

## Chapter 12 - Dzaxwan (Oolichan Fish): Stories my Elders Told Me

### *'Nalaga Donna Cranmer*

'Nugwa'am 'Nalaga, gayutlan lax 'Yalis, 'Namgiyaxsa'man, wanukws Gwa'ni. Xwanukwes Gwi'mo'las dlu O'waxalaga'lis. I am 'Nalaga Donna Cranmer, *the dawning of a new day*. I live in 'Yalis (Alert Bay), British Columbia (BC). I am a 'Namgis woman from the River Gwani (Nimpkish River), the daughter of Gwi'mo'las Elder Vera Newman and O'waxalaga'lis Chief Roy Cranmer. I am the second of five children and have been fortunate to grow up in a very culturally and politically active family. I have heard our Kwak'waka'wakw language all my life, but I am not a fluent speaker. Kwakwaka'wakw have lived on the central coast since the time when K'aniki'lakw (the transformer) was moving through the world changing things. Each one of the 18 tribes within the Kwakwaka'wakw territory has their own origin stories which tell the oral history of the first ancestors. The songs, dances and language recount the Kwak'waka'wakw speaking people's connection to and maya'xala (the closest English translation is the word respect) for the land and sea that provided and continues to provide what is needed to live. In pre-contact time there was an understanding that the balance between people and what nature had to provide was to be maintained.

The late Cape Mudge Chief Billy Assu shared the story of how his people in ancient times after the flood came to live near the T'li'na t'li'na River for a period of time. This ancestor Weka'yi met a woman named T'hisdak and she had wings on her back on the T'li'na t'li'na. The woman T'hisdak eventually allowed Weka'yi to build a house and make t'li'na (oolichan oil) every spring (Duff, Prior to 1965).

These teachings and creation stories show the next generation how to live, share and maya'xala (treat others and things the way you want to be treated [respect]) all things. In Indigenous cultures, teaching every generation is illustrated in stories, songs and ceremonies. Each listener takes away the teachings and meanings from the stories and songs, and uses the principles to help them in their own lives.

This delicate balance is no longer recognized by all Kwakwaka'wakw. There are Kwakwaka'wakw who have had the benefit of the old people who continued to practice their ways during the dark years when our cultural ceremonies and ways of doing things was outlawed by the Government of Canada. There are Kwakwaka'wakw whose old people rejected their culture when the government created laws that made the practice of our way of life illegal. With the introduction of the English language and western ways of thinking, a breakdown in language and cultural traditions has occurred. In some families, many traditional teachings are not taught to the young. Many other factors have come to disturb the balance; children spending too much time watching television or playing video games, the breakdown of families because of substance abuse, and families not getting out onto the land and learning about the traditional territories and way of life. Western values and beliefs about lifestyle in general and one's responsibility to the land and to family and community have significantly eroded the traditional values and respectful behaviour of our young people.

When First Nations peoples discuss "culture," this includes all things involved in day-to-day life; origin stories, the interconnectedness of all things, food gathering and preserving methods, child rearing practices, and the passing on of traditional names, songs, dances, ceremonies, and behaviour towards the land. 'Namgis Elder Gloria Cranmer Webster shared that "...Everything is connected, we don't break things up

into compartments or categories” (personal communication, 1994). Circles and cycles are central to the world and we are all connected. This sacredness and inter-connectedness, or *maya’xala* (respect) shown by the people, for the land and the sea resources is what allowed the Kwakwaka’wakw to live on the coast for thousands of years.

