

Saving the Haisla Nuyem

By Jay Powell

ABSTRACT

Residential schools, a recognized Canadian institution of assimilation for generations of Aboriginal youth, were unsuccessful in suppressing traditional culture among the Haisla of northern British Columbia due to the tribal rememberer, who codified the tribal oral law, their *nuyem*.

Key Words: residential schools, cultural suppression, Canadian aboriginal tribes, Haisla, traditional oral

The Canadian Residential School System – Education as genocide

Canada is currently attempting to redress a historic issue of official genocide—the residential school system. We are speaking of genocide as programmed efforts to wipe out an ethnic identity. Between the 1820s and the 1970s as many as 140 residential schools operated on or near reserves across Canada. Aboriginal young people were taken from their families, transported to schools where they were taught to read, write, do arithmetic, speak English or French, and to think and behave according to mainstream “whiteman” values.

Besides curriculum issues, school life involved tactics to discourage the use of the students’ traditional languages, tastes, beliefs and perspectives. As a single example, in some of these institutions, students were given seven supper dessert tickets per week, and any resident who overheard another student say something in their native language

could demand one of the speaker’s dessert tickets. In a regimen with few treats, such tactics and teachings worked. As the years passed, many students returned from school unable to speak their native language and not inclined to engage in what they had been taught were primitive tribal ways.

The residential schools are now thought and spoken of as “sites of unspeakable trauma.” A national effort referred to as the Truth and Reconciliation movement is attempting to provide treatment and recompense for the 80,000 or so survivors of these institutions who are still alive. But the psychological effects of residential school life affected not only those who attended, but subsequent generations. And certainly, the schools’ efforts to discourage traditional lifeways back home had the effect of gradual loss of many aspects of “the Old Ways.” Back home in the native communities, elders remembered how things used to be, but many students returning home from the residential schools were not inclined to learn the details or even the logic underlying traditional beliefs and ways.



Figure 1: Major languages in NWC culture area

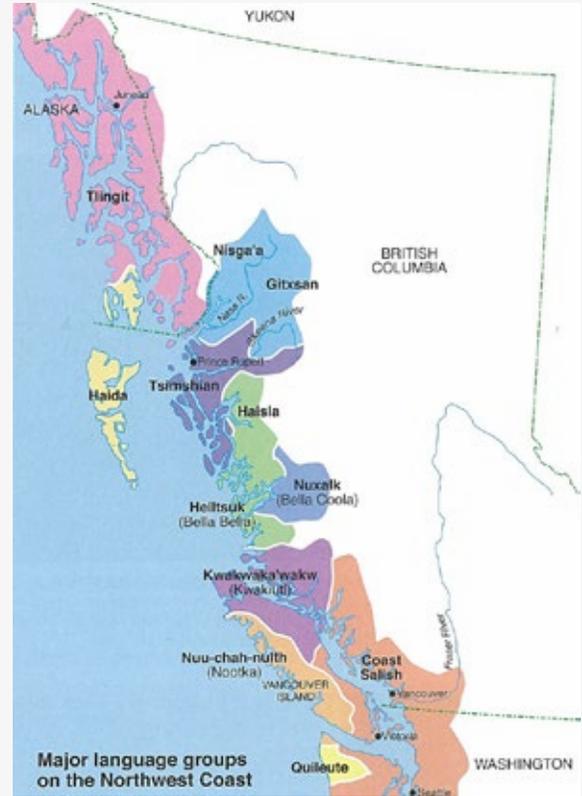


Figure 2: Major language groups on the Northwest Coast

Saving the Haisla Nuyem

The erosion of traditional lifeways and perspectives, exacerbated by the effects of the residential schools in Canada, became increasingly apparent during the 1940s and '50s. Ethnographers recognized the potential unrecorded loss of cultural traits as Aboriginal cultural features and languages were being replaced by mainstream English and “pan-Indian” behaviors and perspectives. Native communities patiently put up with anthropologists intent on documenting the Old Ways, interviewing elders and observing public activities. In some cases, communities even hired their own anthropologist to record the details of their traditional life. Starting in the late 1980s, “traditional use studies” documented band and tribal hunting, fishing and gathering or details of the group’s territory, boundaries and

traditional ownership, occupation and use of their lands. Such projects made clear all that was being lost and replaced, in part due to and exacerbated by the residential school experience.

