

# “Spiritual Relations, Obligations and Outcomes: Transmitting Tlingit Existential Principles and Practices”

Steve J. Langdon  
Professor Emeritus Anthropology  
University of Alaska Anchorage

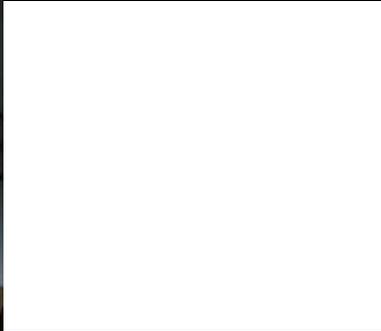
Presentation delivered at  
“Sustainable Wisdom” Conference  
Sept. 12-15, 2016  
University of Notre Dame

This presentation is copyrighted by  
Steve J. Langdon

# Gratitude: Mentors and Friends



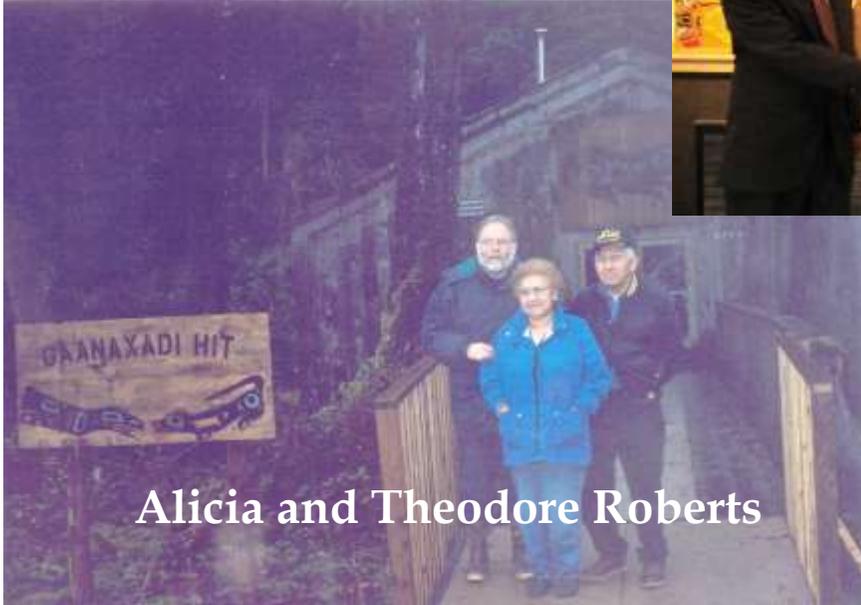
Clara Peratrovitch



David Katzeek

Paul Marks

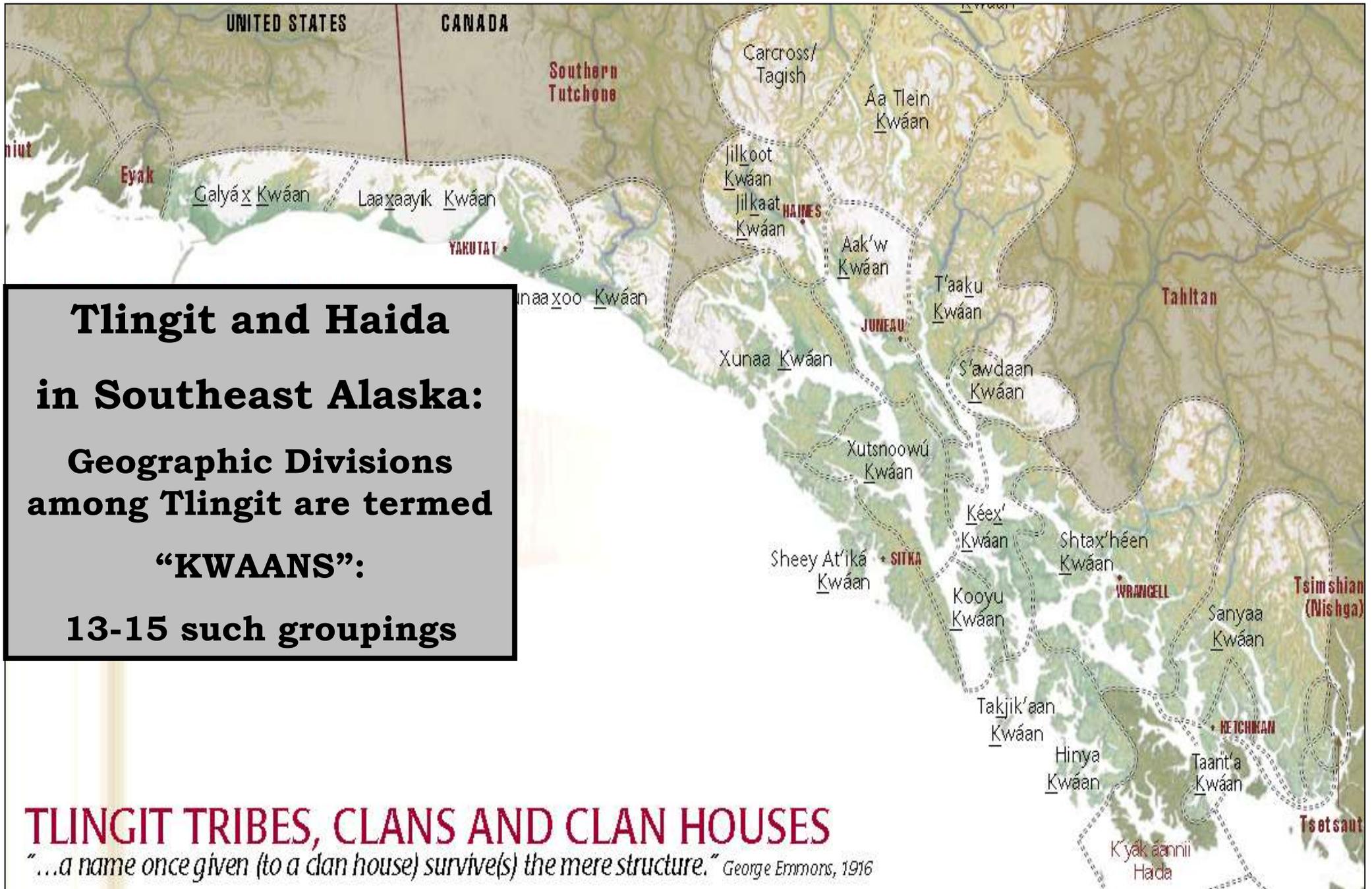
Dennis Demmert



Alicia and Theodore Roberts



Joe Hotch



**Tlingit and Haida  
in Southeast Alaska:  
Geographic Divisions  
among Tlingit are termed  
“KWAANS”:  
13-15 such groupings**

