sail, stretching toward the village on the west part of the Sound" (1981:49). Aside from the fact that the first protracted meetings between the Kunghit and the maritime fur traders did not take place at Anthony Island, it is clear that there was more than one village occupied simultaneously in the vicinity of the western entrance to Houston Stewart Channel during the late 1700s.⁴

Archaeological data indicate that the site of SgA'ngwa-i village was first occupied at ca. 200-520 A.D. (Acheson, 1984), coinciding with a 4-6 m drop in mean sea level for Anthony Island at the turn of the 1st millennium A.D. (Hebda, 1985). Within the prehistoric period the site appears to be only one of a number of smaller encampments or villages in the region. The pattern of spatially close but distinct smaller unilineage communities is compatible to a social organization based on matrilineal descent coupled with avunculocal residence (Murdock, 1949).

Conversely, archaeological data in conjunction with ethnographic and

³ Newcombe's (1901) field map gave two locations for Qai'dju Inaga'-i. In turn, Swanton (1905:268, 277) designated two village locations "Qai'dju," although one lacks the suffix "Inaga'-i" [town]. The town Qai'dju, whose chief was Kia'nskina-i, was situated on the east coast of Moresby Island just north of Benjamin Point. The Benjamin Point site consists of sixteen houses (Acheson and Zacharias, 1985), corresponding closely to Newcombe's (1903) record of "15 [houses], + 10-20 men to each house." The site represents a second Kunghit multi-lineage community. The second "Qai'dju Inaga'-i" village is shown to be on the west side of Kunghit Island in the vicinity of Bowles Point, a distance of only 7.5 kilometres across the "Sound" from SgA'ngwa-i Inaga'-i. In reference to this site, Newcombe (1903) made one brief notation concerning a village by the name of "Kaidu" in proximity to Louscoone Inlet.

⁴ For example, Q!a'dadja'ns Inaga'-i, consisting of at least two house sites, is also situated within a kilometre of SgA'ngwa-i village on Anthony Island (Acheson, 1984). This neighbouring Raven village belonged to the Striped-Town-People [Xa'gi Ravens]. The designated chief was Q!Anxawa's (Swanton, 1905).

historic information support the interpretation that SgA'ngwa-i village became a major multi-lineage community subsequent to historic contact. The site appears to have been first owned by Xo'ya's Qai'dju Ravens, although it was not Xo'ya's principal residence. With the historic merger of the nine Kunghit lineages by the mid-1800s this village and, in turn, the last Chief Ninstints of the Eagle moiety rose in prominence. Xo'ya and the community directly associated with the violent encounters of the late 1700s, on the other hand, receded into relative obscurity.

Xo'ya's name did not pass on to successive Qai'dju Raven chiefs, in contrast to that of Ninstints following the resettlement of the Sa'ki Eagles at SgA'ngwa-i in the early contact period. In Swanton's (1905) list of Kunghit townsites the name Xo'ya appears in relation to only one small community. The site is Xe-uda'o Inaga'-i ("the village that fishes towards the south"), located at Keeweenah Bay on the northeast side of Kunghit Island. Further, Swanton identified a chief by the name "Tc!a'no algola'i" and not Xo'ya as head of the Qai'dju Raven lineage (1905: 277).

For the Kunghit Haida, a society where intergroup relations were based on consanguinity and affinity, the historic record reveals a time of rapidly changing and widening social fields. Changes in residency patterns, with the amalgamation of smaller, possibly single lineage communities, constitute a significant impact on traditional socio-economic relations. SgA'ngwa-i village can be discounted as the setting for the confrontation between Kunghit and maritime fur traders which ushered in these changes. More appropriately, the multi-lineage community of SgA'ngwa-i Inaga'-i was, in concrete terms, the culmination of these changes.

References

Acheson, S.

1984 "Archaeological Investigations: SgA'ngwa-i Inaga'-i." Unpublished permit report on file Heritage Conservation Branch, Victoria.

Acheson, S. and S. Zacharias

1985 *Kunghit Haida Culture History Project: Results of Phase 1*. Heritage Conservation Branch, Victoria.

Blackman, M.

1981 *Window on the Past: the Photographic Ethnohistory of the Northern and Kaigani Haida*. National Museum of Man Mercury Series (Ethnology) No. 74, Ottawa.

Boit, John

- 1981 *Log of the Union 1794-1796*. Edmund Hays (ed.), Massachusetts Historical Society/Oregon Historical Society.

Curtis, E. S.

- 1916 "The Haida." *The North American Indian*. Vol. 11:115-75; 186-93. Norwood, Illinois.

Cutter, D.

- 1969 *The California Coast*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Duff, W. and M. Kew

- 1958 "Anthony Island: A Home of the Haidas." *British Columbia Museum Report* for 1957:37-64.

Hebda, R.

- 1985 personal communication

Howay, F. W. (ed.)

- 1941 *Voyages of the "Columbia" to the Northwest Coast 1787-1790*. Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society.

Ingraham, J.

- 1971 *Voyage to the Northwest Coast of North America 1790-1792*. Mark Kaplanoff (ed.), Massachusetts: Imprint Society.

MacDonald, G.

- 1983 *Ninstints*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Marchand, Etienne

- 1801 *A Voyage Round the World Performed during the Years, 1790, 1791 and 1792*. 2 Vols. London: T. N. Longman.

Murdock, George

- 1936 *Rank and Potlatch Among the Haida*. Yale University Publications in Anthropology 13:1-20.
1949 *Social Structure*. New York: Macmillan.

Newcombe, C.

- n.d. Miscellaneous papers for years 1897, 1901 and 1903. Vol. 35. British Columbia Provincial Archives, Victoria.

Swanton, J.

- n.d. "Haida Notebooks: 1900-1901." Miscellaneous papers, 2 Vols. British Columbia Provincial Archives, Victoria.
1905 "Contribution to the Ethnology of the Haida." *Memoir of the American Museum of Natural History* No. 5.