As a little girl, I remember every summer going to Big Granny’s (Gwantilakw Agnes Cranmer, my paternal grandmother’s) house and we all worked on processing the salmon. My only thought as a little girl was that I couldn’t wait till I was old enough to cut the fish instead of wash the fish. Big Granny made us wash the fish again if we didn’t get all the blood out. We would start right after breakfast. The adults cut the fish and filled the cans; usually my dad or uncle sealed the cans. The men were responsible for gathering wood and keeping the fire burning under the 45 gallon (170 litre) oil drum in which the canned fish were cooked. While everyone was busy working, Big Granny boiled the potatoes, fish heads and tails. She would call everyone in to eat, and after eating would send everyone back out to finish filling the cans. For supper we had barbequed fish with baked potatoes and *t’hi’na*. Usually the fire was burning under the oil drum where the canned fish was cooked by suppertime. When the water in the drum cooled down it was the job of children to wash the cans. Everyone had their job. It was like a mini cannery out back at my Big Granny’s house. This practice continues today, but now we work on the fish at my sister’s house since my Big Granny passed on, and instead of an oil drum and fire we use a pot and a propane cooker to cook the canned fish. This process of canning salmon is also shared in Diane Jacobson’s recently published book *My Life in A Kwagu’l Bighouse* (2005). My uncle once told me that our people always adapted (to change)—it made things easier.

As far back as I can remember, *t’hi’na* has been a central part of my familial, social and cultural life. Since I started my own family and live in my own home, we eat smoked salmon with oolichan oil, as well as salted oolichans when my Dad invites us to my sister’s house where he lives. Once, we entered my sister’s house and could smell the salted oolichans as soon as the door was opened. My 3½-year-old daughter said, “Emmm I love salted oolichans.” I was so proud of her appreciation for our traditional food which our people have been eating since Gwa’nalis was changed into the river Gwa’ni and before. Despite these changes in how to make the work more efficient, *t’hi’na* remains a central feature of our gatherings, whether that be the processing of it or the distribution of the precious oil.

To this day my family continues to potlatch (see chapter 13 for a fuller description of the potlatch). My grandparents on both sides of my family continued to potlatch even when a large majority of Kwakwaka’wakw gave up this important practice for a number of reasons, not the least of which was a Canadian federal statute. The majority of potlatches I saw when I was younger were memorials for family members who had passed on. My maternal grandfather T’lakwagila Chief Arthur Dick, hosted four potlatches during his lifetime. The last three of his potlatches were T’hi’nagila-T’hi’na potlatches, which means he gave gallons of *t’hi’na* away to his guests. My gramp used to say, “Giving away *t’hi’na* was the highest thing for a chief to do, it took a real man to have the means to be able to go and make *t’hi’na* and then give it away.” In the DVD, *T’hi’na: The Rendering of Wealth* (Cranmer, 1999), my uncle Arthur Dick Jr. talks about T’hi’nagila-T’hi’na, “When you give *t’hi’na* away, you T’hi’nagila and you can’t go any higher than that in our tradition.”

*T’hi’na* like the salmon is a staple in the diet of the Kwakwaka’wakw and many other First Nations on the BC coast. The oil is rendered from the oolichan by many tribes on the coast. Our people use the *t’hi’na* to dip our fish into and pour into fish soup. It also has medicinal uses; when people suffer from a bad cold they are told to heat up *t’hi’na* on the stove, rub it on the chest and then cover the chest with a warm towel. There are stories of chiefs in our area in the 1930’s giving away hundreds of five-gallon cans filled with *t’hi’na*. Giving away large quantities of *t’hi’na* has long been the practice of high chiefs. Kwakwaka’wakw Chief Charlie Nowel discusses the making of and giving away of *t’hi’na*:

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In the old days everybody used to go oolichan fishing. Now not all go, even though high priced—\$15 for 4 (imperial) gallon tin. Don't pit-ripen: make bin of boards on top of ground—if you don't ripen (the oolichan) can't get much grease out of...Bill Matilpi gave grease feast on June 1st past. There was a time hardly anyone went. I (got) 6 cans (\$90.00) and wouldn't have to got so many if more people hand gone maybe 3-4. (Chief Charlie Nowel, interview and transcription in Duff [prior 1965])

Today, this quantity of t'li'na is not given away. A Chief may give away two hundred gallons or as little as fifty gallons. Today, there are few families who still T'li'nagila.

