

Prologue

History makes people, but people make history.

– Sherry Ortner, Anthropology and Social Theory

Kwagu'ł Gixsam Feast, 'Yalis Big House
19 May 2007, 3 p.m.

Chief Robert Joseph, Kwankwanxwaligedzi
Gilakas'la!

The chiefs, matriarchs, my people, the Cook family welcome you here today, and they thank you for paying attention to your call for us to come here and to celebrate together their idea and their will and desire to be part of this great sacred circle of the potlatch and life itself.

They want you to know that they're extremely proud to be Kwakwaka'wakw, to be members of the 'na'mima that they are, and they respect all of the other 'ni'na'mima.

We are here today to commemorate the ancestors of this great clan, this 'na'mima, and to work towards bringing about the revitalization of this nation in full knowledge of all of the things that we need to do as Kwakwaka'wakw.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is a great gathering.

This is a moment of reconciliation for all of us.

This is a moment when we reach out together and talk about being inclusive and being part of, so that we can become whole as the Kwakwaka'wakw.

So that we can become strong as the Kwakwaka'wakw.

That's how historic this moment is, this gathering is.

My brothers and sisters, I look forward to seeing you demonstrating the heart and the will and the spirit and the desire to welcome this great 'na'mima into the circle. So that when we look forward into the future, the future of our children is secure.

This great house has always been the place, my brothers and friends, this has always been the place where we right the wrongs and we correct the paths on which we've been, and where we make and create a world that is safe for our children, that is strong for our children.

Throughout the evening you're going to learn more about the purpose of this great gathering.

Gilakas'la.

This book begins at the end of the trail it travels, in the ceremonial realm of gukwodzi (the Big House at Alert Bay, British Columbia), where in May 2007 members of the Cook family were “standing up” to show their history. Here, high-ranked Kwakwaka'wakw lineages demonstrate lines of descent from a single ancestor, who represents their 'na'mima (clan), which comprises several extended families. Just as “standing up” in gukwodzi represents 'na'mima history, this book shows how members of one descent group represent their past by revisiting the story of an ancestor named Ga'axsta'las or Jane Constance Cook, who was born in 1870 and passed away in 1951.¹

The Gixsam Feast hosted by the Cook family is a significant public moment in the resolution of a difficult story that four generations of 'na'mima members carry. In welcoming guests to witness the feast, Chief Robert Joseph (Kwankwanxwaligedzi) of Gwa'yi (Kingcome) spoke about reconciliation. His invocation pertained not to relations with the colonial state (although they also are relevant) but to internal dynamics among Kwakwaka'wakw peoples.² The feast represented the awakening of the Kwagu'ł Gixsam 'na'mima, a clan that had been quiet for ninety years – since their ancestor had let go of her position in the potlatch.³

Like the feast, this work is grounded firmly in the here and now, yet it too references the past. The themes that run through this book reflect the organizing principles of the feast: attention to 'na'mima relationships and responsibilities, a desire to prepare the way for future generations, and the need to flesh out what has been an oversimplified public image of an ancestor. Ga'axsta'las lived through a period of intense upheaval for First Nation peoples. She was born during the late frontier era on the Northwest Coast, one year before aboriginal people were declared wards of the state in the new province of British Columbia (see map, page xxiv). In 1876, when she was six, the dominion government introduced the Indian Act, legislation that deprived aboriginal societies of the right to govern themselves; generated classifications that defined membership; racialized mobility and social behaviour; and sought to assimilate indigenous peoples. When Ga'axsta'las was eleven, an Indian Agent arrived at her mother's village to enforce colonial policies. Her ancestors' territories were appropriated and surveyed, and small portions were eventually reconceptualized as reserves. When Ga'axsta'las was fourteen, the state enacted legislation to ban potlatching – *the* complex of customary interactions at the heart of cultural and political sovereignty among coastal indigenous societies. The potlatch prohibition extended to the year of Ga'axsta'las's death, and like others, Ga'axsta'las was embroiled in the fury of conflicts wrought by the ban. Her generation negotiated a world that called for daily acts of translation, for the honing of bi-cultural skills and the ability to respond to opportunities and obstacles. Her life was animated by Christian and customary cosmologies, and she acted consciously in a world that she knew as a Kwakwaka'wakw woman of high rank and as an advocate for justice.

