

Tsetsaut

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Language and Territory

The Tsetsaut (tsə'tsəwt, 'tsets,äwt) spoke an Athapaskan language. The fragmentary linguistic materials collected from the last handful of speakers in 1894 (Boas 1895; Boas and Goddard 1924)* attest a set of unique phonological developments that make it "the most strikingly aberrant . . . of all Athapaskan languages" (Krauss 1973:917), and its genetic relationships within the family have not yet been completely worked out (Hojjer 1963; Tharp 1972; Krauss 1973:946-947).

From the interior Cordillera of British Columbia, the Tsetsaut had penetrated across the southern headwaters of the Stikine River and the northern headwaters of the Nass as far as the Pacific coast (fig. 1) but failed to achieve a viable long-term adaptation to the natural and cultural environments of these major river systems or the sea coast. From the traditions of the adjacent Gitksan and Coastal Tlingit it is evident that many families of the Tsetsaut were assimilated into these tribes and thereby lost their separate identity. Some others were likewise assimilated into the mixed Sekani-Gitksan people of the vicinity of Bear Lake, at the headwaters of the Skeena. Those who remained Tsetsaut continued to be vulnerable to attack and exploitation by their more powerful neighbors, until they were brought to the verge of extermination. In 1885, a forlorn remnant consisting of 12 men and their families moved from the upper reaches of Portland Canal to the Anglican mission village of Kincolith, there to be finally assimilated by the Niska. Their fate in its broad outlines may have repeated that of other Athapaskans who reached the Northwest Coast in earlier times.

The evidence suggests that the Tsetsaut were most closely related to the Kaska. Emmons (1911:22) wrote of the Tsetsaut that "the Tahltan of today claim relationship to them [the Tsetsaut] only through the Kaska, from whom they say they [the Tsetsaut] are descended."

*There is no phonemic orthography for Tsetsaut, which became extinct early in the twentieth century. The Tsetsaut words cited in the *Handbook* are given as found in the sources, with a phonetic transcription into the *Handbook* technical alphabet added in brackets for those words available in Boas and Goddard (1924). The editors have been unable to check the spelling of the words cited from Thorman's (1915) manuscript.

An ecological factor that supports the suggestion of Kaska-Tsetsaut connection is the absence of salmon from the greater part of the Stikine drainage basin. Rich spawning areas a short distance above Telegraph Creek were exploited by all the bands of Tahltan, but blockages in the major tributaries turned the upper parts of the river system into what was in effect a salmonless corridor extending from Kaska territory almost to the sea coast.

Identity

A persistent suggestion that the Tsetsaut were nothing more than a displaced offshoot of the Tahltan (McKay in Boas 1895:559; Morice 1906-1910:276; Emmons 1911:22; Drucker 1965:52, 105) does not fit the evidence and has been convincingly disproved (Boas 1895; Tharp 1972). A particular cause of confusion has been the application of the name Tsetsaut to the southernmost band of Tahltan, the Nassgotin, who were in fact the Tsetsaut's most relentless enemies (see "Tahltan," this vol.). At an early time, perhaps about the beginning of the nineteenth century, this Tahltan band displaced the Tsetsaut on the upper Nass and established a fishing

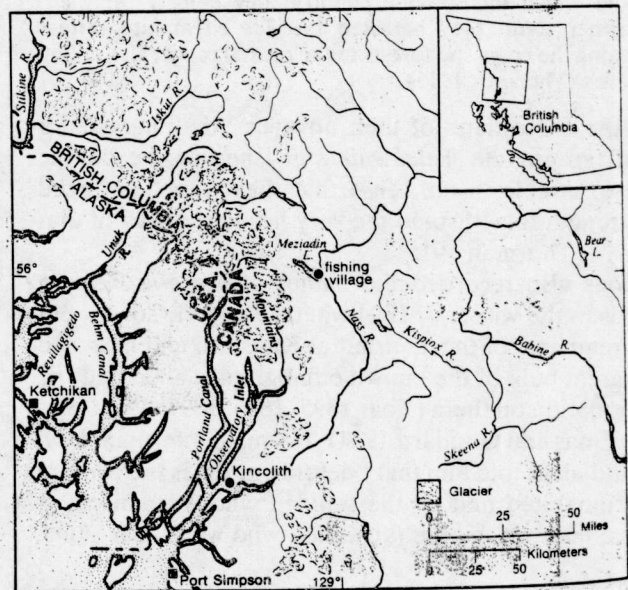


Fig. 1. Maximum extent of Tsetsaut territory, mid-19th century.