In the late 1980's my Dad started traveling to Dzawadi (Knight Inlet) to make t'li'na with his own crew. In 1997 when the *T'li'na* documentary was being filmed in Dzawadi, my brother Edgar who was 9 at the time and some of his cousins, who were between the ages of 8 and 10 had their own pit and made their own t'li'na with the help of one of their dads and a few uncles. They each came home with 4 gallons. The importance of this tradition remains strong and has been handed down since time immemorial from one generation to the next. Dzaxwan (oolichan) are preserved by smoking or salting, but the major reason to go to Dzawadi is to make t'li'na. I have had the opportunity to travel to Dzawadi with my dad and other family members and have participated in the process of rendering the oil from beginning to end. Our people were and are truly amazing, to render oil from these small oily fish. How did this process come about? The knowledge it took to create the nets to fish the oolichan and then to process the oolichan I would consider as Indigenous Science. The preservation of food, taking raw stinging nettle fibre and creating fishing nets are all the result of timeless observations, inferences, experimentation and evaluations of success and failures. In short, we are benefiting from age-old scientific observation, thought and action.

Archival footage from the film *T'li'na: The Rendering of Wealth* (1999), documents the large amounts of oolichan that were normally caught. Chief Jack Nolie and his wife Dorothy remember a time when there were lots of oolichans and how easy it was to get what you needed:

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Jack: There's lots, from here to that wall, maybe about that thick with oolies.

Dot: I use to walk down to the edge of the river and just pick out what I needed.

Jack: You could just grab it and put it in the pail, there was so much...You didn't use the tagal [cone-shaped net]. You could use the kanayu [dip net] too if you want.

Beliefs about the supply of oolichan being foretold was shared by my maternal grandfather, Arthur Dick Sr. in the documentary film *T'li'na: The Rendering of Wealth* (1999). He tells about the first moon in the new year—if the crescent moon is lying on its side (looking like a bowl standing upright) then there will be lots of oolichans in the

spring, but if the crescent is standing up then the oolichans are all running out, then there won't be many oolichans in the spring (Cranmer, 1999).

Over the past twenty years in my community of 'Yalis the number of families that continue to harvest the oolichan has continually declined. There are a number of reasons for the decline; only a small number of families have fishing boats and are able to go out and gather the oolichan, and the cost to go out on the water has increased considerably. A major reason is the steady decline in the number of oolichan returning to Dzawadi every year. It is easier for some families to get their food from the local grocery store, so the knowledge of how to gather and preserve this resource is slowly being lost by some families.

While growing up I wanted to be an elementary school teacher, integrating our culture and academics so that our children could learn about themselves and their history in our own school, unlike my own school experience that involved very little Kwakwaka'wakw history or cultural knowledge. Knowing that much of our own culture and history, Indigenous Knowledge, has been left out of our school curriculum made me want to help educate our children about our history and help them to see what they can become. That is why I wanted to spend time with the Elders to learn more about how they harvested oolichans and processed t'li'na. From the teachings of my Elders, I developed a science curriculum for our children at our band-operated school, T'hisalagi'lakw, that used the Traditional Ecological Knowledge with Western Science methods.

## Research Purpose

In general, this project had a two-fold purpose. The first purpose was to research Kwakwaka'wakw traditional methods of gathering, preparing and preserving dzaxwan and the making of t'li'na; and in the process of interviewing the Elders to understand how this information was passed on from one generation to another.

The second purpose was to develop and evaluate a science curriculum on the dzaxwan at the Grade 6/7 level that would be respectful to the Kwakwaka'wakw culture and science knowledge and wisdom practices, and accepted for its value in the BC Science curriculum (Cranmer, 2009) (Chapter 13 describes the development, teaching, and evaluation of the dzaxwan curriculum).

## Background to the Study

'Yalis (Alert Bay) is located on Cormorant Island and is the traditional homeland of the 'Namgis First Nation. Cormorant Island is a small island three miles long and half a mile wide, just off the northeast end of Vancouver Island. It is known by some locals as "paradise island" and others as "the rock!" There are approximately 1,350 people living in 'Yalis, which is made up of a municipality on one end of the island and the 'Namgis First Nation reserve on the other. Every other person used to be a fisherman in 'Yalis prior to the drastic changes to the commercial fishing industry, caused by the federal Department of Fisheries regulations and declining returns beginning in the 1980s. Today there are few commercial fishing boats. The major employer in the village is the 'Namgis First Nation, which operates the: administration office, treaty office, forest management office, health and dental centre, Elders Centre, alcohol and drug centre, T'hisalagilakw School, Amlilas playgroup, waste management facility, Lawrence Amber's Recreation Centre, Gwa'ni Fish Hatchery, and Youth Employment Centre.

