



**Gágiwduł.àt: Brought Forth to Reconfirm  
THE LEGACY OF A TAKU RIVER TLINGIT CLAN**



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THE LEGACY OF A TAKU RIVER TLINGIT CLAN**

Elizabeth Nyman  
and  
Jeff Leer

Yukon Native Language Centre  
and  
Alaska Native Language Center  
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**FOREWORD**  
by Robert Bringhurst

*Sèdayà* of the *Yanyèdí* — known to her English-speaking friends and admirers as Mrs. Elizabeth Nyman — is a Tlingit-speaking elder of the Taku River country, an ancient region now superficially divided among Alaska, British Columbia, and Yukon. She has lived a long and informative life, not untouched by the outside world, yet much more closely attuned to the cultural memory and traditions of her people than to the wars, riots, elephantine engineering feats, and other interruptions often thought to be the substance of news and history. By living such a life, she has made herself a bearer of real news. She has also become the bearer of a nourishing, sustainable, profound, and very softly spoken vision of what really constitutes history. In this vision, human and natural history, though different, are inseparable, like arteries and veins. Her forebears have held this view for centuries, and there was a time when the peoples of Europe understood it too. Now it is something all of us stand to relearn.

Mrs. Nyman is an extraordinary storyteller, one whose stories are woven closely into the fabric of her own life and whose life is woven closely into the fabric of her land. One of the first things we will hear her say is:

*A yíkh ûsh kè iyawduwaxhâ wé T'àkhú  
kha yâ ldakát át x'úx' kàdé yà kakghishaxî.*

If only you were taken by boat along the Taku River,  
you could write the whole story down in a book.

The story she had in mind is, of course, not a city-dweller's breathless account of a quick trip into the wilderness. Nor is it a frontiersman's tale of personal adventure. It is a story the river knows

before we get there, written and rewritten on its banks by the footsteps, voices, and visions of the ancestors who traveled it long before we were born. What the river knows is *wâ sáyú ikawdayâyi* 'what happened to you in your past.' And if you travel the river with someone like Mrs. Nyman, who knows how to read what is written there, you can hear that story and *become* that story. The river is *wé àxh i shagûn khuwdzitiyi yé* 'the place where your history came into being.' This river, this watershed, this valley, with its landforms and its animals, knows who you are, and if you permit it to do so, it will tell you.

Mrs. Nyman's amanuensis and translator, Jeff Leer, has done what she invited him to do. He has followed the river as she reads it. This, therefore, is the Taku River's book as well as Mrs. Nyman's and Jeff Leer's. As readers of this book, we can overhear all three — the invisible mind of the river, *Sèdayà's* voice, and Leer's attentive listening, which brings that voice to the reader's attention in the way a visual image is brought into focus by a lens.

As a mother and grandmother, Mrs. Nyman is a bearer of the genetic traditions of her people. As a storyteller and teacher, she is a bearer of their extra-genetic heredity as well, which is to say their culture. Culture is precisely that: extra-genetic heredity. It is to the mind what parenthood and childhood are to the body. It is all the parts of ourselves that we carry externally — on our backs and in our hands and in our minds — instead of in our genes. That is why it is given to things like rivers for safekeeping. But history reminds us that it isn't safe, even with the river, unless it is continuously listened for, reread, rehearsed, retold.

Often we say, "I know that story. I've heard it before." But stories, like people, are highly individual. They live and grow and change. Every telling, by every storyteller, is different. Every *hearing* is different too. Each performance of each story bears its payload of revelation, which one listener may catch square in the chest while another merely watches it go by or receives a glancing blow.

It was once the custom among anthropologists to ascribe most Native American stories to anonymous, tribal authorship. The story of

Wealth Woman, for instance, was said to exist in a Tlingit version (the story of *Tl'anaxîdákhw*), a Haida version (the story of *Sgiiljaad*), a Tsimshian version (the story of *Hak'wilo'ox*), and so on. In reality, these names belong to different though related characters, and there is not one story here, nor one story per language; there are many. Every thoughtful version is separate and distinct, even if it agrees with other versions on the sequence of events. John's Gospel is not the same as Luke's, and Fauré's *Requiem* is not the same as Mozart's. In the same way, Mrs. Nyman's story of *Tl'anaxîdákhw* is recognizably hers, and she is its author. Others will tell it differently, and she herself will vary the telling from time to time. It has not been the custom in Mrs. Nyman's tradition, as it was in the world of Bach and Beethoven, for artists to call attention to their skills by making a series of deliberate variations on a theme, but skillful and deliberate variations on familiar stories constantly occur. Attempting to fold them all down into one canonical version or archetype would be as senseless as trying to reduce Bach's *Goldberg Variations* to a single incarnation of the theme.

This book weaves back and forth between the personal and the eternal, the seen and the unseen, autobiography and myth. In doing so, it maps the interrelationships between these two domains. And it does so with remarkable understatement, economy, and grace. It is therefore what is known in the white world as a work of literature, a book that has a beauty and value reaching beyond cultural boundaries, a book with a life of its own. But it is rooted in a world too intelligent, adaptable and practical to accept the idea of "scripture" in the fundamentalist sense of a text immune to change.