## TLINGIT TRIBES, CLANS AND CLAN HOUSES

*“...a name once given (to a clan house) survive(s) the mere structure.” George Emmons, 1916*







# Building blocks – kinship and proximity

- Matrilineal descent
- Kwaans – socioterritorial groups
- Moiety – dual division (Raven – Eagle/Wolf)
- Clan – sovereign political entity, lineages
- Houses – named and ranked
- Names – spirits return through reincarnation

# Core concepts through which Tlingit organize cultural practice

- ***SHUKA*** – Joint heritage of past, present and future members of clan; present generation must act as trustees to insure existence for themselves and others who return in future
- ***SHAGOON*** – Remembering and honoring persons that have gone before who have special meaningful experiences for clan members
- ***AT.OOW*** – Sacred objects and practices which embody and memorialize ancestral experiences and claims to territory, resources and relationship; objects appear only at *ku'eex* (mortuary potlatch) or other event of weight
- **OBLIGATORY RECIPROCITY** – moral requirement to marry outside of clan and moiety creates inescapable linkage and interdependence; leads to continuous stream of materials and support between intermarrying clans



# Existence scapes: What is it possible to think and do?

- Entities some of which we are aware and some not are constantly in flux in time and space through processes and interactions of reproduction and transformation.
- Through these processes and events humans receive and create a stream of sensations.
- Sensations are interpreted through both physiological and cognitive processes and given linguistic labels.
- Constructions of meaning – the basis of much behavior – arise through mediated processes that rely on concepts and understandings that are learned and are the basis for creative engagements – both social and environmental.
- Language structure is important to conveying critical concepts and understandings.
- **Existence scapes** comprise the realm of possible understandings, behaviors and creative responses given a set of core cosmological and ontological principles.
- **Existence scapes** become embodied **habitus** shared with other members of a cultural group allowing for critical understandings to be circulated.

# Tlingit Existence Scape of Willful Interdependent Beings

- Cruikshank (2005) - the Tlingit occupied “a moral universe inhabited by a community of beings in constant communication and exchange.”
- **RELATIONAL COSMOLOGY**  
Raven (Yeil) Accounts - Transformation and Processes
- **RELATIONAL ONTOLOGY**  
Salmon Boy - Mythic charter
- **RELATIONAL EPISTEMOLOGY**  
Acquisition of knowledge from interaction - careful attentiveness
- **RELATIONAL PHENOMENOLOGY**  
Interactive engagement - experiential acuity - reflection and Reflexivity
- **RELATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY**  
Interdependent necessity - appropriate action by all required for existence to be sustained

# KEY THEMES AND CONCEPTS of the Tlingit existence scape

- **Cosmology** - Tlingit understandings of the nature of existence: entities, processes, interactions, time and space  
**Cosmological cycling** - living spirits (entities) cycle between domains of life and death subject to appropriate treatment
- **Connections** - between domains of existence and spiritual forms in domain of life  
Interdependence - not only connected but mutually dependent for existence on behavior of other entities
- **Relations** - interaction is foundational and unavoidable, respectful engagement is essential for existence - balance
- **Obligations** - what entities must do to allow existence to continue; how respect is demonstrated and rituals conducted
- Tlingit beliefs, behaviors and ritual practices are built on these basic principles - **relational sustainability**

# Yeil's Transformations



# ***HAA AANI (Our Homeland): Yeil's (Raven) Creation***

## **RAVEN - Trickster/Transformer**

- **Obtained sun, moon and stars from the head of the Nass River**
- **Obtained freshwater for all beings from spring on *Deikeenoow* (Far Out Fort)**
- **Hauled in tank from ocean and released all the species of fish**
- **Tricked king salmon into jumping onto beach near *L'tua* (Lituya) Bay**
- **Tricked the Old Woman who controls the movement of ocean waters to create the tides**
- **Convinced owl to get fire from the ocean**

# *YEIL'S LESSONS*

- **Movement between domains of existence occurs**
- **Movement between forms of existence occurs**
- **Implicit message - things may not be as they appear**
- **Implicit message - there maybe deeper meanings than are apparent**
- **Implicit message - be observant, attentive, open to new knowledge and practices as things can change**
- **Implicit message - existence as presently experienced is contingent and potentially chaotic**