village on Meziadin Lake, which they held until about 1865, when they themselves were so reduced in wars with the Kitwancool (Gitksan) and Niska that they withdrew to the Stikine, leaving most of the upper Nass in the possession of the Kitwancool (fig. 1). This Tahltan band was also known to Tsimshian speakers as Lakwiyip (Lackweip, Laq'uyí'p [lax'uyí'p]) or Gitlakwiyip '(people of) on large flat ground' although that too was an indiscriminating term applied to the groundhog (marmot) country of the Nass and Stikine headwaters and its occupants. As applied here, the name Tsetsaut is not used for any of those who were also Tahltan or Sekani, but only for those who, not having any other identity, might with irony be called "Tsetsaut proper."

Tribal Subdivisions

Three named bands of Tsetsaut, or fragments of earlier bands, have been distinguished. Thorman (1915) was told by the Tahltan of three groups that were disrupted by the southward advance of the Nassgotin. Two of these were displaced to the west of the Nass, the third to the east. He recorded their names as follows: Suss to'deen 'people of the black bear raiment', of the Unuk River area; Tse etseta 'people of the adult marmot headgear', farther south; and Thlakwair khít 'they of the double house', who were driven east. Thorman's notes described in some detail the invasion by the Nassgotin and their establishment of a summer village at a place that they called Thluwe'thlun'dahl and that, judging from Kitwancool traditions, was by the falls at the foot of Meziadin Lake.

Driving the *Suss to'deen* mercilessly before them to the Ningunsaw River [a southern tributary of the Iskut] and beyond, they slaughtered the adult males and aged females, making slaves of the younger women and children, many of whom were taken to Tahltan. They penetrated the *Suss to'deen* country to the Ocean Water at the Unuk River, from which inhospitable country they quickly returned. Farther south they harassed the *Tse etseta* into retreat among the crags and forests of the coastal range, also taking slaves (Thorman 1915).

On the other flank of their advance "they harassed a small group, the *Thlakwair khít* (they of the double house, double in the sense that they were reinforced in strength to withstand the very heavy snowfall of that area)" (Thorman 1915).

Boas also recorded the names of the two western bands in the winter of 1894 when he eagerly sought out the remnants of the Tsetsaut at Kincolith and recorded the great bulk of the known ethnographic and linguistic information on them (Boas 1895, 1896, 1897, 1969:155-170; Boas and Goddard 1924). His main informant Levi (Dandjalee) told him that "before our times the country was inhabited first by the *ts'ak'é'*, who wore marmot-skins; later on, by the *futvūd'ié'*, who wore bear-skins.

Both were said to have spoken the Ts'ets'á'ut language" (Boas 1897:48). The latter name, given the sound correspondences between Tsetsaut and Tahltan, is cognate with Thorman's Suss to'deen; the former, while etymologically different from Thorman's Tse etseta, clearly refers to the same group, the marmot-skin people.

Levi distinguished these Tsetsaut from another group that was clearly the Nassgotin band of Tahltan. He called that band, in Niska, Laq'uyí'p, and in Tsetsaut, Naqkyina [naxkyina] ('on the other side'); its village was called Gunaqá' [gunax'é''] (Boas 1895:555). Boas commented that the dialect of this village differed somewhat from the Tsetsaut, the latter being considered slaves of the Gunaqá' (Boas and Goddard 1924:16).

That Thorman's third band, the double-house people, were also Tsetsaut seems likely in view of the information obtained by Teit (1915) from Tahltan and Niska informants. Teit's description of Tsetsaut territory differs from that of Boas in that it extends eastward as far as Bear Lake and Sustut River. Teit failed to distinguish clearly enough between the Tsetsaut proper and the Nassgotin and between the Niska and the Kitwancool. Despite that, the following seems to refer to an eastern remnant of Tsetsaut: "Some Indians claim that Tsetsaut were the same as the old Bear Lake tribe. . . . Part of the tribe still live around Bear Lake and Sustut Lake . . . After the Nishga [Niska] took the central part of their country away the Tsetsaut were divided, one band in the west and the other around Sustut River. The latter became mixed with Sekani proper, Carrier, Babine, Tahltan, Gitksan, and later most of them moved to among Tahltan and elsewhere" (Teit 1915). This corresponds with Thorman's description of the fate of the double-house people. In any event, they lost their identity as Tsetsaut.