In the hothouse of contemporary journalism and gossip, all sorts of strange and parasitic stories can survive, and these stories have given the word *myth* a bad name. Out of doors, in the real world — the world of the Taku River as Mrs. Nyman has known it, for example — few stories survive for long unless they are of use to those who hear them. In such a world, myths tend to be persistent truths and not persistent lies. But they are not fixed truths; they are truths that, like the earth itself, are evolving and alive.

The stories in this book have a central image: the orphan (*kuhànkî* in Tlingit) who succeeds, the survivor who makes good despite the odds. Mrs. Nyman herself embodies this tradition, and the oral literatures of the Tlingit and their traditions on the Northwest Coast of North America are rich with stories built around this theme. I think there are useful lessons here for all of us. Whatever nation we come from and whatever language we speak — Tlingit, English, Yiddish, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Vietnamese — all of us now are living the orphan's story to some degree. Our cultural boats are sinking and our cultural houses crumbling in the tidal waves and earthquakes we have caused.

Stories are orphaned as easily as people in such a world. But stories seek people out because they need people to tell them. And people need stories to tell, as truly as they need shoes, knives and fire. We need them because stories are maps of the world; they are concentrated summaries of reality. People who have no stories to tell, like stories that have no people to tell them, don't survive.

The speaker of these stories is not an orphan in the more abrupt and distinctively modern sense of the word. She was not abandoned anonymously on the courthouse steps or tossed into the crowd from a moving train en route to Auschwitz by a mother at the peak of desperation. *Sèdayà* — daughter of *Kudagân* and *Nêxh'w*, granddaughter of *S'igaxshâk'w* and *Xh'agûk'*, great-granddaughter of *Khinxh.ashî* and *Yàwtl'êkî*, great-great-granddaughter of *Lkhùxhî* — knows perfectly well who she is. She is *Yanyèdishâ*, a woman of her mother's clan, *Yanyèdí* of the Wolf side; and she is *Khàch.ádi yádi*, a child, as the Tlingit say, of her father's clan, *Khàch.ádi yádi* of the Raven side. She is not a person without a place in the social order, but a person whose closest links with that order were cut while she was still a newborn child. Her survival, therefore, required more than ordinary generosity, which created a kind of indebtedness. In the wealth-and-status-conscious world of the Tlingit, social indebtedness may be expunged through an expensive potlatch, but if it is not, it is paid for through a reduction in social standing. An uncle suggested a quick solution to the problem, namely that *Sèdayà* be abandoned — *du tlâ tayìxh xh'anaxhdutì*, left to

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nurse at her dead mother's breast. One of her grandmothers (a maternal great aunt, in the English-speaking scheme of things) rejected this suggestion and adopted her instead. This aunt bore the same name as *Sèdayà's* great-great-grandmother, *Łkhùxhì*.

Mrs. Nyman tells this powerful story with dignity, simplicity and skill. When she then shifts back to the world of myth and tells the story of *Tl'anaxîdákhw* and *Nats'áł*, that power is still present in her voice. There is no pretending that the myth world is remote from and irrelevant to the world of daily life when we hear the orphaned mythteller say,

*À áwé*

*shawatshàn áwé yú.á wé du dachxhánk' / asihân,*

*ch'u tle ch'u yê kwsagênk'idáxh.*

*Du tlâ wùnà kha du ísh.*

Now

an old woman had adopted her granddaughter  
when she was small.

Her mother and father died.

In Mrs. Nyman's world, miracles do happen. Myth and reality touch, and each informs the other. This is to say that in her life and in her stories, not only the Tlingit language but also Tlingit culture is alive. It has not yet been uprooted and transfixed like the exhibits in museums. This book, now, can be read in either way — as part of a living culture in which books and people speak to one another, or as one more fixed exhibit in the literary museum. People with only one book are always in danger of taking it too literally. People with too many books occasionally forget that books are like other cultural treasures. Like headdresses, robes and masks — the prized possessions known in Tlingit as *at.úw* — books have to be danced with, lived with, used, or else their power seeps away.

Mrs. Nyman does not, of course, write her stories; she speaks them over a complex choreography of traditional Tlingit hand gestures,

missing from the printed page. It was her decision that Jeff Leer's transcriptions of her stories should be published as a book, and the result is a great gift, a potlatch to which everyone who can read either Tlingit or English is invited. We should nevertheless remember that in trading oral literature for a written one, something is lost as well as gained.

Twice in the course of the story *Tl'anaxîdâkhw* and *Nats'áł*, Mrs. Nyman claims to have left something out. Yet when I analyze the structure of this story, every motif, every theme, seems perfectly in place. The story is as solidly and cunningly constructed as any of Hayden's quartets. I have to conclude that like many skilled actors and musicians — and unlike most writers — Mrs. Nyman knows how to turn a lapse of memory to full creative use.