'Yalis is also considered the heart of Kwakwaka'wakw culture. Our community is home to one of the six traditional gukwdzi (bighouses) where our ceremonies take place. The young are learning the songs and dances that

are so important to the culture. There are still a few smoke houses in the back yards of the men and women who still go out and gather the resources which Creator has provided.

The original home of the ‘Namgis is the Nimpkish Watershed and the Nimpkish Valley. The territory extended up to the head of Wa’as (Woss Lake) and up into the mountains.

Gathering Kwakwaka’wakw dzaxwan took many forms and was obtained from many sources. I recorded informal interviews with Elders and knowledge keepers to gather information on Kwakwaka’wakw traditional methods of gathering, preparing and preserving dzaxwan. I interviewed the following four Kwakwaka’wakw (Kwak’wala speaking Elders): ‘Namgis Chief O’waxalaga’lis (Roy Cranmer), Lawit’sis Elder Harriet Joseph, Mamalilikala Chief T’lakwagi’lakw (Arthur Dick Sr.), and Da’naxda’xw Chief Maxt’sulam Kamx’id (Jack Nolie).

I conducted one interview on my own in English. Three interviews were in Kwak’wala and my mother Gwi’mo’las (Vera Newman) who is fluent in Kwak’wala asked questions. While researching this information I documented many Kwak’wala words and phrases used during the gathering, preparing and preserving of these foods. When interpreting the results of the interviews, common themes and patterns were taken from the transcripts. For example, several individuals shared that their grandparents always said to take care and not throw garbage in the river; the theme of respect and behaving accordingly became an important teaching theme that was explored in depth.

Archival research and document analysis were other methodologies used to gather information. Published information by anthropologists who worked among the Kwakwaka’wakw in the late 1800s and the early 1900s was added to my database.

### Maya’xala, Showing Respect

The old people taught the young to maya’xala—treat others and things the way you want to be treated. The old people gave words of thanks when taking things from nature and they made sure that garbage was properly discarded. Today, this caring for the environment is called “conservation.” Mamalilikala Chief, Arthur Dick (Art) talks about his Ada’s (paternal grandmother) teachings:

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The first thing [when arriving in Dzawadi] that Ada [Minnie Dick] used to make us do was to dig a pit for where the garbage is going to go. So we don’t go and throw our garbage in the river...Dzawadi itself will take care of the garbage, Ada used to say you didn’t cover it up with the sand, you just left it open. We respect the land we don’t own the land, the land owns us, that’s our mother. That’s what the old people said and the ‘blood is the river’. If you put bad things into it, it would not make the heart of our mother do good things.

Harriet also talked about the respect shown to the river:

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I use to hear my mom talk about how the old people use to really take care of the river. We were never allowed to dump our dish wash into the river. We were not allowed to throw garbage into the river.

It is important to note that when talking about “Kwakiutl religion” or “prayer” as anthropologist Franz Boas called it, I use the term “words of thanks” (Webster, 1987). It was explained to me that our people had three ways of giving thanks; the English word prayer is now used for all of them. Boas’ (1930), translation provides examples of words of thanks that were used by Kwakwaka’wakw men and women in day-to-day activities. Giving words of thanks was part of everyday life. The old people, like my grandparents and great grandparents, washed themselves here before entering Dzawadi, and asked Creator to take their sickness away:

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Vera: ...Daddy would say, T’suxudaxan t’sit’saxk’ulam ‘Numase’

Art: four times...

Vera: Wash my sickness away ‘Numas, I guess that would be another way of saying Creator or ancestor.

This ceremony took place at Twin Falls (Cascade Point), and was considered an important site to stop on the way up to make t’hi’na. Macnair (1971), described the ritual of “Stopping halfway up the inlet to bathe ritually under the mist of a water fall at Cascade Point to ensure good health ...” (p. 169). They were preparing themselves spiritually for the work ahead.