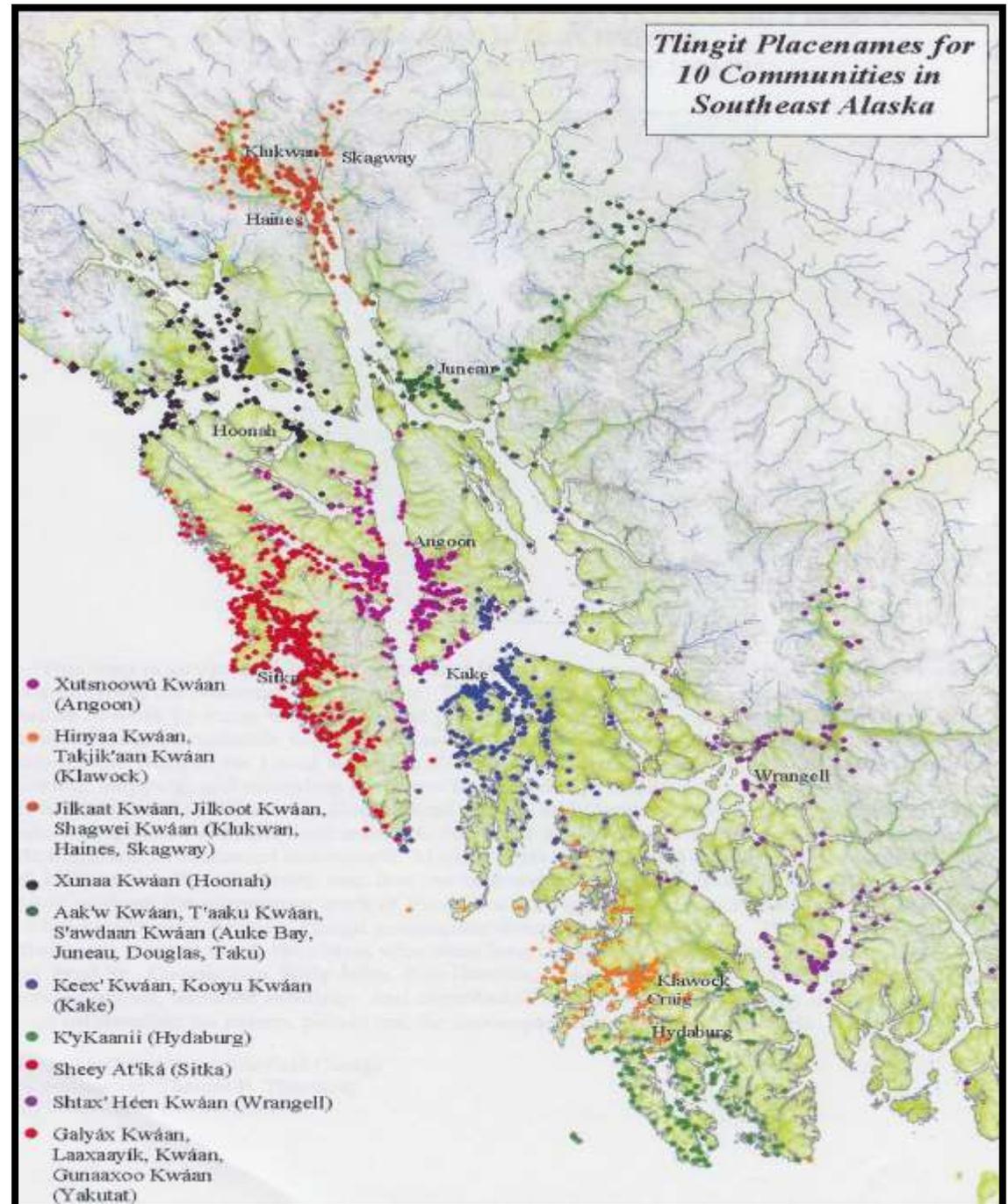
# *Tlingit* Place Names:

“If you do not know the names, your [*Tlingit*] life will drift away forever.”

Demonstrate locations of Raven’s activities, clan histories and knowledge of local conditions.

Knowing your place requires knowing your clan place names.

Source: University of Alaska Fairbanks, Alaska Native Rural Systemic Initiative



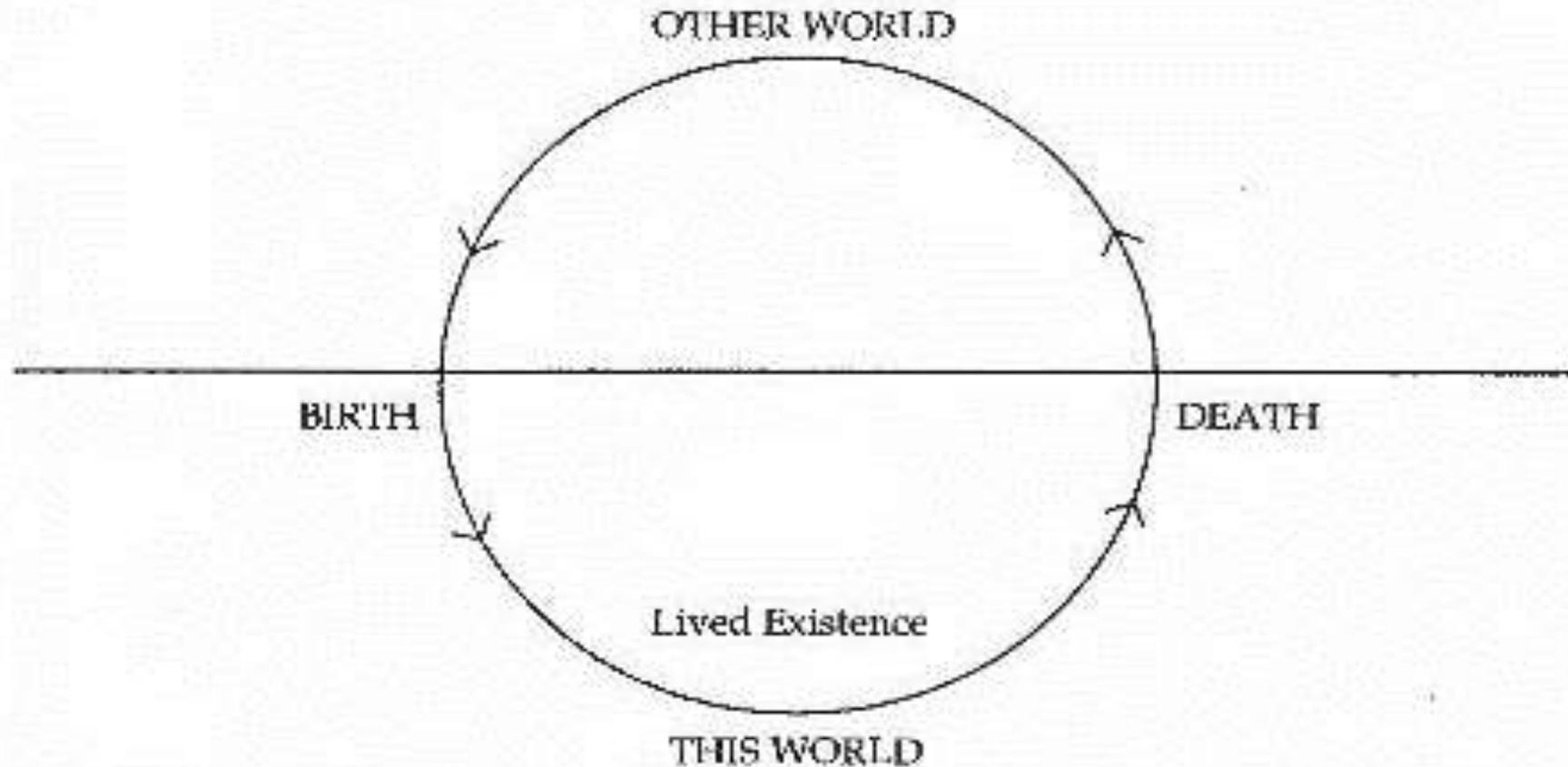
# RELATIONAL ONTOLOGY

- **Ontology - existence composed of willful, sentient, volitional spirits/forces**
- **Respect and interdependence crucial**
- **Continuity of existence depends on relational principles of mutual benefit - respect and giving**
- **Balanced relationship**
- **NOT THEISTIC**
- **NOT MATERIALISTIC**