The western Tsetsaut occupied an area that included the Unuk River and reached saltwater along the eastern side of Behm Canal and the upper reaches of Portland Canal and Observatory Inlet (fig. 1). According to Levi, they formerly spent most of their time on the Behm Canal side in intermittent friendly relations with the Sanyakwan Tlingit, but on the death of the chief of that group they began to frequent Portland Canal more and came under the domination of the Niska.

Niska traditions tell how Eagle clan chiefs of the Gitxadin or downriver Niska, while scouting for new territories, discovered the Tsetsaut at Tombstone Bay on Portland Canal (Barbeau 1950, 1:27-29). Portland Canal, and the Salmon and Bear rivers at its head, were claimed by Chief Gitkun. When his family declined in numbers he permitted another Eagle chief named Sagawan or Chief Mountain to use the area, and the Tsetsaut came to be known as the Tsetsaut slaves of Chief Mountain. Sagawan lived for a time at the site of Kincolith, to be close to the trading ships and the Hudson's

Bay Company post at Port Simpson, and he held a monopoly of trade with the Tsetsaut. When William Duncan established the new Christian village of Metlakatla in 1862 and entered the competition for furs, this monopoly was broken. In anger, Sagawan moved back to Gitiks on the Nass. Robert Tomlinson, who established the mission at Kincolith in 1867, was in frequent contact with the Tsetsaut, and in 1885 his successor, W.H. Collison, invited the last 12 men and their families to take up residence in Kincolith. When Boas visited them in 1894, he found their total number to be 12, reduced from an estimated population of 500 just 60 years earlier (1895:555). Emmons (1911), in 1907, found only seven: four men, two old women, and a girl. Later writers do not identify any persons as Tsetsaut.

Traditional Culture†

Boas (1895), the source for this section, makes it clear that the Tsetsaut economy was based on inland game hunting. Only in the summer when they descended the rivers to Portland Inlet did they take salmon, drying their excess catch for winter use. Their principal food was the marmot, though they also relied on mountain goat, bear, and porcupine. With the beaver (and excepting the porcupine?) these animals also provided the skins for their clothing. For both sexes traditional clothing consisted of pants of cured skins and thigh-high marmot skin "boots" (probably the Athapaskan all-in-one moccasin legging). Mittens, jackets, short coats, robes, and belts, all of skins, completed the costume.

The Tsetsaut had no fixed villages but moved camp as the subsistence quest dictated. Their shelters were temporary, single or double lean-tos (fig. 2) covered with bark. For winter travel they used snowshoes with lacing of beaver skin. Canoes, made of the bark of the yellow cedar, were seldom used. Each man hunted alone, "confining his operations to one valley at a time" (Boas 1895:565). For taking marmots, deadfalls were commonly used. In hunting other animals, besides lances and clubs they employed the sinew-backed bow. The bow also served as a fire drill, and fires were kindled by means of strike-a-lights as well.

In Boas's (1896:257) judgment the tales and myths of the Tsetsaut resembled "in character" those of the Athapaskan peoples of the Mackenzie drainage, but had "evidently . . . been greatly influenced by Tlingit tales." With all surrounding groups they shared reliance

†Before his death in 1976, Wilson Duff had completed his informed analysis of the scanty yet complex data bearing on the tribal identity and tribal subdivisions, the movements, and the history of the Tsetsaut, and the source of the name. The sections of this chapter on those topics are by Wilson Duff (with a few editorial emendations). Margaret Tobey checked references and wrote the section on Sources. She and June Helm prepared the section on Traditional Culture.

on shamans for curing and the emphasis on girls' puberty seclusion and ritual observances.