Art also talked about how words of thanks were given daily to show respect when gathering traditional food:

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...When we use to go put the halibut gear into the water and then the halibut would come up into the boat...Dada (paternal grandfather) would turn the halibut’s head towards Village Island and he thanked the halibut for giving his life so we can continue to survive as humans. That’s what Dada use to do; he did that when he shot a deer. Right where the deer dropped he used to run around it four times. Twice I saw the old man do that. Thanking the deer for giving his life so we could live. That was the work of the deer, all the animals were human beings...That’s the way Dada was.

## Rendering Oolichans

The T’hi’na t’hi’na River is the traditional territory of the A’wa’etlala and Da’naxda’xw. Although this territory belonged to these two tribes, during oolichan fishing time they allowed fourteen Kwakwaka’wakw tribes to have their own camps to harvest the oolichans (Galios, 1994, p. 137).

Oolichan continues to be gathered on two rivers in Kwakwaka'wakw territory; the T'li'na t'li'na and Kingcome. Once the boats arrived at the flats (where the boats are anchored), the hard work of getting all the supplies up to the village began.

Jack shared how the old man Panxw'idi from New Vancouver told the people how things were to be done:

“ He use to stand with his talking stick in the river and he would give the teachings, say we are not going to put our tagaḷ in till it's time. After the oolichans spawn...when he gives the OK 'Wahead now', then everyone goes in the river and puts their poles in for the tagaḷ. You have to wait 'til night time when the tide is coming in (yaxwala—high tide), then the dzaxwan come in the early evening and at night.

Art shared how his grandfather looked for the biggest oolichan and what was done with this oolichan:

“ I was very young when Dada went searching through the boatload of oolichans for the biggest, a very long oolichan he took out from the pile—he showed with his hands how big. He asked Ada, 'Can you please go fry this for me? You're the only one who is going to eat this'. I ate it, Dada said 'You will never forget Dzawadi now'. That oolichan had a name, but I don't remember the name. You're a supernatural being...what Dada called 'Nawalakw—supernatural, sacred you don't even talk about it, you just know. 'You'll never forget Dzawadi, you'll always want to come home...You'll never give up on this land, after I ate that oolichan. You're the one that is going to be looking after Dzawadi', Dada used to say, 'It was amazing things that happened when I was a kid with the old people'.

There was a lot of work to do to get ready before going fishing for dzaxwan, especially in the days before seine nets. Art talked about his great aunt, who made the tagaḷ for his family:

“ Dad used to say Anit'a [Andy Bean's mother, Ada's sister] used to be the one that used to make the tagaḷ for our family and our tribe...they used the spruce tree, the roots, spruce roots. All winter long wove the tagaḷ net out of spruce root. It's really light. She just held it with her one hand...Nobody knows how it was done before, where they locked up the tagaḷ. We just tie up the tagaḷ now, nobody knows how to do it the way the old people did it.

This special net was placed below the spawning grounds. Once the dzaxwan spawned the current carried them back down the river into the tagaḷ. It allowed only the dzaxwan that had completed spawning to be caught:

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That’s why there were lots of oolichans in the old days, because they already spawned before they came down to be caught. That’s why the tagals were used, you don’t fish oolichans till they’re ‘was ‘id [spawned].

Wood needed to be cut, nets mended, tools cleaned, and samgat’si (tanks for cooking oolichans in) needed to be re-corked (caulked). My Uncle Art shared how you clean the tools you’re going to use:

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...the k’alayu (paddle split at the end) and awayu (skimmer) the first thing you start working on when you put the fire on under the samgat’si you put less than ½ a cup of soap in the samgat’si to wash the tools, then you just wipe it off, all the things you’re going to use when you’re making the t’hi’na, then it gets put away till they start to use it.

I asked my Dad to explain what the samgat’si was made of:

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...red cedar and the bottom is galvanized steel or tin...Back in the earlier times I guess they used to be able to get the trees big enough...they could get one chunk, one plank...they used to be able to cut it so the only joints you’d have is the corners...we were lucky that we found a big enough cedar that we managed to get two eighteen inch planks out of them.