Standing Up with Ga'axsta'las attests to Jane Cook's legacy, which is apparent in her descendants' ongoing participation in the political struggles of First Nation peoples in Canada. As a work initiated by these descendants, this book includes their many voices alongside words written and spoken by Ga'axsta'las, words that have entered the historical record or have been waiting in archival repositories for consideration in the present. Our work reconsiders dominant historical and biographical portrayals that flatten the diverse motivations of aboriginal people and represent them as having naively consumed the colonizing project. We turn instead to a story embedded within the daily and ritual embodiment of one's place in a web of 'nami'ma relationships and within relevant social, economic, and political

realities. Our collaborative, intergenerational approach seeks an intimate rendering of larger historical forces by focusing on family and community histories as they came to be governed by colonial suppression and by new forms of religious and political expression.

Briefly stated, the family oral history begins around 1869, when the warship HMS *Clio* sailed along the coast to the Kwakwaka'wakw village of Tsaxis (Fort Rupert) to arrest men suspected of committing a murder. During the skirmish, the village was bombarded. Kwagu'ł chiefs were taken to stand trial in Victoria, and Jane Cook's grandfather John 'Nulis was among them.⁴ His daughter, Gwayu'łalas (Emily Whonnock), accompanied him to Victoria. Eventually, the chiefs were released without charges, but it was in Victoria that Jane Cook's mother, Gwayu'łalas, met William Gilbert, an English trader and sea pilot. Jane Constance Gilbert was born to them in Port Blakely on Washington's Puget Sound, in 1870. Gwayu'łalas later married another man named James Newman, and they had two children – He'man'sa-gilaogwa (Annie Newman) and 'Nulis (Charlie Newman) (see Part II).

On paper, Ga'axsta'las's story is difficult to trace until she appears, at the age of twelve, in the 1881 census at Tsaxis, her mother's village. Some in the family say that Jane, her sister Annie, and her brother Charlie were brought home by their grandfather John 'Nulis after the death of their young mother. According to other stories, after traveling for a time with her father, Ga'axsta'las was brought to Tsaxis and later entrusted to the care of the Reverend Alfred Hall of the Anglican Church Mission Society (see Part III). Hall taught a few Kwagu'ł children in his home, and he later established a mission in 'Yalis (Alert Bay), where he built Christ Church in 1881. It is likely that Jane Gilbert (Ga'axsta'las) met her husband, Nage (Stephen Cook), at this time, as they were both missionary-educated. Through his mother, Stephen Cook had Mowachaht roots among the Nuuchah-nulth peoples of the West Coast. His father was also European. At a young age, he received the name Nage among the 'Namgis.⁵ Jane and Stephen married in Christ Church in 1888, and they raised their family in 'Yalis. They were parents to sixteen children and grandparents and great-grandparents to many more.

Throughout their lives, Jane and Stephen opened their multigenerational home to those recovering from losses, to travellers, and to people who were ill or in need of shelter. Relatives and others remember Ga'axsta'las's generosity. From her well-tended orchard, she distributed fruits, and her kitchen was open to visitors. They recall both the

splendid Christmas dinners that spilled out over two rooms in the Cook big house and the more intimate sharing of seaweed and *t'lina* (eulachon grease) at the kitchen table. Those who lived with “Granny Cook” recall the occasions when she was called away at all hours to assist births, to tend those who were ill, and to comfort and prepare those who were dying. Ga'axsta'las is remembered as a woman of strength who demonstrated the importance of family relationships.

Together, Ga'axsta'las and Nage and their children ran a general store in 'Yalis, a salmon saltery, and net loft. Later, they and their sons built a successful fishing fleet and took on leadership roles in the Native Brotherhood of British Columbia. Their lives were touched by tragedy too. Before 1911, they lost three sons: Stephen Jr. (to tuberculosis), Alfred (to dysentery), and Rupert (to bronchitis). In 1918, they received news that their son Edwin had been killed in France while serving in the armed forces during the First World War. Daughters Grace and Alice died in the 1920s, and Jane and Stephen opened their home to their daughters' grieving husbands and children. Today, some of their descendants hold the title of hereditary chief; others have been initiated into the Hamatsa (Cannibal Society), or they are recognized and named performers of traditional expression who themselves host potlatches. Their descendants are also dynamic figures in First Nations structures of health, community and cultural development, education, law, resource rights, and local government who trace their passion for politics to Ga'axsta'las and her legacy of public engagement.