# ***TLINGIT* RELATIONAL ONTOLOGY:** ***Aakw'taatseen* mythic charter**

- **CORE PRINCIPLES**
- **Cosmological cycling between domains**
- **Non-human entities have an essential spirit or “person” that is the same as humans**
- **Spiritual forms are relationally interdependent and one must be attentive to communication**
- ***Ay wunei* (respect) – existence depends on reciprocal respectful relations**
- **Ritual relations – including return of salmon bones to water are critical to sustaining the existence of salmon**
- ***Wooch Yax* (balance) – when both parties have conducted themselves appropriately and respectfully**

# Cosmological Cycling Model



# Human Cosmological Cycling

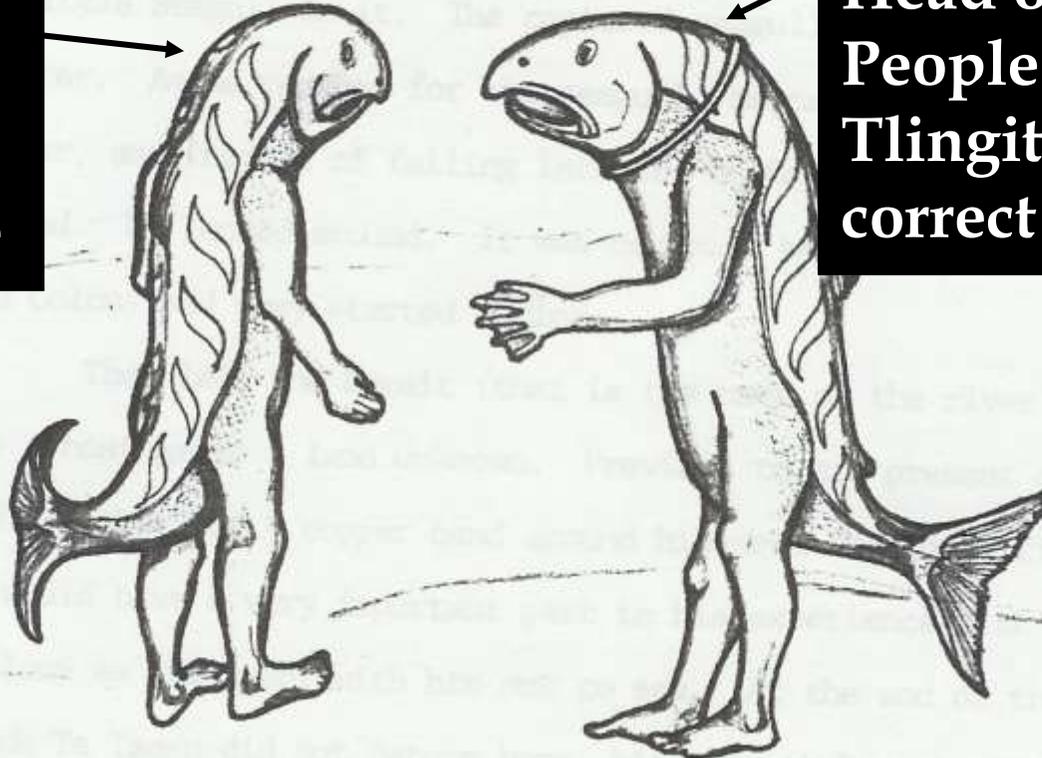
- Termed in English rebirth, reincarnation, metempsychosis
- In Tlingit belief – reincarnation follows clan, house and sex lines – does not cross species
- Requires release of spirit at death through cremation; four days following death allows spirit to leave living world to prepare for return
- *Ku'eex* – memorial ritual (potlatch) enables return, new names can be given and new positions assumed
- Dreams, visions, in the past *ixt* predictions made the living aware of the return of a spirit through a new birth
- Obligations of living toward those in the spirit domain are to engage in ritually appropriate actions to insure their return

# *TLINGIT* RELATIONAL ONTOLOGY: *Aakw'taatseen* mythic charter

- FOUR CORE PRINCIPLES
- Cosmological cycling
- Non-human entity has an essential spirit or “person” that is the same as humans
- *Ay wunei* (*respect*) – existence depends on reciprocal respectful relations
- Ritual relations – including return of salmon bones to water are critical