Such an opportunity to record what was being lost happened to me in 1999. I received a call from the Haisla Band, located far to the north at Kitamaat Village, British Columbia. The voice on the phone said, “We have almost 50 elders who are the last ones that remember the way things used to be. Would you come up and write a book about each one of those elders’ lives and memories?” I had just retired after 30 years on the faculty of anthropology at the University of B.C. This was an invitation to become a failure at retirement and keep on working. I accepted and was invited to fly up north for an interview.

I knew from previous work with almost a dozen aboriginal groups that I would have to pass the interview process. My wife-colleague and I call it the “truth test.” Every Northwest Coast Aboriginal group we have ever worked with decides early on whether or not you can be trusted. My wife and I have noted that the people seem to decide in an instant; they are seldom wrong and they never change their mind. So, with some nervousness, I flew up north to the Terrace airport, rented a car and drove for an hour out to the village.

I was talking with the official who had originally contacted me when three old men came into the office. I was introduced, and one of them said, “Are you Jay? Let’s go to lunch.” I expected that we would drive to a café “in town” for a soup and sandwich. Instead we went down to the dock and got into an old carved cedar canoe and paddled out to a floating buoy in front of the village where we tied up. One of the old men reached into the water, grabbed a line and started pulling up what eventually turned out to be a prawn trap that was lifted into the canoe. It was loaded with large prawns. When the trap was opened, they skittered freely in the bottom of the canoe. The three old men chatted over “lunch” as we picked up one prawn after another, peeled and ate it, saying each time “*Nolaxw, nolaxw, nolaxw.*”

We talked and they gently razzed me about how “all the other smart ‘perfessers’ had gotten it all wrong when they came up to study us over the years.” The right response was to laugh and agree. I did. After eating our fill, the prawns that remained were gently picked up and put back into the water. Then one of the men got up and, despite my

concerns about an unstable canoe, he did a dance, singing in Haisla while he patted out the drumbeat gently on his chest. He spoke a few sentences in Haisla and then look directly at me and said, “You see that mountain over there. That’s my *wa’wais*, my valley is there. My uncle gave it to me with his name. He first taught me about the spirit powers of that place and the other living things there.” And as he spoke, I knew that I had passed the truth test. Word would spread, but without that acceptance, I might as well go home because none of the elders would have confided in me.

Word that I had passed did spread. I was given an “office” in the gym and, at my request, they hired two typists to transcribe the week-long tape-recorded interviews with elders that I immediately got started doing. During those interviews we took down the matrilineal family trees, showing how the 52 *wa’wais* (heritable ownership areas) had been passed down from one family headman to his sister’s son, as was the traditional inheritance pattern among the Haisla. Each family had a precise annual resource harvesting schedule that assured that they would be at the right place when fish ran and harvestable resources were mature. My interview notebooks included hand-drawn maps and the design of fish weirs, as well as descriptions of springpole (a baited noose attached to a bent-over tree), pitfall and deadfall traps, and other traditional technology. And the interview cassettes included songs and mythic, legendary, and folkloric narratives, all of which were family property. Each interview transcript was, in fact, an inch-thick book of the lineage and individual memory of the elder interviewee.

Actually, this project was documenting the Haisla culture in transition. I was surprised how often I was told, “You shoulda been here last year when Old Man so-and-so died. He was the last one who knew about that.” It was clear that everything we were getting down was like a catching a dodo bird by the toe as it flew off to extinction. The things we got down, the community would have forever. What we didn’t get down would be lost forever. Considered in those terms, there was no doubt that these interviews were the right thing to do at the right time.

As the elders spoke, I heard the same phrase regularly. They would say, “Our *nuyem* (NOO-yum) says...” When I asked what that *nuyem* was, I was always told, “The *nuyem* is our law. It’s our stories.” When I pressed for explanation and details, I was sometimes told a narrative in which a Haisla person in the recent or mythic past was told, “Don’t...” “Don’t harvest more than you need and waste.” “Don’t disrespect other living things; but whatever you do, don’t injure or make fun of frogs.” And in each of those *nuyem* stories, that miscreant who disregarded the warnings and did what they had been told not to do, was punished for disregarding the law. Disregarding the *nuyem* could even be a capital offense.