As president of the Anglican Women's Auxiliary for over thirty years, Ga'axsta'las ran weekly meetings in the village, offering women Christian teachings and support through often difficult circumstances. An avid reader and thinker, Ga'axsta'las's belief in education and literacy left an impression on her descendants and a trail in the recorded history of First Nations activism in BC. She translated sermons, speeches, and legal and extra-legal testimonies from English and her language, Kwakwala. Her letter writing began in the late nineteenth century, when she wrote to colonial officials at the request of community members (see Part IV). Sometime between 1911 and 1914, Ga'axsta'las translated traditional narratives told by Chief Lagius of Gwa'yi (Kingcome) for Edward Curtis, a photographer and researcher who worked to document the peoples of Native North America (see Part V). In 1931, she worked with anthropologist Franz Boas as he studied the Kwakwala language (see Part VII). Her services as a translator extended to the

legal system, where she, and others, served officially as court interpreter for trials and hearings from the 1910s onward.

Ga'axsta'las was also an interpreter and representative of her people at government hearings for aboriginal rights. In 1914, she translated the words of Kwakwaka'wakw chiefs who made land claims before the McKenna-McBride Royal Commission, where she also testified as witness on behalf of the A'wa'etłala (Knight Inlet), Da'naxda'xw (New Vancouver), and the 'Namgis (Alert Bay) and made co-claims to resource sites (see Part VI). She was the only woman on the Executive Committee of the Allied Indian Tribes of British Columbia, in 1923, an early political organization composed of chiefs and other aboriginal leaders. Representing what was then the Kwawkewlth Agency, she spoke for commercial and food fishing rights and for nonracist health services – specifically, for Indian-only tuberculosis hospitals (see Part VII). Her words carried conviction, for she had already lost two of her own children and had nursed many others suffering with TB.

In her work with the Allied Indian Tribes, Ga'axsta'las represented potlatchers seeking compensation for property confiscated under the antipotlatch law, and she assisted potlatchers in scripting a petition to “relax” the potlatch ban. Some chiefs entrusted her to look after their ceremonial property, and she and Stephen were asked by relatives to hold money for them. Ga'axsta'las carried an abiding confidence in the law, and in the 1940s she stood with the Native Brotherhood in its fight for aboriginal peoples to benefit from the rights of Canadian citizenship without losing Indian status and hereditary privileges (see Part VIII). Too often, Jane Cook's contributions to the struggle for rights are overlooked. Many focus on her later support for the colonial ban on the potlatch, but simple versions of her story do an injustice to the complicated situations and events that she likely faced.

Although both of high rank (or perhaps because of this), Stephen and Jane Cook stood their ground on controversial matters, matters that would eventually leave them feeling – in Jane Cook's words – like “outcasts” (see Part VII). Ga'axsta'las's objections to some aspects of “the custom” had to do initially with questions about potlatch marriage and what she saw as women's limited choices. Potlatch marriage was a primary mechanism for the transfer of property and the naming of chiefs among high-ranked lineages. For colonial authorities, it was an obstacle to their attempts to control the political, legal, and social lives of coastal indigenous peoples. Positioned at a major intersection

of the colonial and Kwakwaka'wakw worlds, marriage was anything but straightforward.

When Ga'axsta'las advocated for women, she entered into dialogues that sometimes placed her in conflict with customary leaders and with colonial agents. Initially, she wanted officials to acknowledge the legality of Kwakwaka'wakw marriages in the potlatch. Later, she asked them to legislate some kind of family support for women and children left destitute. Ga'axsta'las wrote and spoke about underage brides married without their initial consent, and about the specific situation of women who were converts, caught between Kwakwaka'wakw and Christian norms. Eventually, she spoke about her own position within the realm of rank circumscribed by *gwa'l* (the marriage contract). One of her letters about the potlatch stated that it was more than just a custom: it was a form of "government" or a "constitution" that affected all aspects of Kwakwaka'wakw life. She was concerned that young women especially had few options but to follow customary authority.

In her early letters, Ga'axsta'las clearly supported the custom. As official prosecution of potlatching intensified, she took more decisive stances – against the social effects of long-term criminalization, against the financial burden faced by families, and against the more competitive aspects of potlatching that she felt affected village life negatively (see Part VIII). Ga'axsta'las communicated with powerful men in the colonial hierarchy: she wrote to and had meetings with bishops, senior Indian Affairs officials, police chiefs, and politicians in BC and Ottawa. Looking at archival materials, it is evident that she worked within a strong web of 'na'mima relationships, for many of her actions were directed to protect women and girls in her extended family.