Most of us addicted to the written word are prone to exaggerate its importance. The novelist Hermann Hesse, for example, entranced by his own craft, once claimed that "without words, without writing and books, there is no history, there is no concept of humanity." Hesse, a Christian missionary's son, did later learn to hear some of the Buddha's wordless sermons. I hope that he also, at least once in his life, met someone like Mrs. Nyman, who has lived without writing and books, yet who embodies and projects a sense of history and a concept of humanity that would put most writers — even perhaps most missionaries — to shame.

Those who first brought writing to the Tlingit country were missionaries as well. Many of them, forgetting Christ's example, insisted that written culture is in every way superior to a culture based on memory, voice, and community. Even those who did take an interest in Tlingit oral literature failed to see it for what it was. Ivan Veniaminov, a Russian Orthodox bishop who was in Southeast Alaska in the 1830s, was probably the first who tried to summarize some of the stories he was told. Other summaries of Tlingit stories were published by the German geographer Aurel Krause, who came to the Chilkat country in the early 1880s, and the Russian priest Anatoli Kamenski, who worked at Sitka in the latter 1890s. It is startling, in retrospect, to



see how much respect the Tlingit showed their visitors, and how much they were willing to learn from them, and how little their visitors were willing to learn in return.

The first stories actually transcribed and published in the Tlingit language were told to the American anthropologist John Swanton in 1904. The speakers were *Dèkinàk'w* of the *Khùk-hittàn*, from Sitka; *Kh'adastìn* of the *Kwâshk'i Khwân*, from Yakutat; and *Khàdashàn* of the *Khàsxh'agwèdí*, from Wrangell. (Swanton published their stories in his *Tlingit Myths and Texts* in 1909.) Unlike earlier visitors, Swanton knew what oral literature was, and he knew how complex and sophisticated the structure and usage of Native American languages tends to be. But Swanton had little time among the Tlingit, and most of the stories he recorded, unfortunately, are also merely summaries, written directly in English. *Khàdashàn's* mother (Swanton mysteriously failed to record her name) told him many stories of great interest, but he summarized them all and transcribed none.

The best prose summaries of Tlingit oral narratives are, not surprisingly, those written by a Tlingit, *Stùwukhâ*, of the *Kàgwàntàn* clan from Klukwan. He was the first Tlingit writer, so far as I know. Most of his writing was done in the Tlingit country, but he wrote only in English under his English name, Louis Shotridge. He published often in the 1910s and '20s in the quarterly journal of the University of Pennsylvania Museum.

The real work of transcribing and translating Tlingit oral literature did not get under way until the 1960s. Three important collections have already been published. They are the two large anthologies edited and translated by Nora and Richard Dauenhauer — *Haa Shuká, Our Ancestors: Tlingit Oral Narratives* (1987) and *Haa Tuwunáagu Yís, For Healing Our Spirit: Tlingit Oratory* (1990) — along with Frank and Emma Williams' *Tongass Texts* (1978), edited and translated by Jeff Leer. The present work is a significant addition to this legacy in several ways. To begin with, this is the first book-length work in Tlingit by a single author. The whole book speaks with one voice, and its parts compose a whole.

It is important that the book has a single *listener* as well. Jeff Leer is a professional linguist, expert in the secret life of glottalized consonants and agglutinative verbs. He is also at home in Mrs. Nyman's land and language; he has spoken Tlingit since he was in his teens. For the rest of us, this has two important advantages. It means that his translations merit a high degree of trust, and it means there is more to translate in the first place. What a storyteller tells depends on who is listening, and how well. Leer's fluency in the language, together with his status as *Yanyèdí yádi* — an adopted child of Mrs. Nyman's clan — supports an extraordinary bond between storyteller and auditor, and the stories thrive.

In the last few decades, the work of documenting the aboriginal languages and oral literatures of northwestern North America has changed considerably in character. By and large, it has ceased to be the work of outsiders, and by and large it is now understood as what it always was — an active and creative collaboration between native speakers and linguists, storytellers and scholars. Under these conditions, the word "informant" — more appropriate to the police station than it is to the arts and sciences — is rarely heard. Pseudo-scientific sentences such as "The Tlingit believe that ..." are vanishing as well, at least from the speech of professionals. In place of this presumptuous jargon, there are actual human voices, openly fallible, thoughtful, and respectful as a rule. And the scholars, like the storytellers, now generally live in the land of which they speak and write. This change has been painfully slow and deliberate; even so, it is a miracle. It is worth remembering also what a miracle it is that Mrs. Nyman exists, that her language is still spoken, that these stories are still told.

## PREFACE

by John Ritter

I am delighted that we are able to publish this first collection of Tlingit narratives by Mrs. Elizabeth Nyman of Atlin. This book is a truly impressive result of her long collaboration with our colleague Dr. Jeff Leer of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Mrs. Nyman's family and friends, her fellow *Yanyèdí* Clan members and others in the Taku River First Nation have all waited patiently as the book has come together over the last several years. It is not only an important contribution to their history, but also Mrs. Nyman's own deeply moving and personal record of life in the Taku River region.

