

# **Bald Eagles and Their Meaning to the Tlingit People of Southeast Alaska.**

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The Eagle and the Raven are important as representatives of the two moieties in Tlingit culture. The Eagle is a prominent figure in stories handed down by elders to instruct their children and grandchildren and Eagle parts were used for various purposes in traditional Tlingit society.

I appreciate the invitation to share a little of what I have learned from our elders. This is what I would say in Tlingit: It is Tlingit Tundataani, which means "the way we think as Tlingit people" or "human thinking."

Our grandparents would always instruct us in the things that we were to learn-the stories that we were to begin to understand and learn from the time that we were children and even before then. Our grandparents or our parents would begin speaking to the children while they were still in the womb. We believed that our children would listen. We felt that at that time the child was beginning to record in his memory what was being said to him.

The stories that we have today were told by our grandparents as instruction. These stories existed way before you and I were even thought of. All we knew, through the Raven stories, was how the Raven taught us how to get our food and taught the Tlingit people how to live.

One of my grandparents, Woosh Kiyadagweich was his Tlingit name, was from Sheetkaa, Sitka in English. He and another grandfather of mine, from DeiShu, Haines, would get together and tell the stories back and forth to one another of the old ways. It was at a time when our people began to recognize that there would be one day that our land would be flooded over with non-Natives. So they began to instruct a young man, his name in Tlingit: Donawaak. Some of you may know him. His English name is Austin Hammond. He received an honorary doctor's degree of humanities from the University of Alaska Southeast in 1989.

He's the one who told me some of the stories from his grandparents. He was told, "You're going to be the one that's going to pass these stories on because there's going to come a time that you're going to need these stories. There are going to be people coming in that will flood our land and you're going to need to learn or know these stories."

At that time we did not know our Heavenly Father as we know him now. We only knew the Raven stories. Raven had three titles. Yell Dleit, the first title, means in translation "the White Raven." The second title, Yell Tlein, meant "the Bigger Raven." The third, Yell Yaadi, meant "the Child of the Raven." These three were one. He was white at the beginning and then he turned black when he stole the water and put all the lakes and the different waterways that we have today in Southeast Alaska.

Yeil Yaadi, the story that I'm going to share with you, comes from Austin Hammond.

Our grandfathers would say: "Woosh Kiyadi gweitch" as their time on this earth was coming to an end: Grandson, be of good courage. Be of good courage. Tell these stories to your children and to your grandchildren. Let them know and whoever will listen, tell them these stories. My dear grandchildren, I want you to know, I want you to hear my voice, that it is my desire now that you will think of this story I am about to tell. Through this story, my hope is that you will think about your lives.

### **The Story of the Raven and His Brother-in-Law**

As the Raven began his journey he headed out to sea and as he paddled out to sea he saw what he called his brother-in-law. From there he began to talk with his brother-in-law. The Raven called out, Is that you, brother-in-law? Aax Kaani is how he called in Tlingit. Aax Kaani. Waa eigwe. My brother-in-law, is that you?

This seemed to be a planned meeting as they came together and talked. And Raven, being inquisitive, asked him, How long ago were you born, Aax Kaani? How long ago were you born?

And his brother-in-law told him: Before primitive tools were made.

And the Raven replied, I guess you are just a young boy or a young child yet. Then he added, I was born before the crust of the earth was formed.

The lesson of this story, as our parents and grandparents would instruct us, is that always an argument starts with little troubles. Also, let me point out, that since I am a Raven, as I was telling this story, an Eagle would know that I am calling him brother-in-law because we have two moieties, the Eagle and the Raven.

His brother-in-law told the Raven, well, I guess you were born before me.

Then he put his hat on. It was the Fog Hat. Soon the fog was so thick Raven couldn't see anything. But it brought a new insight to the Raven. Before the fog he didn't think what he was saying to his brother-in-law. He was just trying to out-talk him. He spoke impulsively.

So the Raven called out to his brother-in-law, changing his mind: Aax Kaani. Aax Kaani. I guess you were born before I was. But his brother-in-law did not pay any attention to him. And out there on the ocean it was very calm. One could hear not a thing. The fog was so thick Raven couldn't even see the bottom of his canoe.