# **TLINGIT RELATIONAL ONTOLOGY:** *Aakw'taatseen* mythic charter

**Tlingit youth  
saved from  
drowning by  
Salmon People**



**Head of Salmon  
People teaches  
Tlingit youth  
correct behavior**

**Source: Peck,  
Tides People,  
1975**

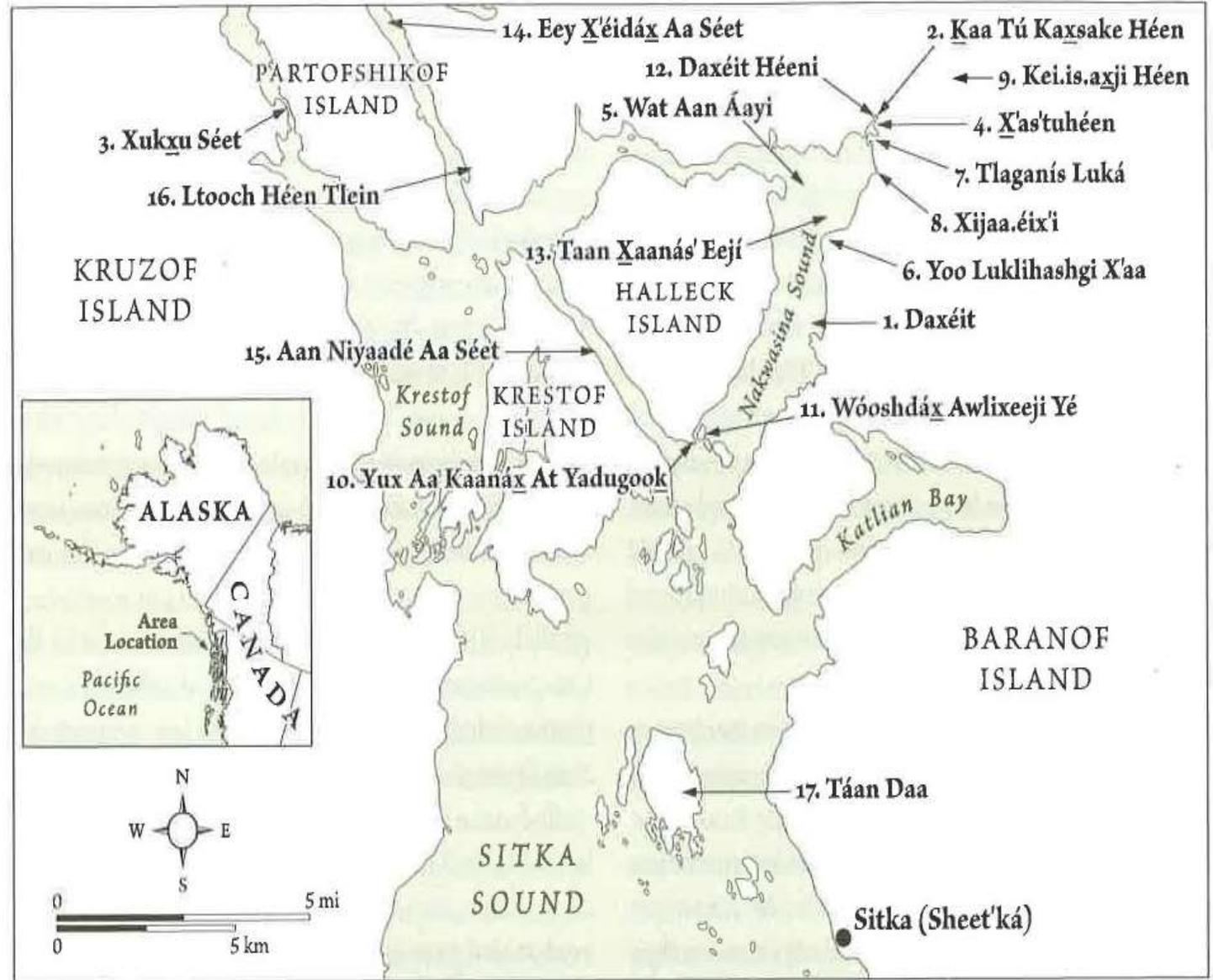
# **RESPECT:**

**Tlingit concepts and practices  
derived from mythic charter**

- **Mythic charter – “respect” is crucial**
- **Salmon – to be understood as people, have a spiritual essence similar to humans**
- **Sentient**
- **Attentive**
- **Volitional**
- **Dignity**
- **Power**

Map of route of  
*Aakwtatseen*  
return from the  
ocean to his  
parents' stream  
– Sitka version  
provides  
important  
locational  
information

Source: Thornton 2012



# **RESPECT:**

## **Oral greeting of salmon jumping**

- **Acknowledgement and affirmation - Joe Hotch, “... when they’re jumping, we are supposed to say ‘Ey Ho’; you see a fish jump, ‘Ey Ho’ [then] they know they’re being appreciated so they keep jumping. And I guess our people say it so they can know which way it’s going. Just keep saying ‘Ey Ho’, and that’s the way they want to be talked to; the fish want to be appreciated.”**
- **Source - Thornton 2012:50**

Salmon  
People  
Arriving!

Salmon  
jumping  
at stream  
as in  
Salmon  
Boy story



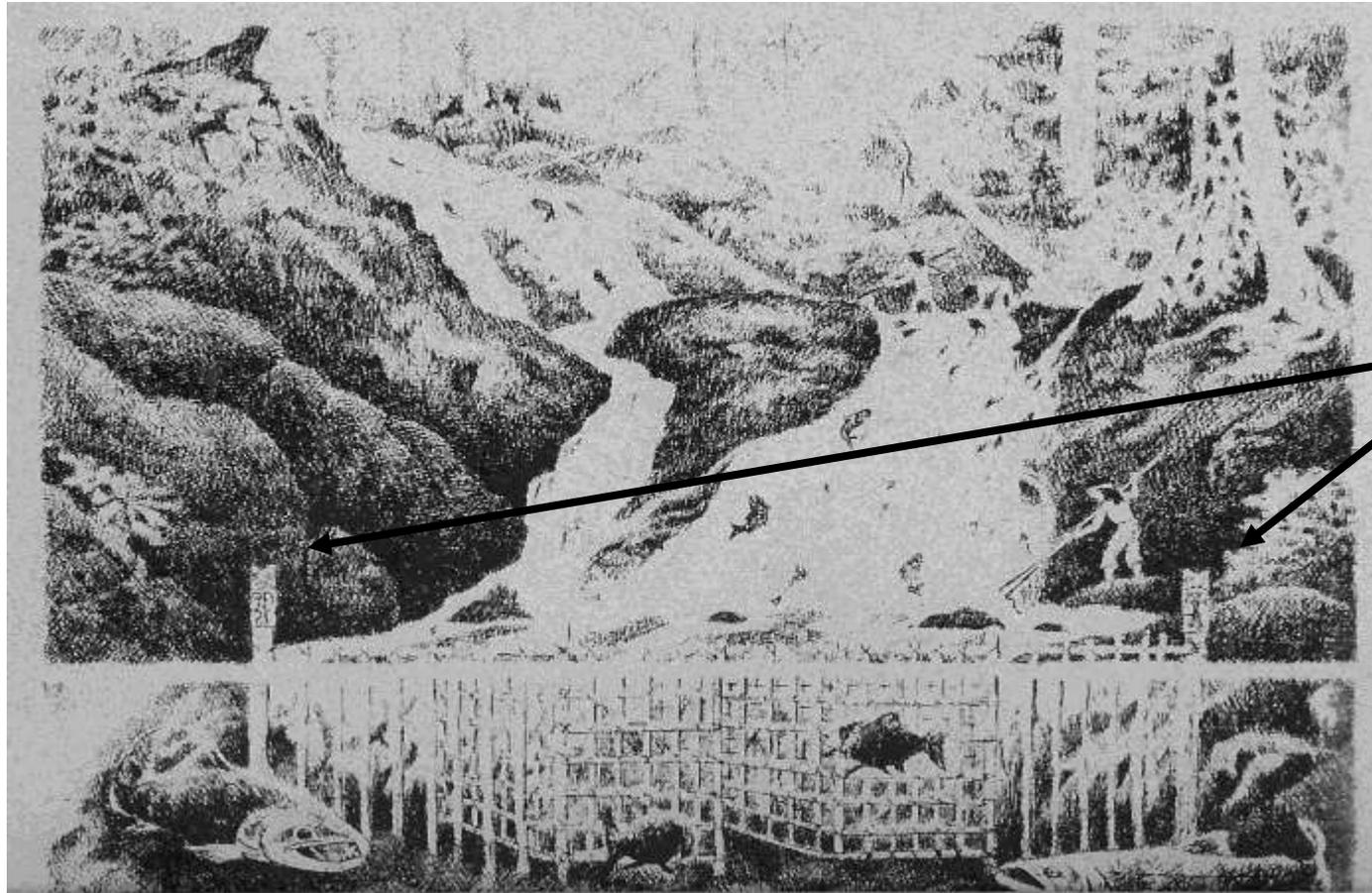
# RESPECT:

## Singing and dancing at stream



- Joyous welcome - “The young boy had been the first one to see the jumps. Preparations were made for the Salmon Welcome Dance that the [clan] performed every season at the creek where the salmon arrived. It was important to honor and respect salmon. Tlingit believe that if the Salmon People are made welcome and used respectfully, they will return again. The villagers bathed in freshwater to cleanse their bodies. They donned full, formal regalia. To the salmon people, the head man said in a great voice, ‘Gaat [sockeye salmon] the L’eeneidi welcome you. We are grateful to you for the life you give us.’ The drums began and the villagers sang ancient songs about the salmon’s return home. They joyfully danced with arms outstretched giving thanks to the salmon.”
- Then they invited the salmon into the “forts” [traps or smokehouses] they had prepared for them.
- Source: James 1997

**Gift of Beauty:  
Carved stake located on intertidal salmon trap  
["fort"]- above water, see below for  
positioning**



# *Aakw'taatseen* Mythic Charter: Ritual Action for Return

- In Klawock, a first salmon feast and ritual were held upon the arrival of the sockeye hosted by the clan leader, the *heen sati* responsible for relations with salmon
- Entire community invited and host clan members harvested fish, roasted them in pit and fed everybody
- Clan leader collected salmon bones after consumption and returned them to the estuary where the stream flowed out
- As the bones drifted down toward the ocean, he sang to them to travel safely to their homes and return
- These are the ritually prescribed actions to insure the rebirth of the salmon and hopefully their return

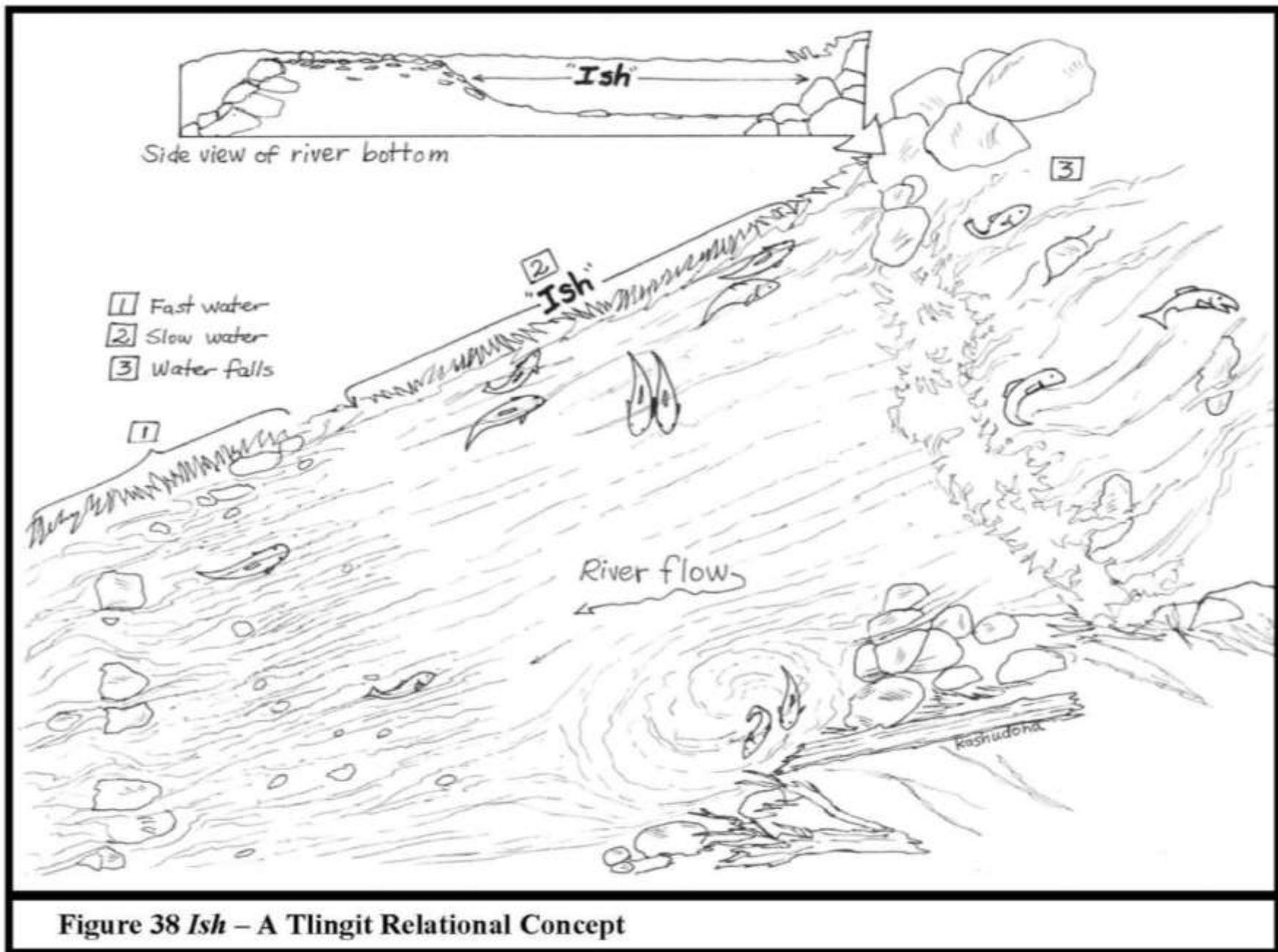
# *Aakw'taatseen* Mythic Charter: Basis for ENGAGEMENT