Mrs. Nyman and Jeff Leer did their first brief work together in July, 1979. At that time Leer was conducting a linguistic survey of Interior Tlingit in order to determine dialectal differences between the varieties of Tlingit spoken in the coastal Alaskan communities, with which he was already intimately acquainted, and those spoken in the interior of British Columbia (Atlin) and in southern Yukon (Carcross, Tagish, Teslin). He was fortunate to meet Mrs. Nyman on his first trip to Atlin, and together they recorded a number of Tlingit place names and personal names.

During this same period — the late 1970s and early '80s — the Yukon Native Language Project (YNLP) was beginning to document all the aboriginal languages of the Yukon, including Tlingit, and to develop and provide training for those individuals interested in learning to read, write, and teach the languages. Our first Tlingit literacy workshop, held in Teslin in 1979, marked the beginning of an effort that continues to this day to support and enhance the Interior Tlingit language. School-based language and culture programs were started in Teslin, Carcross, and Atlin in response to requests by students and parents for a greater degree of traditional Tlingit

culture in the curriculum. Language teaching materials were developed and systematic efforts made to record the elders and tradition bearers. Tlingit language instructors participated in literacy and language teaching methodology classes offered by YNLP, which itself gradually expanded and by 1985 became the Yukon Native Language Centre, located since 1988 at the Ayamdigut Campus of Yukon College in Whitehorse.

Jeff Leer has taught Tlingit literacy classes offered by YNLC for the Yukon and B.C. instructors since 1984, maintaining a close association with Canadian Interior Tlingit communities, their language teachers, and important tradition bearers. The latter include Mrs. Elizabeth Nyman of Atlin; Mr. and Mrs. David Johnston, Mrs. Mabel Johnson, Mr. Watson Smarch, Mr. Frank Sidney, and Mr. Tom Smith of Teslin; and Mrs. Angela Sidney and Mrs. Lucy Wren of Carcross and Tagish. During Jeff's visits to the Yukon he would typically spend several days teaching Tlingit literacy with language teachers as a group, and then work individually and intensively with one or more of the elders to record materials they wished to share. Many of the early recordings with Mrs. Nyman were made at the Yukon Native Language Centre when it was still the YNLP and housed at Whitehorse Elementary School. On other occasions Jeff has traveled to Atlin, Teslin, and Carcross.

The collaboration between Jeff and Elizabeth, which began so briefly in 1979, was resumed in earnest in 1984 and has continued, as time and resources have permitted, to the present. Very early on, certainly by 1985, it was clear that Mrs. Nyman's narratives about Taku River and her experiences there were so interesting and so beautifully told that they deserved to be heard, read, and appreciated by others as well. Jeff Leer also shared our hope of assembling a book of Tlingit stories in bilingual format, and of advancing the documentation of Tlingit oral literature begun in the early 1900s by John Swanton and more recently by Nora and Richard Dauenhauer.

From the very beginning of her work leading to this book, Mrs. Nyman has had a clear and consistent idea of the kinds of stories and

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I am delighted that we are able to publish this first collection of Tlingit narratives by Mrs. Elizabeth Nyman of Atlin. This book is a truly impressive result of her long collaboration with our colleague Dr. Jeff Leer of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Mrs. Nyman's family and friends, her fellow *Yanyèdí* Clan members and others in the Taku River First Nation have all waited patiently as the book has come together over the last several years. It is not only an important contribution to their history, but also Mrs. Nyman's own deeply moving and personal record of life in the Taku River region.

Mrs. Nyman and Jeff Leer did their first brief work together in July, 1979. At that time Leer was conducting a linguistic survey of Interior Tlingit in order to determine dialectal differences between the varieties of Tlingit spoken in the coastal Alaskan communities, with which he was already intimately acquainted, and those spoken in the interior of British Columbia (Atlin) and in southern Yukon (Carcross, Tagish, Teslin). He was fortunate to meet Mrs. Nyman on his first trip to Atlin, and together they recorded a number of Tlingit place names and personal names.

During this same period — the late 1970s and early '80s — the Yukon Native Language Project (YNLP) was beginning to document all the aboriginal languages of the Yukon, including Tlingit, and to develop and provide training for those individuals interested in learning to read, write, and teach the languages. Our first Tlingit literacy workshop, held in Teslin in 1979, marked the beginning of an effort that continues to this day to support and enhance the Interior Tlingit language. School-based language and culture programs were started in Teslin, Carcross, and Atlin in response to requests by students and parents for a greater degree of traditional Tlingit

culture in the curriculum. Language teaching materials were developed and systematic efforts made to record the elders and tradition bearers. Tlingit language instructors participated in literacy and language teaching methodology classes offered by YNLP, which itself gradually expanded and by 1985 became the Yukon Native Language Centre, located since 1988 at the Ayamdigut Campus of Yukon College in Whitehorse.