When some people in ‘Yalis talk about making t’hi’na they say that the oolichans are put in the pit and left to rot. Then the decomposing oolichans are cooked and the oil comes out. I found it interesting how the old people explain things. According to Art, the old people said, “It didn’t rot. It was just cooking in the pit. You wait for so many days for the dzaxwan to cook in the ground.” Once the dzaxwan are “cooking in the pit,” it’s time to start cooking the first batch of dzaxwan. Prior to this, the dzaxwan are not touched. The seal is broken on the pit once the first shovel load of dzaxwan is moved. The Elders interviewed all agreed that great attention and care needed to take place through the whole process. There were a few things that could affect the taste of the t’hi’na if care wasn’t taken—one being the temperature of the fire under the samgat’si. Uncle Art Dick, Sr. said: “... you can’t get your fire too hot either because you burn your tin [samgat’si] or you’ll have to change it because it affects the taste of the grease.”

Art mentioned that old corking in the corners and joints of the samgat’si has an effect on the taste:

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...you have to change the migulam [corking on the samgat’si] so that the damp doesn’t change the taste of the t’hi’na. If you don’t take out the old corking then the taste will go onto the grease. You can smell it even.

Jack described the process and used the Kwak’wala words for the equipment used during this process “k’alayu, the paddle that’s split on the end, you g’ala (shake) it on the samgati’si and the bones come out...then oil will start

showing up and you g’ala again. Then the t’li’na shows up.” After the shaking took place the oil began to rise to the top. Harriet shared how her mother used the awayu to skim the oil off the top:

“ My mom would grab her pail and her awayu to get the t’li’na, and all the pails are all ready around the fire, after you transfer the oil from the samgat’si . . . you use the screen when you first transfer it to the pails. The first batch that comes out, you leave the t’li’na in the buckets over night.

The Kwakwaka’wakw enjoyed eating dzaxwan a number of ways. A treat for those of us who do not make the annual trip to Dzawadi is frying fresh oolichans. Once the oolichans show up in the river and the ‘lap’as (pits) are full, there is usually one or two boats that make a trip out to pick up supplies and bring a load of fresh oolichans to share with the community. Harriet talked about how her dad made little barbeque sticks and her mom would barbeque oolichans:

“ I used to love watching my dad make the little barbeque sticks [laughs]...I use to just watch my mom when she barbequed the oolichans. She didn’t open up the oolichan, it was still whole when she put it on the sticks. You tied it together with danas [cedar], you wet the cedar to make sure the cedar is really wet, when you tie the oolichans onto the sticks—up to 10 oolichans on a barbeque stick.

Harriet talked about how the old people lived a good life for thousands of years on the natural resources that Creator provided. They harvested and preserved what they needed and the people were much healthier because of the good food we ate “our own food”:

“ I think there is so much illness now because we eat white man’s food, especially these fast foods, that’s what I blame. They don’t eat the good food we used to eat, our own food. . .jarred fish and clams, that’s what she [her mom] canned so that we could bring it to Dzawadi. It’s so different now. I bet the kids don’t know how we grew up. I think our bodies aren’t strong because we don’t eat our oolichan grease.

## Diminishing Oolichan Returns

Each person interviewed shared their concern for the future of making t’li’na in Dzawadi because of depleting oolichan runs. Some of the factors mentioned which have an effect on the small number of returning oolichan were: fish farms in the path of the oolichans travelling to the ocean and returning home, the effect of logging in the valley, the changing river in Dzawadi, and dragnets (ocean vessels with long lines and deep nets) by-catch. Art shared an Elder’s words about this issue:

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What Glennie Johnston said is there is no more sacredness of the season, they [the fish farms] are here 365 days of the year, yet the sacredness of the season is no longer there, well the different times of the year when we gather different things. To add on to what Grandpa said, that those people better look after that shit [fish farm waste that sits on the ocean floor underneath the pens], and if we don't then our country, all the land and water will go haywire. And gone is the respect of the land, the sacredness of the seasons is gone...The people who are doing the bad things will ruin themselves. Don't stress too much because he's [Creator] going to come and fix our lands for us. Don't let it get to you too much in your day, so you don't go following the people that are fighting it, cause it will fix itself. They are not Creator, because everything they are doing is going to go bad [farm fish and that stuff].