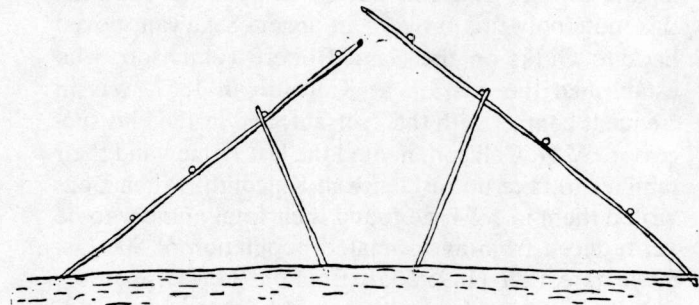
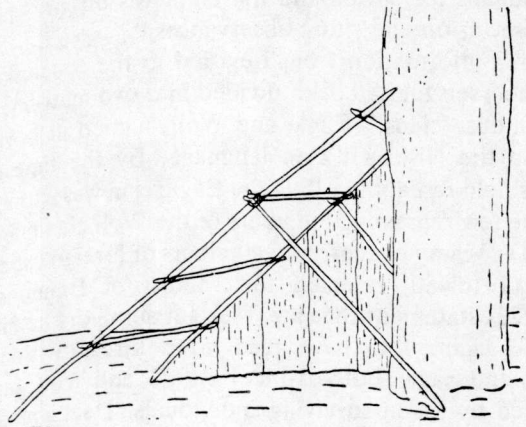
Boas's information from Levi led to the conclusion that the Tsetsaut had been divided into two matrilineal exogamous "clans," Eagle and Wolf, named in Levi's time in the Niska-Gitksan language. By the time of Boas's field research in 1894 the Eagle clan was extinct, and the few remaining members of the Wolf clan maintained exogamy by marrying members of foreign tribes. Boas (1916:480) rejected the validity of Emmons's (1911:22) statement that the Tsetsaut survivors he met in 1907 claimed to have recognized three divisions, Raven and Eagle, both extinct by 1907, and Wolf, represented by seven surviving individuals. De Laguna's (1975:59) statement that Tsetsaut "social organization seems to have been very similar to that of the Tlingit" reflects a preference for Boas's conclusion regarding a dual division in Tsetsaut social organization.

Synonymy

Much confusion over the identity and history of the Tsetsaut has been caused by the name itself and the ways in which it has been used. This name was not used by any group for itself but was said by Boas (1895:555) to be a Tsimshian word, meaning "those of the interior", applied by the Gitksan and Niska indiscriminately to the Athapaskans to the north and northeast of themselves. It thus included bands of Tahltan and Sekani as well as the Tsetsaut, but since the "native name of the [latter] is forgotten, . . . we must . . . continue to designate them as Ts'ets'á'ut," i.e. [čəčá'ut] (Boas 1895:555). Boas also used the spelling Ts'ets'aut (Boas and Goddard 1924), and Emmons (1911:22) rendered the Niska name as Tsits Zaons. Emmons (1911:21-23) referred to the people in question as "the Portland Canal People" and said that they called themselves Wetalth, presumably [wətał]; Tharp (1972:16) considered this form to be "a phonological impossibility in the language" but does not justify this judgment. The Tahltan called them Tseco to tinneh (Emmons 1911:22).

Sources

Boas's 1894 fieldwork among the Tsetsaut living at Kincolith is a classic example of the salvage ethnography he so vigorously promoted. Of the three men interviewed by Boas, only his elderly informant Levi spoke the Tsetsaut language fluently. The two younger men used the Niska-Gitksan language almost exclusively. Boas (1895:555) freely acknowledged that "all the ethnological and historical data were given by Levi." Boas's (1895) brief report remains the primary source on the Tsetsaut; it includes notes on social or-



Boas 1895: figs. 1-2, pp. 561-562.

Fig. 2. Frameworks for houses, for a single family (left) and for 2 families (right). In use, the pole framework was covered with bark except for door openings next to the tree (left) or on each vertical side (right). Between uses, the poles (the longest about 14 feet) were dismantled and stored tied to a tree.

ganization, material culture, subsistence patterns, and history. Myths and oral histories of the Tsetsaut recorded during the 1894 visit were also published (1896, 1897). Boas and Goddard (1924) collaborated on a rel-

atively extensive treatment of the Tsetsaut language, principally as spoken by Levi. Tharp (1972) has evaluated the position of the Tsetsaut among Northern Athapaskan languages.