Jeff Leer has taught Tlingit literacy classes offered by YNLC for the Yukon and B.C. instructors since 1984, maintaining a close association with Canadian Interior Tlingit communities, their language teachers, and important tradition bearers. The latter include Mrs. Elizabeth Nyman of Atlin; Mr. and Mrs. David Johnston, Mrs. Mabel Johnson, Mr. Watson Smarch, Mr. Frank Sidney, and Mr. Tom Smith of Teslin; and Mrs. Angela Sidney and Mrs. Lucy Wren of Carcross and Tagish. During Jeff's visits to the Yukon he would typically spend several days teaching Tlingit literacy with language teachers as a group, and then work individually and intensively with one or more of the elders to record materials they wished to share. Many of the early recordings with Mrs. Nyman were made at the Yukon Native Language Centre when it was still the YNLP and housed at Whitehorse Elementary School. On other occasions Jeff has traveled to Atlin, Teslin, and Carcross.

The collaboration between Jeff and Elizabeth, which began so briefly in 1979, was resumed in earnest in 1984 and has continued, as time and resources have permitted, to the present. Very early on, certainly by 1985, it was clear that Mrs. Nyman's narratives about Taku River and her experiences there were so interesting and so beautifully told that they deserved to be heard, read, and appreciated by others as well. Jeff Leer also shared our hope of assembling a book of Tlingit stories in bilingual format, and of advancing the documentation of Tlingit oral literature begun in the early 1900s by John Swanton and more recently by Nora and Richard Dauenhauer.

From the very beginning of her work leading to this book, Mrs. Nyman has had a clear and consistent idea of the kinds of stories and

reminiscences she wishes to convey to others, especially to the younger members of the Taku River First Nation. Over the years, the materials recorded by her have grown in number and variety to include personal and mythological narratives such as those in this book, lists of place names and information on traditional land use, details of material and faunal culture, and genealogical information with abundant data on Tlingit personal names. Obviously not everything could be contained easily in one book, and it was Jeff and Elizabeth who selected materials to be included in the present volume. Proceeds from its sale in Canada will be used to support the publication, hopefully in the near future, of a second volume of her narratives and a separate study of place names of the Atlin-Taku River region.

It is easy to begin, difficult indeed to complete, the list of all the individuals who have assisted us in so many ways during the last several years as we have made our way to final publication of this book.

The Council for Yukon Indians has been especially supportive since the project was first conceived in the early 1980s. During a period of intense activity in the negotiation of land claims, extending over several years as this book was being assembled, CYI officials have given constant support and encouragement to the Yukon Native Language Centre, and have taken an active role in the negotiation of funds to support the documentation and oral literature and local history. Special thanks are due to Mrs. Judy Gingell (Chairperson), Mr. Albert James (Vice-Chair), and Ms. Cheryl McLean (Director of Programs) for their belief in the inherent value of our work and for their unfailing commitment to aboriginal language issues.

Our colleagues at the Yukon Native Language Centre and the Alaska Native Language Center have assisted in many ways. Mrs. Anne Cullen of YNLC handled most of the logistic and travel arrangements and proofread earlier versions of the manuscript. In 1992 Mr. Tom Alton, ANLC Editor, assumed responsibility for the final production and has worked assiduously to assemble the maps, charts, and final texts so that the book could go to press in the spring of 1993.

Dr. Michael Krauss, Director of ANLC, concurred with our suggestion that the book be jointly published by ANLC and YNLC and has provided useful advice at various points along the way.

Robert Bringhurst, a Canadian poet, critic, and book designer who has assisted in the development of other Yukon and northern publications, gave us substantial help in several phases of this project, providing a review of the initial selection of texts and making many useful suggestions for the book's format. He has also graciously provided a Foreword.

Others assisting us in the long journey to publication include Mr. W.O. Ferguson (Yukon Department of Education); Dr. Julie Cruikshank (UBC); Ms. Ingrid Johnson (formerly with the Social Programs Department at the Council for Yukon Indians); Mr. Myron Balagno and staff at MBA (Vancouver, B.C.); Mr. Scott McIntyre (Vancouver, B.C.); Ms. Karen Farrell, the Fairbanks artist who drew the three sets of maps that go with these texts; and especially Mr. Wayne Towriss, our Yukon photographer whose color slides are reproduced in this book.

Members of Mrs. Nyman's family have assisted us over the years with personal and logistic arrangements of every imaginable kind. Her daughter, Mrs. Mary Anderson, gave generously of her time to make sure that Elizabeth could travel to Whitehorse on numerous occasions to work with Jeff in the quiet comfort of her home. Mary also participated actively in the final check of Jeff's translations and with the photo identifications. Mrs. Nyman's son, Jack Williams of Atlin, assisted with some of the place name identifications and translations. Her grandson, Mr. Sandy Anderson, a faculty member at Yukon College, Whitehorse, read the completed manuscript and provided useful comment. Our deepest thanks we extend to these and other members of Mrs. Nyman's family.

Jeff Leer has worked tirelessly with Mrs. Nyman for many years now, principally in Whitehorse and Atlin. The texts themselves were transcribed and edited primarily in Chicago while he was doing graduate work, and also at his home academic base, the Alaska Native



Language Center in Fairbanks. To the making of this book he has brought an exceptional technical understanding of Tlingit gained from thirty years of study and reflection, as well as a deep commitment to making these narratives available in English so that they can be shared and appreciated by the widest possible audience.