## • CONCEPTS

- Salmon as Persons
- Sentient, Volitional
- Attentive to human acts
- Dignified - require respect
- Return depends on respect and ritual - balance

## • BEHAVIORS

- Handle with care
- Kill so spirit can travel to spawning grounds
- Take only what is needed
- Utilize all - no waste
- Never speak badly
- Do not play with fish
- Share with others



# *ISH:*

## **A multidimensional relational concept woven through Tlingit cultural practice**

- A deep pool where salmon congregate
- A site index to harvest activity
- A place of rest and recuperation in stream
- A harvesting location
- A spawning location
- A model for purposeful stream modifications
- A location in the existence scape of philosophical contemplation and reflexive encounter – for salmon people, for human people
- “Alive in the eddy” (translation of *Aakwatatseen*)

*Huna* Tlingit  
gaff hooking  
salmon

An *ish* in Neva  
River where coho  
and sockeye  
salmon  
congregate



## NEVA RIVER:

**“Streamscaping”**

**Instream falls  
and pool created  
by moving rocks**

**“Ish” – salmon  
pool created by  
Tlingit trustees**



# Relational Philosophy of *Ish*

- Commentary by Walter Soboleff on *Ish* during the Tlingit Traditional Scholars discussion:

*There were those who were knowledgeable about all kinds of subjects. This thing named ish - it was almost as if it were human and it was spoken to in that way, this ish. This is how they valued this resource. It was as if their life depended on it so they treated it with respect. Because they got their food from this place is why they would speak to it. There was pride, there was honor (given to the ish) so no one was to say anything foolish about it or to it. If it was said that we could laugh at it, it was not so. We were told not to talk to it in a foolish way but to respect it. This is what the white man calls taboo. When you do this there is a discipline, a law that will correct you. It will be like it falls on you; this is the way this is. All that is seen around us is said to be alive around us is what it is called. The Lingit people have known this to be true from time immemorial.”*

**ISH IMAGE ON  
KOOTEYA IN  
KLAWOCK  
TOTEM PARK:**

**Pole indicates  
ownership of  
major Sockeye  
Salmon System by  
*Kakoshittan* clan**

**Bear and wolf are major  
crests of the clan**

***Ish* DEPICTED AS  
DISH WITH THREE  
SALMON, 1939 and 2013**



**Arch House of  
Basket Bay  
Decitan in  
Angoon -**

***Ish* at center of  
image  
surrounded by  
sockeye  
salmon  
heading to it**



*LUK'AK'ADI  
NAXEIN:*

Sockeye  
CREST  
BLANKET

DEPICTION OF  
*ISH*, CIRCLE  
WITH SALMON  
IN CENTER



*LUK'AK'ADI NAXEIN:*

**Sockeye CREST BLANKET  
Worn By Clan Leader**

**Dances with it on Ceremonial  
Occasions**

**Brought out and story  
associated with Blanket told  
only at  
*Koo'ex* (potlatch)**



# Imagistic redundancy

- *Ish* images are found in various locations in Tlingit objects known as art and especially in *at.ooow*.
- Circle is the recurrent symbol used for the *ish*
- Aesthetic quality (beauty) is valued – demonstrating it to others is a gift.
- Gifts are to be reciprocated – absolute obligation.
- Examples – appears on Salmon Staff in U Penn Museum Tlingit collection as three nested ovoids
- Totem pole – claim to Sarkar stream as clan crest, *ish* is shown with three red fish, sockeyes, filling a circular dish
- Blanket – Clan claim to Chilkoot Lake spring-fed pool
- House front – Claim to Basket Bay and Arch House through image
- Finally – *Ish* have names, like people!

# Abductive Reasoning

Cognitive Process which -

- Differs from deduction and induction
- Is the form of everyday embodied knowledge creation
- Makes comparisons of elements between forms and when similarity is established, makes further inferences for action.
- Thus if salmon are people – we treat them as we treat people we value so that they will return as our relatives return if they are treated with respect and honor.
- Treatment of valued human others becomes inferential basis for treatment toward salmon
- Process is termed “empathic reflexivity”

# Abductive Reasoning: Foundation for Empathic Reflexivity

- “It [abduction] is the only logical operation which introduces any new idea; for induction does nothing but determine a value, and deduction merely evolves the necessary consequences of a pure hypothesis. Deduction proves that something must be; induction shows that something actually is operative; abduction merely suggests that something may be.” Charles Peirce
- **Tlingit belief is more than suggestion – foundation of certainty in mythic charter produces continuous examination in light of embodied emotions and extension of those to salmon.**
- “Abduction may thus be conceived of as a principle that allows us to reconstruct how conceptual order is achieved through the imposition of a hypothesis (in the form of a minimal theory, an idea, a rule or a ... hypothesis) – which inaugurates constructivist thinking. Here I can only hint at the great variability of this schema; it enables us to bridge the traditional gap between the arts and the sciences because it can be used as a model both of explanation and of understanding.” Rudolf Fischer

# Abductive Reasoning: Foundation of Tlingit Cognition

- Engagements with Salmon are based on various explorations of what respectful behavior and thought consists of:
- 1) Knowledge and understanding of how other valued humans are treated respectfully – the *koo'ex*, *Kuwakaan* (peace ceremony), the principle of gift, the principle of balance, the principle of obligatory reciprocity
- 2) Reflective consideration of own emotion and projection thereof
- 3) Following *ixt* (shaman) teaching about salmon in Salmon Boy charter
- 4) Attending to behavior of salmon and interpretation of it
- 5) Responding with appropriate behavior exhibiting respect
- 6) Reflexivity – Examining own behavior in regard to salmon, how are they responding understood through empathic reflexivity
- 7) Continuous iterative interpretation, innovation, adjustment – circumstance are in flux and allow for generation of new behaviors

# Empathic Reflexivity

- Mythic charter establishes spiritual similarity between humans and other forms.
- One learns about emotional states and preferences by observing self and reflecting on human social interactions.
- These contemplations provide material for **abductive** construction of understandings about salmon emotions and preferences. Projective interpretations of salmon action. (Scott notes similar pattern for Cree interaction with geese.)
- Observation of salmon activity in stream including spawning generates the concept of *ish* based on an interpretation of the manner in which that context relates to salmon existence.
- This involves not only observing salmon but also learning to think and sense like a salmon – to develop an understanding of their worldview.