And when I asked if it was possible to “get the *nuyem* down,” I was told that it is an oral code and so complex that one could never get it all written down. The elders of the year 2000 had learned the details of the *nuyem* from the admonitions and stories of their parents, uncles, grandparents who were born shortly before or after 1900. But, “No,” they said. The *nuyem* was too complex and enormous. “Us elders,” they said, “are the generation who

went to residential school. We had the *nuyem* scared out of us.”

A year passed while I interviewed elder after elder in Kitamaat Village. And, one day when I had a break, I went over to visit the oldest Haisla in the village, Sampson Ross, born 1912. I had spoken to him about the *nuyem* on a couple of occasions. That day he told me something that I had never heard before. He said, “Our *nuyem* says that in each generation, there will be someone who was born with the skill to be (1) a story teller, (2) a healer, (3) a wise counselor or judge, (4) a carver, and (5) a rememberer. Louise Barbetti is our rememberer. You go to talk to her about the *nuyem*.”

When I asked other Haislas about Louise, they told me that, in fact, “She says, ‘Our *nuyem* says...’ regularly. And, we also go to her to find out about the protocol for Settlement Feasts (ritual dinners when the names of deceased Haisla are passed on to the next generation). Louise also remembers what happened at potlatch feasts (dinners where guests are paid with gifts for witnessing ceremonial activities, sometimes inappropriately called giveaway feasts).” I realized that Louise was considered to be the Haisla rememberer.

So, I went to Louise and asked her whether she would work with me to record the *nuyem*. And, just like the other villagers, she said that the *nuyem* is too complicated to document, since each forbidden behavior has a prohibition story that goes with it. Prohibition narratives are common in the oral history and legal codes of ethnic groups. An example is the Adam and Eve story in the Biblical book of Genesis. In that narrative, the deity told Adam and Eve that they could eat fruit from all of the trees in the

Garden of Eden except for the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the fruit of that particular tree they were prohibited from eating. However, Eve was tempted and talked Adam into eating the “apple” from the forbidden tree. As a result, the deity forced them to leave the garden forever and to suffer for having eaten the forbidden fruit. The Haisla *nuyem* stories are Amerindian examples of such prohibition narratives. And, Louise argued, they are so numerous and so varied that the attempt to put together the Haisla *nuyem* would be too daunting to consider.

In response, I told Louise, “Just think how many hundreds of generations it took for the Haisla *nuyem* and the supportive corpus of stories to develop. Think also that there is no return from the unrecorded extinction of small group cultural traits when the last one who remembers has passed. And if one can “think” an oral code such as the *nuyem*, then one can also record those thoughts. It would take patience and time, but it would be worth it. And this is probably the last opportunity there will ever be.”

A week later, I saw Louise and she said, “OK, Jay. I’m willing to try to get down the *nuyem*.”

When I paid her a visit later the same day, she said, “The *nuyem* is so important that I have to try this. But you will have to agree to spend every day with me so that as soon as I think of a tenet of *nuyem*, I can also recall the story that tells the origin of the prohibition and that tells what will happen if one doesn’t refrain from prohibited activity. I get up at 6:00 every morning. I’ll see you early. And bring lotsa pencils.”

In the end, I rented Louise’s guest bedroom and we were up drinking coffee, talking and taking notes most mornings by six. Furthermore, it turned out to be less impossible or more possible than she (and everyone) had expected. We worked for three intense weeks. At first every issue had to be explained and related to some aspect of one or several of the *nuyem* stories. But towards the end of the second week, Louise and I realized that we were starting to recognize that many of the *nuyem* behavioral prohibitions related to the same issues of belief and perspective. At the end of the third week, I wrote up a first draft of the basic prescriptions of the *nuyem*. Louise read it and said, “That’s the *nuyem*.”