But our greatest debt is of course to Elizabeth Nyman, whose love of the Taku River and its people has been the inspiration for this book, whose language and art we admire, and whose patience and good humor we gratefully acknowledge. *Gunałchîsh, Sèdayà*.

Yukon Native Language Centre  
Whitehorse, Yukon  
April, 1993

## INTRODUCTION

by Jeff Leer

### The author and title

Elizabeth Nyman was born on April 12, 1915. Shortly thereafter she was given her birth names, *Sèdayà* and *Nèsdêw-Tlâ*, both of which she inherited from the mother of Taku Jim. Her firstborn son Jack Williams was given the names *Jigê* and *Xûts*, both of which had belonged to Taku Jack, the former clan leader of the Taku River *Yanyèdí*, and long before him, to the first *Jigê*, who dissolved the great glacier that had separated the coastal people from the interior people (see the second text in this book). Soon after Jack Williams was born, Elizabeth took the baby to an old man named *Gêy*, who lived in Juneau and had asked to see him. In commemoration of this event, *Gêy* gave Elizabeth the name *Gágiwdułàt*, which is a shortened version of the sentence “*gági wdudli.àt*” meaning ‘they were brought forth.’ As Elizabeth recalls it, *Gêy* said, “*Ha dê dâk áyá at shundayíkh. Axh ík’ Jigê du ádi áwé dâk wududli.át. A kâxh áwé kkhwasâ: Gágiwdułàt á.*” This translates, ‘Now [*Jigê*, Taku Jim] is bringing out the possessions [he had when he was alive] to be distributed. My brother *Jigê*’s things have been brought out. I will give [*Sèdayà*] a name in honor of this: *Gágiwdułàt*.’ She explains that after the old *Jigê*’s death, his possessions were brought out in armloads so that they formed a great pile from which his clansmen — his nephews, brothers, and grandsons — could claim what they wanted. This was both literally and figuratively a passing on of the heritage of the *Yanyèdí* clan to the new generation. *Gêy* used this event as a metaphor to express his feelings about the birth of the new *Jigê*. He had been “brought forth” to reconfirm the legacy of the old *Jigê*, who had in turn inherited his name and legacy from the *Jigê* before him, and so on back to the beginning of the clan.

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On being asked what she wanted to name this book, Elizabeth decided after long deliberation that the name *Gágiwduł.àt* best describes the aim of these stories. This name explicitly symbolizes her role in perpetuating the lineage of her clan. At the same time it implicitly charges her with the responsibility of passing on the knowledge and wisdom that she was taught by her people. The name also represents our hope that this is but the first of a series of texts gathered from Elizabeth Nyman and other elders, the first armload of what will eventually become a great heap of treasures brought forth to enrich the minds and hearts of those who reach out to claim them.

### The texts

It has been my good fortune to know and collaborate with Elizabeth Nyman since about 1979. During this time we have recorded more than one hundred hours of taped material. The texts in this book represent only a small fraction of the corpus. Text II was recorded on audiotape in our first session in 1984. Mrs. Nyman wanted foremost to bequeath the *Yanyèdí* clan history to her descendants in a form they could understand well. Texts IV and V, personal narratives concerning her early years and her marriage with Steve Williams, were taped in 1986 and 1987. In 1987 we began recording as many of her narratives as possible on videotape and audiotape simultaneously; texts I, III, and IV were recorded in this manner in 1987 and 1988. The videotapes thus recorded convey much information that, for want of time and resources, we were unable to include in the written version of the texts. A rich inventory of hand gestures as well as eye and head movements and changes of posture brings the stories to life. We should mention that these gestures are part of the Tlingit linguistic system. Like the language itself, the gestural system is strikingly different from that familiar to English speakers, and conveys much specific information essential to a complete understanding of the narrative.

The texts are presented in a manner that attempts to convey the cadence of the spoken language, and every effort was made to match the English translation to the Tlingit original line by line. Each line that

begins at the left margin represents a “verse,” that is, a sentence or part of a sentence that is distinguished from what precedes by the start of a separate intonational pattern, and frequently also a pause or taking of breath. (In cases where pauses did not seem to indicate structure, but to result from stopping to find the appropriate word, I often did not judge a new verse to be justified.) If either the Tlingit verse or its English translation is too long to fit on one printed line, the line continues indented on the following line or lines.

It was sometimes impossible to devise a reasonably fluent English rendition of a short Tlingit verse by itself. In these cases, two or more succeeding verses are placed on the same line with a slash (/) to separate them, and the English translation reflects all the verses so combined.

These verses are then grouped into paragraphs, or “stanzas.” It is often difficult to decide on objective grounds just where the division between stanzas should be made. The clearest cases are where the speaker pauses for a relatively long time, or emphasizes the beginning of a sentence by changing the tone of voice or adjusting her posture. In other cases, the decision was made on the basis of phrases that serve to mark a transition, translating for example as “then” or “finally.” A new stanza is also begun where there is a clear change in topic or change of scene.