An eagle and a raven. Photo by Bob Armstrong.

After awhile Raven called to his brother-in-law again. Aax Kaani. Aax Kaani. I guess you were born way before me, the tone of his voice starting to change. He was getting frightened. It felt as if the boat was shaking with him. He didn't know what was going to happen and feared the boat might tip over.

This is how we are sometimes when we say something wrong. We get frightened just as the Raven was frightened.

Raven called to his brother-in-law the third time, now with softness in his voice: Aax Kaani. Aax Kaani. I guess you were born way before me.

Raven's voice turned to crying as he called out and suddenly the Raven grabbed the side of his canoe as his brother-in-law shook the canoe with him in it.

What are you saying? his brother-in-law asked as he began to take his Fog Hat off. I guess you were born before me-way before I was born, Raven said, wiping the tears from his eyes.

This is how it is in our lives when we say the wrong thing. We think of our mistakes after they are made. This is why it is as it was with Raven and his brother-in-law. From that point on they worked together building this world. They would not do anything without the other.

### **Importance of the Eagle in Tlingit Culture**

As mentioned earlier, the Eagle is part of the Tlingit social structure. There are two moieties, the Eagle and the Raven. They are both equal. In Tlingit society we are all equal and this is how we balance out things.

We also used parts of the eagle's body, as I learned from asking our elders. There is not much information about this, but I will continue to ask for more information. I was told that the eagle's wing was used for sweeping out the tribal houses. And the tail of the eagle was used for dancing regalia: Dancers would put them in their hands and move them back and forth. Sometimes the beak was used for a spoon.

I was also told that the parents would tie the wings to the children's wrists, to the boys' wrists. I suppose they were tied in such a fashion that it would be very difficult for the child to move, it wouldn't be as natural. There would be a little tug on his arms when he was moving his arms. It was believed that this would give him arm strength while he was growing up.

### **The Shaman [Fee-Kee]**

One story tells of a powerful shaman called Fee-Kee, who was Ixt', a helper of the people. The shaman often journeyed into the wilderness and up into the mountains to seek out hardship to give himself strength. One time the shaman went up on top of a mountain in the Haines area. While there he saw an eagle flying high above him. As he looked at the eagle he began chanting. He had a drum with him and he drummed four times and upon the fourth drum it is told it sounded like a rifle shot and the eagle came down from where he was at .. dead. And this is one of the reasons how our shaman took the spirit of the eagle away from him for his own possession. And in Tlingit terms that's Atoow and that was property that was owned by that particular shaman or that clan that he belonged to.

His name was Fee-Kee. He was known to be very powerful.

He was also known to eat the eagle and he would let the eagle go rancid and they said that it tasted like fish, because basically that's one of the eagle's main diets. I've asked two people about that and both brothers, elders, once said that we as people used to eat it and they said it was pretty good meat. It may not sound tasty but I guess when we thought of chickens we probably felt the same way.

### **The Eagle As Gift-Giver**

But there is another story of a man or a family in Klawock. I understand that today there are people who bring wounded or injured eagles back to health. A family in Klawock did the same thing for an eagle. And as he gained strength they let the eagle go. And the eagle caught a king salmon and he dragged it to shore where the family was, in front of

the family's house and left it there and he flew up into the woods and sat in a tree watching. The family throughout the day didn't pay attention to the king salmon and the eagle became very angry and flew down to the king salmon and tore the king salmon up and devoured it. And so we are told the story as to when in need the eagle will help you or bring food to you as he tried to pay back his gift. And the respect that we are paying to the eagle today: that gift will be paid back to us.

### **Other Significance of the Eagle**

We also have a river we call Ch'aak-Heeni. That's just a little ways from Klukwan area. And the original name, Ch'aak being our Tlingit term for eagle and it's spelled Ch'aak in Tlingit. The original name was Gie, I believe. And that's what the river was called Gie y nee, Eagle River, which is a small river across from Klukwan.

We also had houses, Ch'aak it, Eagle House.

In closing as I mentioned earlier that we as a people have two moieties, the Eagle and the Raven and they are both equal. Our father comes from Chookanheeni, Grass River. He was from the Xoot Hit, the Brown Bear House and he was an Eagle, from the Eagle moiety.