Some stories about Ga'axsta'las charge that she informed on potlatchers during the colonial ban and that she mistranslated at the famous potlatch trials in 1922. These stories imply that she had a central role in the long sequence of potlatch prosecutions, the imprisonment of chiefs, and the appropriation of their ceremonial regalia (see Part VI). Although Ga'axsta'las was a woman with strong influence, these accounts underestimate the power wielded by Indian Agents, politicians, and police officials whose actions and decisions determined the outcomes. During the ban, potlatching stayed alive, but it went underground. The political terrain was shifting, and people found themselves in complicated positions given their allegiances to family, their membership in the Church, and their reliance on commercial sources of income.

In the last years of her life, Jane Cook made strong statements about the “awful results” of colonialism and the missionary condemnation of Kwakwaka’wakw beliefs, about their continued lack of access to traditional resources, and about the “white man’s” misunderstanding of their “past.” Traced through her words offered up in varying contexts, the arc of her story still holds mysteries. What is clear is that Ga’axsta’las stood firm. She defied structures of customary authority at a time when senior, high-ranked Kwakwaka’wakw women held power in their ‘ni’na’mima but rarely throughout the public spectrum.

Jane Cook’s descendants do not intend to erase her involvement in colonial processes. They seek to contextualize her activities in the villages and in the wider political sphere (see Part I). By revisiting her story, they interrogate the historical record and seek to overcome a sense of stigmatization linked to her actions. They also “stand up” with Ga’axsta’las in a larger effort to reincorporate her descendants – especially younger members of their family – estranged from the potlatch system and from other sites of Kwakwaka’wakw identity.

As a first-born child of a first-born child, Ga’axsta’las had the right to ‘na’mima privileges that flowed through her Kwagu’l grandfather, Chief John ‘Nulis. Upon her marriage in 1888, Ga’axsta’las stepped out of her standing in the potlatch system. Her historical decision left some descendants without standing in that traditional arena. Many of Jane Cook’s descendants participate in this continual re-creation of identity, tracing descent through their mother’s and/or their father’s lines to ancestors from whose mythical encounters the symbols and stories of ‘na’mima belonging are generated. Others are without this option. Among her potlatching descendants, there is a good deal of talk about young people who are without names, without the vitality of Kwakwaka’wakw being.

This book documents ways in which one family has worked to resolve questions about the past. It is also intended to inform more distant relatives about a history to which they belong. The efforts of Ga’axsta’las’s descendants to include new generations in the cultural realm are documented in Part X, which includes discussions with two family chiefs about the potlatches they hosted in 2005 and 2006. Ga’axsta’las’s descendants also ritually reanimated the Kwagu’l Gixsam ‘na’mima in 2007 at a feast where they bestowed over sixty names. This book concludes with an edited transcript of the feast through which the family stood up to reactivate dormant names and positions through one line of descent from Ga’axsta’las. In the welcome speech

that opens this book, Chief Robert Joseph speaks of how the return of the Gixsam 'na'mima will strengthen the Kwakwaka'wakw as a whole, for the vitality of the potlatch system depends on a complex network of participating, interrelated clans. Evident at the feast was a palpable sense that Ga'axsta'las's descendants were stepping back into a relevant Kwakwaka'wakw history.

The words, actions, and embodied interpretations of the potlatches and feasts offered throughout this book address many angles of public and personal memory. The Big House in 'Yalis harbours an echo of the voices and movements of ancestors still alive in the recital of their origin stories, in the donning of their crests, in the bestowal of their names, and in the words and gestures that accompany their songs. Each of these prerogatives – these acts of remembering – is revealed to witnesses by retelling their paths of transmission. The tellings affirm links to the present; they are vital demonstrations of one's place within a 'na'mima and within the Kwakwaka'wakw world. To make the genealogical links explicit in the Big House is sometimes, as Chief Robert Joseph states, “to right the wrongs” and “correct the paths on which we've been.”

Every potlatch or feast celebrates the continuity of a particular 'na'mima, and it is important to acknowledge that each lineage holds the memory of multiple histories that, over time, have woven themselves into the experiences and thoughts of individuals. The momentum of these histories generates shared ideas about the past, conjuring memories of collective struggle and colonial oppression and sometimes triggering the difficult stuff of belonging and exclusion. This book is a textual act of remembering that documents how some members of the Cook family use 'na'mima knowledge and historical analysis to “make and create a world” that is both safe and strong for their children.