Specialists in ethnopoeitics, or the structure of oral literature, recognize other groupings besides those distinguished here. Further analysis will doubtless reveal levels of organization not overtly recognized in these texts. In particular, stanzas may be grouped into “scenes.” This was done here in just one case, text II, “The History of the Taku Yanyèdí,” which I divided into three scenes. Here the beginning of a new scene is indicated by two blank lines instead of just one; the scenes begin at lines 1, 203, and 357.

In punctuating the Tlingit text I used the comma (,), the period (.), the question mark (?), the dash (—), and quotation marks (“...” or ‘...’). The semicolon (;) does not seem necessary for Tlingit and is not used, so that the English will often have a semicolon where the Tlingit

has a comma. Note also that commas may be used within a line in the Tlingit to clarify the phrasing. The comma here does not imply that there is a break or new intonational pattern (although it may coincide with a slight pause that was not deemed indicative of a line break). It simply indicates my interpretation of the syntactic structure.

Two types of brackets are also used in the texts. Quite common are square brackets ([ ]), which indicate words that were added in the process of editing. In the English text, they indicate English words added to make the meaning clear. In the few cases where I answered Mrs. Nyman or asked her a question, my words are enclosed in braces ({ }).

During the act of speaking, people often find it necessary to revise what they have just said or begun to say, and sometimes they do not finish a word or sentence before going on to something new. In working with the spoken word, it is useful to make policies spelling out precisely how it is to be committed to paper. In transcribing legal proceedings, it is customary to write down every sound the speaker makes, but the result is tiresome reading and tends to make the speaker seem duller or more ignorant than he or she actually came across while speaking. For this reason, in preparing these narrative texts for publication, we have generally omitted inadvertent repetitions and false starts. Repetitions that seemed to serve a purpose, however, were retained. If false starts could not be deciphered, they were ignored; if they were subsequently rephrased, they were either ignored or else omitted from the text but described in a footnote.

If a word or sentence was not completed, but seemed significant or was not subsequently rephrased, I would ask Mrs. Nyman during editing to supply what was missing; these additions are enclosed in square brackets in the texts. Square brackets are also used for words that she decided should be added or changed. If the words were changed, then the original words are replaced by the words in square brackets, usually with a note explaining the change.

Due to the profound differences between the linguistic structures and vocabularies of Tlingit and English, it was often difficult to

render the original Tlingit text with an accurate yet fluent English translation, especially with the constraint that the English line should contain the same information as the corresponding Tlingit line. It was often necessary to add words to the English translations that do not correspond directly with anything in the Tlingit; such words are enclosed in square brackets. Square brackets are also used for amplifications to the text such as English names of people and places. Note that if the English map name for a place does not exist or is not known to us, a translation of the Tlingit name is given. Also, in many cases I have not been able to verify the spellings of English names, so some of these may be incorrect. We ask the reader's pardon for such errors.

In spite of the liberties I took in adding and rearranging words and phrases, the English translation may still sound choppy in places. This is almost always a result of the mismatch between the linguistic structures of English and Tlingit. Tlingit allows much more latitude than English in ordering phrases within a sentence. Nominal and adverbial phrases may come in virtually any order. The subject may follow the verb, and the object may come before the verb. And in many cases the speaker will specify what she is going to talk about, but go on to remark on something else relevant to the situation before returning to finish the sentence. In such cases, dashes (—) set off the parenthetical remark from the sentence in which it is embedded. Sometimes, too, a dash is necessary in the English translation but not in the Tlingit.

### **The orthography**

Those who are familiar with the Tlingit writing system will note that we have introduced some important orthographic changes in this book. The revised orthography used here has now been adopted by the Interior Tlingit, and it is our hope that it will eventually be used by the Coastal Tlingit as well. Two key goals guided the design of the revised orthography. The first is that changes in the alphabet should never cause confusion by assigning a different value to an already existing alphabetic unit. For this reason, all the revisions involve changing an alphabetic unit in the old orthography to a completely



new form in the revised orthography. The second goal is that words should remain relatively readable even if all the diacritics (accents and other marks above and below the line) are omitted. This is an important consideration if we wish Tlingit names to enter into public use in legal documents, on maps, and in newspapers. It is difficult or impossible to reproduce diacritics in most of these settings.

Tlingit has both velar and uvular consonants. The velar consonants are **g**, **k**, and **x** (**x** sounds roughly like German **ch**). The uvular consonants are produced further back in the mouth than the corresponding velar consonants. In the old orthography these are distinguished by underlining the consonant: **ḡ**, **ḱ**, and **ḵ**. The difference between, say, **k** and **ḱ** in Tlingit is just as significant or even more significant than the difference between **c** and **ch** in English. They are fundamentally different sounds, and the distinction between them is always clearly maintained. Because of the difficulty of reproducing underlined letters in newspapers and other public documents, the revised orthography represents the uvular consonants with distinct combinations of letters: **gh**, **kh**, and **xh**.