**RELATIONAL  
SUSTAINABILITY:  
BASIS FOR TLINGIT  
ENGAGEMENT  
WITH SALMON**

**RELATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY: THE PHILOSOPHICAL  
BASIS FOR THE LOGIC OF ENGAGEMENT PRACTICED  
BY TLINGIT**

*“...the true method of philosophical construction  
is to frame a scheme of ideas, the best that one  
can, and unflinchingly explore the interpretation  
of experience in terms of that scheme.”*

**Alfred North Whitehead, Process and Reality:  
An Essay in Cosmology, p. xiv, 1978**

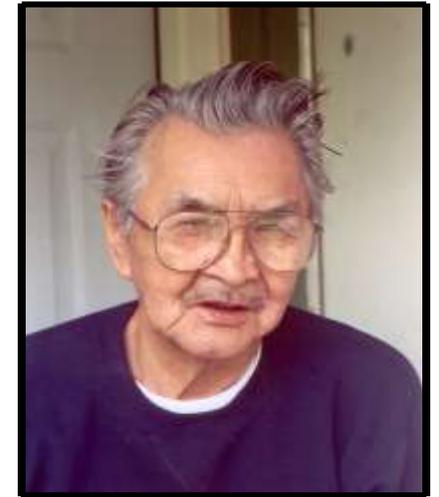
**ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD**



*“You have to understand that we treat salmon  
like we would like to be treated.”*

**Response by 82-year old Huna Tlingit elder  
James Samuel Osborne to my query, “What  
were you taught as a boy about salmon?”  
August 2003**

**JAMES SAMUEL OSBORNE**



# *Tlagaas* - Violation

- What happens when violation occurs – when relations are disrespectful or indicators are ignored?
- *Aakwtatseen* – nearly drowns but saved. Became a “teachable moment.”
- *Kasteen* – as a girl in seclusion, teased the glacier up the bay by waving dried salmon at it. Glacier advanced and destroyed village, driving people out of Glacier Bay.
- Young girl – invited giant octopus (Devilfish) to “come out of your house and get some [dried salmon].” The giant octopus came out and swept away the village killing almost all the people.
- Failure to attend to “guide” (Mt. Fairweather) resulted in drowning of several canoe loads of people at Lituya Bay.

# Social Reproduction

- Sustainable wisdom – techniques for acquisition
  - Dependent on successful transmission to next generation.
  - Immersion – consistent exposure
  - Redundant occasions – multiple moments
  - Participation – being included in activities
  - Responsibility – contribute to family activities
  - Accomplishment – praised for contribution to activities
- Clara – carried salmon to pit for First Salmon ceremony  
Theodore – as 7 year old, threw rocks to keep salmon in fish trap

# Pedagogy

- **Pedagogy** – practices and techniques of informing young people in general
- Story telling – continuous, dramatic contexts
- Dynamic characterization and body language
- Young people are central characters – note who were in taboo accounts
- Discovery and inquiry – *Shaanda*, creation of a “teachable moment” with props and set-up.
- Special occasions – female puberty seclusion where explicit training occurs
- Uncles train and challenge their nephews

# Learning about Yeil (Raven)

An example of Tlingit pedagogy - **structured discovery** produces excitement, awe and wonder.

A powerful technique to sustain wisdom.



Tlingit Clara Peratrovitch describes how her mother led her to the petroglyph shown in the image and told her the story about how Raven got Owl to bring fire to the people. She demonstrates how the petroglyph is a mnemonic that shows how owl's once long beak was gradually burned down as he flew back in from the "fireball" with the flame in his beak.

# Moral Pedagogy

- **Moral pedagogy** – practices and techniques for teaching about how one should and should not behave.
- Young people are central characters – note who were in taboo accounts
- Special occasions – one “teachable moment” at a time of **moral transgression**
- Charles Jack – upbraided for rough treatment of salmon and given a lesson in how to carry salmon, not throw them.
- James Martinez – told Salmon Boy story by his mother.

*“One time ... I was down at the creek and ...at Karheen ... I was throwing rocks at the fish .. and trying to kill them, you know ... and ... she saw me and ... called a stop me and she called me up to the house you know, and she said, you know, ... it’s bad to do that ... she said that’s what we eat ... you know? That’s what ... keeps us going ... and I thought about it you know, and she finally told me a story, you know that ... the story was that, a young, some young Native boy was killing the fish and laughing and ... and throwing them around in the creek and ... and ... she said that she knew that his mother ... told him that it was no good to do that ... some day they will come after you. I listened to that and got kind of interested, you know.”*

- Thomas Mills – excessive harvest followed by corporal punishment and father required the cleaning and processing of all the salmon harvested.

# Neva River: Practicing Relational Sustainability

Pat Mills, *heen sati* (stream trustee) enjoys freshly caught coho salmon cheeks and jaw from the stream his clan has owned for hundreds of years.

The joy and benefits of long-term salmon engagement!



# Conclusion

- Sustainable wisdom – that wisdom necessary for sustaining a flourishing existence.
- Sustainable wisdom – structuring transmission of essential wisdom in such a way that it will be the basis for behavior going forward and thereby contribute to a future of flourishing.
- Wisdom sits in places (Keith Basso – Apaches)
- Wisdom sits in stories and rituals (Tlingit elders)
- Wisdom must be situated in neurons and synapses that create an existence scape that generates appropriate orientations, attitudes and behaviors!!!