The Haisla Nuyem—A Brief Account

The *nuyem* as it was finally expressed and edited was 15 pages long, and the corpus of relevant *nuyem* stories was 90 pages long. It seems probable that many other *nuyem* stories were lost due to a lapse in traditional transgenerational oral discussion and storytelling. But, the *nuyem* still feels satisfyingly complete as the Haisla currently have it. The final printed version of the known *nuyem* was provided to the Haisla people in a book called *Haisla! We Are Our History: Our Lands, Nuyem and Stories as Told by Our Chiefs and Elders*, Louise Barbetti, editor, and Jay Powell, compiler, (2005, Kitamaat Village Council: Kitamaat Village). It was printed privately and distributed to the community at the Haisla Unity Feast, June 21, 2005.

The Haisla Village Council has never released the *nuyem* into public domain, considering it a private aspect of Haisla individual identity and tribal distinctness. The introduction of the original presentation of the *nuyem* to the Haisla, though, has been

included in many reports of various types and is considered by the Haisla Nation Council and the people to be an expression of the ancient aboriginal cultural sophistication of the people. Here is the introductory statement regarding the Haisla and their prehistoric oral law. There is some repetition of information provided previously, but this is the *nuyem* as the Haisla wish it to be presented—the Haisla people’s characterization of their oral law, their *nuyem*.

The Haisla Nuyem

The Haisla *nuyem* is our traditional rule of behaviour and conduct. But, it is more than a set of regulations to be followed. It’s not like the Ten Commandments. We can characterize it like this:

(a) Our *nuyem* is a Haisla philosophy of life that teaches us who we are, our group history and our personal identity as a member of a family and a clan.

(b) Our *nuyem* is the Haisla ‘worldview’, outlining our traditional beliefs about our relationship to other living things and to the physical and spiritual worlds.

The *nuyem* is part of our tradition, but it is not a cultural leftover from “the old ways” like a bow and arrow that is no longer relevant to our lives. Our *nuyem* is still our law. It is a good law, and it will always be our law.

Even though our *nuyem* provides guidance for behavior in every situation, it is really quite simple. Our *nuyem* tells us how to act in any situation of daily life, yet it can be described in a few words like this:

“With the power you get by being grounded on the earth and with the help of the Creator, always

fulfill your obligations to yourself, to your family, clan and chiefs, to your land, and to the other living things in it.”

The *nuyem* specifies the details of these obligations to self, family, clan, chiefs, land and other living things. It also tells us how to carry out those obligations. And, finally, it teaches us how to achieve the personal integrity and strength of character to fulfill these responsibilities.

Our *nuyem* has always been an oral tradition and has been passed on among the Haisla from generation to generation. We learn it from our chiefs, elders, grandparents, aunts and uncles and parents. Hardly a conversation happens among the older Haisla people without someone telling us, “Our *nuyem* says...” But, nowadays there are Haisla families in which the children grow up without learning about the *nuyem*. Traditional Haisla storytelling habits and teaching of the *nuyem* were interrupted by the residential school experience. Many of those who attended residential school either never learned our *nuyem* or were taught to feel that it was primitive, sinful or wrong. So, instead of every family teaching the *nuyem* to their children, the line of cultural transmission of our *nuyem* became a thin cord, with only a few elders speaking of our law. Indeed, some of the traditional knowledge of our Haisla ancestors may already have been forgotten. For this reason we are writing it down, so that it will be preserved and will never be lost.

Here, then, is our *nuyem*. We are aware that non-Haisla people sometimes wonder why the Haisla do the things we do or why we may not be comfortable doing some things that other people do. Interested non-Haisla people, if they wish, can better under-

stand us and learn from this description of our law. This ancient wisdom still works well for us. Our *nuyem* will always be the law for the Haisla people.

The Haisla Nuyem—Our Law

We call it *nuyem*. It is our history and our law. If you ask one of our elders what the *nuyem* is, you will get a set of very simple statements that outline the general rules of Haisla life. If you inquire further, you will be told the reasons for each of those rules. So, that's how we will start. We will give the *nuyem* in simple statements.

Remember that the *nuyem* is guidance. It has general guidelines to help one decide on the best course of action, guidelines as to the way things have been done for generations—maybe millennia. Those who know the *nuyem* well say that there is no order of importance in the rules of our *nuyem*. Each thing is as important as the next. Here is a general list of the guidelines that reflect the most basic principles of our Haisla *nuyem*.