In the old orthography, the long vowels are written with special combinations of letters (**aa**, **ei**, **ee**, **ou**, **oo**). In the revised orthography, they are written with a single letter (**a**, **e**, **i**, **o**, **u**), like the short vowels. Both vowel length and tone are indicated by the accent over the vowel. For example, **a** represents a short low-tone vowel, **á** represents a short high-tone vowel, **à** represents a long low-tone vowel (old **aa**), and **â** represents a long high-tone vowel (old **áa**). These Tlingit vowels are pronounced roughly as they are in most European languages such as Spanish, Italian, and German, and in fact, in most languages that use the Roman alphabet. (Note that the terms “long vowel” and “short vowel” here may be confusing to the English reader. The long vowels of Tlingit are nearly the same in quality as the short vowels, but they are literally longer in duration than the short vowels. Some five hundred years ago the same was true of English vowels, but since that time the vowel system has changed so that the long vowels are now different in quality from the short vowels. For example, long **e** used to

sound much like the **ey** in "they," as does the Tlingit long **e**; but our modern English "long **e**" is quite another sound.)

The letter **ɬ** represents a voiceless lateral fricative, which is found also in Welsh, where it is written **ll**. This is a kind of hissing sound produced by air escaping along the side(s) of the tongue, which is set in much the same position as for the English **l** sound. This sound is quite foreign to English; the Welsh name "Lloyd," for example, was reinterpreted by the English as "Floyd." In the old orthography, this sound is represented by the letter **l**, since the ordinary **l**-sound does not occur as a distinct sound in Coastal Tlingit. Interior Tlingit, on the other hand, has both sounds, so the hissing **l**-sound is distinguished by crossing the letter with a "bar" or slanted line. This "barred **l**" is also used to write the same sound in most Athabaskan languages. For Coastal Tlingit, however, the bar is not necessary, and may be omitted.

The correspondences between the old and the revised orthography are summed up below:

	REVISED ORTHOGRAPHY	OLD ORTHOGRAPHY
<b>Uvular consonants:</b>		
	gh	g̱
	kh	ḵ
	xh	x̱
<b>Vowels:</b>		
	à	aa
	è	ei
	ì	ee
	ò	ou
	ù	oo
	â	áa
	ê	éi
	î	ée
	ô	óu
	û	óo

**L-sounds (for Interior Tlingit):**

ł	l
l	l̥

As discussed above, in many situations it is difficult or impossible to put accents on the vowels or bars across the letter ł. In these cases the words will remain relatively readable even though these diacritics are left off. The English-speaking reader can produce a fairly acceptable rendition of the word by pronouncing the vowels as in Spanish, pronouncing l something like **thl** and x something like the **ch** in “Bach,” and always pronouncing g as an English “hard g,” that is, like the g in “get” and not in “gesture.”

We should also mention here that Tlingit has a set of consonants called glottalized consonants, which are not found in English or other European languages. These are produced with the vocal cords closed, so that the flow of air from the lungs is cut off. The air trapped between the vocal cords and the mouth is compressed and then released through the mouth, so that these consonants typically have a characteristic “pinched” sound. Glottalization is indicated by an apostrophe following the letter(s): **t', tl', ts', ch', k', kh'; ʔ, s', x', xh'**. Tlingit also has a glottal stop made by simply closing the vocal cords and then reopening them. At the beginning of a word, this sound is not written; in the middle of a word, it is represented by a period (.); and at the end of a word, it is represented by an apostrophe ('). This sound occurs also in a few English interjections such as “uh-uh” or “huh-uh” (meaning “no”), where it is represented by the hyphen. When they represent actual sounds, both the apostrophe and the period are treated as letters of the alphabet in Tlingit, and they are an integral part of the word. Care should be taken not to omit them or to leave an extra space after them when copying a word.

Finally, readers who are familiar with the old orthography should keep in mind that all the alphabetic units (that is, letters and special combinations of letters) that they have already learned are pronounced EXACTLY THE SAME in either orthography. They can easily

read the revised orthography by mentally substituting the old equivalents of the changed alphabetic units, for example, substituting old **g** for revised **gh**, old **aa** for revised **à**, and so forth. A useful exercise would be to convert a few sentences from this book into the old orthography, substituting the old alphabetic units for the revised ones according to the chart of correspondences provided above.

### Thanks

I would like to express my appreciation to John Ritter, the Yukon Native Language Centre, and the Council of Yukon Indians for making it possible for me to work with Mrs. Nyman and prepare this book for the benefit of the Tlingit people and enrichment of our common heritage. We hope this book will be one of many to come, and indeed are attempting to document the Tlingit language and culture in such a way that what we do now will provide materials that future generations will be able to reinterpret and weave into new patterns. I would also like to thank Mary Anderson for her help and encouragement and the warm hospitality she has always extended me, as well as the other members of Mrs. Nyman's family. Finally, I thank Mrs. Nyman for enriching my life with her wisdom and patiently sharing her knowledge, as well as seeking out and encouraging me to seek out other Tlingit elders and working together with them to recover the knowledge of the past. In her I have seen an example of the kind of sharing and cooperation between peoples and nations that, like the blessing of the *Tl'anaxîdákhw*, will bring riches to future generations.

Alaska Native Language Center  
University of Alaska Fairbanks  
April, 1993