Art went on to talk about the other resources and areas where he used to gather other traditional foods:

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I was just in a place that Gramp called Oyands (a little bay right next to Village Island where you could dig for clams when we lived there) and it smelled [terrible], just like standing in [an outhouse]. Nothing was good where we use to dig clams in our territory...The fish farms are really bad...It will never work because it's not [like] the ways of following the sun and the moon (seasons). There is no more respect, no one cares anymore. There is so much that has been destroyed...what they used to eat the crabs and the clams. You used to see the clamshells and the crab shells in the woods because the otter and mink use to eat it in the forest. They can't eat that anymore because it's not good.

There is an understanding among the Kwakwaka'wakw that everything is connected. If you destroy or take away one thing from nature it has a lasting effect on the food chain. Art shared what he had witnessed in his traditional homeland:

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There are no tracks now where the deer use to come down and eat the kelp. There is nothing good for them to eat any more...It's just like murky mud where we use to have our clam beds. There is no more land that is hard any more. It's all just murky mud.

Roy also shared some of his concerns about the effect draggers are having on the dwindling oolichan populations:

“ There are stories today about what the draggers are doing even though they were supposed to have behind [the boat] a beam troll that allows the oolichans to escape, and I guess that’s still not happening because you still hear stories about those guys dumping oolichans out there.

He also expressed concerns about how fish farms and the logging industry are seriously diminishing oolichan habitats and populations:

“ ...Now that we’ve got these...fish farms [in the Broughton Archipelago], who knows how they’re affecting the oolichans, and I’m pretty darn sure that somehow they’re being affected because they’re still using pit lamps at night to feed the farm fish... Well they just attract everything. Those oolichans, they couldn’t be very big when they get out this far. They probably just eat them. That’s just my suspicion.

Roy talked about changes in the river that he has seen since his first visit to Dzawadi when he was a young man to now:

“ ...the other thing that’s happening up at [Dzawadi], all the logging that’s happening up there, I remember the first time I went up there it [the T’hi’na t’hi’na River] used to wind its way down from the bridge, but now it’s almost a straight shot from the bridge down to the village now.

The important stories that Elders shared about this one traditional food overwhelmed me. There was so much information, the most important being *maya’xala*, caring for the land, river and the *dzaxwan*, as well as the process of rendering the oil, and the many ways of preparing and preserving the *dzaxwan*. Within the last five years, you would be considered lucky to have a feed of fresh oolichans if your family does not have a boat coming out of Dzawadi. The teachings need to continue as they have since Creator put our ancestors on this land.

## Preparing Harvesting Equipment

Boas (1975) described how the Kwakwaka’wakw harvested food and created other water receptacles, household utensils, kelp bottles, stinging nettle nets and netting. All these items were used in the collection, storage and serving of the oolichan. “The best kelp (wawadi) or bull kelp for making oil-bottles grows on rocks where there is a swift tide. The kelp is collected by women in the fall, after the berrying-season is over” (Boas, 1974, p. 407). Boas goes into great detail on the cleaning and drying of the kelp before the oil is placed in the bottles. The types of oil saved in these containers were “Olachen-oil (L!e’na) t’l’ina, dogfish-oil (xu’lq!wes) xwalgis, and oil made of seal (me’gwat!es) migwat’is, porpoise (Ko’lot!es) k’ulut’is, whale (gwe’gis) and bear (Lē’ntses), are also kept in kelp bottles. Catfish oil (dze’k!wis) is kept in small kelp bottles” (p. 419).