- Draw gratefully on the sources of our strength. Ground yourself in the power of the earth and pray to the Creator for strength, help and wisdom. Cleanse yourself mentally and physically. Give expression to your deep feelings of awe for the natural world and its bounty by saying, “*Nolaxw. nolaxw, nolaxw.*”
- Respect and obey our chiefs and support our leaders. Demand honesty, courage and commitment to the people's good from your leaders. Support leaders who listen to everyone's point of view and, without surrender, encourage negotiation rather than hostilities. Attend feasts politely, following protocol.

- Know your history, including the background of your tribe, clan and family. It is the source of your identity and self-confidence. Listen to the elders when they tell our story.

- Know our land and our natural world. It is our obligation to be stewards of the land and the living things on it. Never take or kill more than you need. Something has to be left for the future. Live to the rhythm of our annual cycle. Know the weather and the habits of other living things.

- Family is first. The family provides support to those who need it: the young, needy and enfeebled. Pregnant women get special care and guidance. Children of your siblings are your children. Everyone in the family is responsible for teaching and guiding the young.

The *Nuyem* also says the following eight dicta to help us in our personal behavior, balance and relationships:

a) Share what you have with others who need it. A Haisla is never greedy. If someone needs what you have, give it to them.

b) Be handsome. A handsome person recognizes what is needed, whether an aspect of the social fabric or physical environment, and can influence others to help fix it. A handsome person is caring and sympathetic for those who grieve or are needy. A handsome person accepts others as they are and respects everyone.

c) Be responsible for your word. If you agree to do something, prepare yourself and make sure it gets done. Don't shirk your obligations or procrastinate. Do what is necessary now.

d) Leave your own footprints. You can never fill someone else's footprints. Accept yourself as you are. But also don't be proud or boastful. Good will be recognized without blowing your own horn.

e) If your enemy spits in your face, don't retaliate. Find a way to avoid stooping to violence because of envy or greed. Be handsomer than your tormentor.

f) What you learn or receive, you give back in some form. A parent should train the children about the *nuyem*, to take responsibility and not to be lazy, to pick up after themselves and do things right from the start. Never give children anything they don't earn.

g) Let go of grief and sadness. Fulfill your obligation to have a settlement for the deceased. Burn food for the dead.

h) Never mistreat animals; a similar mistreatment comes back on you double. Be especially respectful of frogs.

Saving the Haisla *nuyem* from unrecorded extinction is an uncommon success story in the

attempt to reverse the effects of the residential schools and subsequent assimilation to mainstream ways. Current Canadian efforts to create a national mood of truth and reconciliation deserve the encouragement of knowing that some communities mounted successful attempts to maintain their traditional institutions.

There have been few positive stories in this shameful history and its outcomes. This essay remembers a close call with regard to the near extinction of a remarkable cultural institution. It's the story of the survival of the Haisla aboriginal oral law. Such legal codes may have been common throughout the Northwest Coast cultural area in traditional times, but the only one that is known to have survived is the Haisla *nuyem*. The documentation and survival of this *nuyem* is a feel-good outcome. And just as this native legal code has survived, so should the story of the remarkable woman who kept the code alive—Louise Barbetti, the Haisla rememberer. •

This Article may be cited as:

Powell, J. (2018) Saving the Haisla Nuyem. *Fourth World Journal*. Vol 17, N 1. pp. 1-8.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jay Powell

Shown playfully transforming into Bluejay, Jay (a.k.a. Dr. J.V. Powell) is an ethnographer and anthropological linguist, now emeritus professor, at the University of British Columbia. He has worked intensively with a dozen Canadian and American bands and tribes living on the Northwest Coast. His focus is the documentation of traditional lifeways and language as well as the development of cultural and language curricula for Native schools. Working with his

wife, author Vickie Jensen, and knowledgeable elders, he has written more than 50 books for various groups (studies of Native beliefs, lands, traditional economics, ceremonial life, language grammars and dictionaries). He is the last fluent speaker of Quileute, a tribe with whom he has worked for 50 years.