The gathering of stinging nettle to create fishing nets and the creation of these nets was a women’s job:

“

Nettles are cut in October.... Fifty stems of nettles are placed in a heap, and are tied together with split cedar-bark in four places, at about equal distances. These bundles are taken home, the tying is undone, and the stems are split with the nail of the thumb...the nettles on it is placed on a drying-frame, where it is left exposed to sun and wind. In the evening the nettles are covered over with mats so as to keep the dew off. (Boas, 1974, p. 370)

After the nettle fibre is gathered and prepared it is then spun and finally the fishing nets are created. “In making the large oolichan-net, the woman begins with the finest nettle-twine, using the small netting-needle, on which the thread is wound. First the twine is turned twice around the smallest net-measure” (p. 399).

Boas (1916, p. 751), describes feasts where t’hi’na was mixed with fruit: “...feasts of currants, huckleberry feast, Viburnum berry feast, salmon berry feast, crabapple feast and finally feast of salal berries and crabapples.” For example when huckleberries were gathered in the summer they would be cleaned and then placed in a bentwood box and covered with water and oolichan oil. These boxes of huckleberries would be stored away for use during a huckleberry feast.

## The ‘Namgis Grease Trail

Oolichan, particularly oolichan oil, was one of the most valuable trade items (Drake & Wilson, 1991). Part of the oral history of the ‘Namgis tells of the ancestor U’małame’ walking over the mountains to the west coast of Vancouver Island and trading with the people he encountered (Wasden, 2005). The grease (oolichan) trail that U’małame’ created was a major trade route for the ‘Namgis and Nuu-chah-nulth people. Valuable items that were traded were “red ochre, mountain goat wool, herring eggs and songs, but the most important was the precious eulachon oil” (Wasden, 2005, p. 20).

My Big Granny shared stories of my paternal great grandfather Gwi’mo’las and my paternal grandfather Pal’nakwala Wakas walking this trail. For over 80 years the trail was not used. In 1999, the ‘Namgis Grease trail was used to bring t’lina to the Nuu-chah-nulth at a canoe gathering in Ahousaht. ‘Waxawidi (William Wasden, Jr.) composed a song after completing the journey, called the Grease Trail Song. This song recounts the recent journey of four ‘Namgis men who travelled an ancient trade route that extends from the traditional territories of the ‘Namgis tribe on the east coast of Vancouver Island, to the territory of the neighbouring Mowachat tribe on the west coast of Vancouver Island (Neel, 2004, p. 5). The words of the Grease Trail song in English are as follows:

“

What shall we do my brothers and sisters? Come, let’s wander into the forest and begin our journey.

What shall we do my brothers and sisters? Come, let’s fly around the world as our ancestors did with their spiritual power.

What shall we do my brothers and sisters? Come, let’s go to the other side of our world, the West Coast.

“

What shall we do my brothers and sisters? Come, let's hurry now and complete the things we need to do in this life. (Neel, 2004, p. 5)

For several years since 1999, people have hiked the grease trail to see how the old people had to travel to trade grease with the Nuu-chah-nulth. This new generation have not carried dzaxwan, but have learned the importance of the trail.

## Following the Path of Our Ancestors

The Kwak'wala phrase *Kas'ida'asa san's galga'lis* means the path of our ancestors. The Kwakwaka'wakw have survived for thousands of years by continuing to follow the path of our ancestors. Chief Charlie Nowel's interview took place prior to 1965 when anthropologist Wilson Duff was working at the Royal British Columbia Museum. He concluded his discussion about t'li'na with, “We still got to have grease—can't get along without it... good for stomach too. We eat regularly with boilers (potatoes) and dried salmon” (Duff, Prior to 1965). Ławit'sis Elder Stella Beans shares the same view about grease, in the film *T'li'na: The Rendering of Wealth* (1999). She stated “we still gonna make grease...Stevie [her husband] to Darryl [her son] to Steven [her grandson].” Clearly, it is critical for the welfare and future of our people that this belief and respect continues.

Knowing that much of our own culture and history has been left out of our school curriculum made me want to educate our children about our history and help them to see what they can become. That is why I developed and taught a science curriculum on the dzaxwan and the processing of t'li'na grease to our Kwakwaka'wakw children. The story of the teachings, the numerous contributions of Elders and community knowledge keepers, and how the students responded during instruction is outlined in chapter 13 of this book.

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