

REVIEW

BEING AND PLACE AMONG THE TLINGIT

*By Thomas F. Thornton, 2008, University of Washington Press in association with Sealaska Heritage Institute, Seattle
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While numerous but generally limited studies of the complex place-naming practices and patterns developed by Alaska's indigenous groups have appeared over the years, Thomas F. Thornton's new volume offers a more expansive and holistic ethnographic view of how place characteristics and names are woven into the fabric of existence by the Tlingit people of southeast Alaska. *Being and Place among the Tlingit* is not only an outstanding contribution to Tlingit ethnography but also offers a powerful set of conceptual tools that other anthropologists, not just those in Alaska, should find illuminating and stimulating.

The book consists of six chapters and includes a guide to the Tlingit language at the front, a preface, and a somewhat dangling appendix listing living resources used by Tlingit and their seasonality of use. In the preface, Thornton describes his fieldwork in various Tlingit village communities initially while working as a researcher for the Subsistence Division of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and then subsequently through numerous grants that enabled him to elicit and compile place-names for virtually all of the Tlingit kwaans (regional groupings) from an impressive group of Tlingit-speaking elders, many of whom are now deceased. I was a co-participant in one of the projects directing place-name collection among the Hinyaa Tlingit. Thornton does not inform us about the actual amount of time spent during fieldwork nor does he tell us that an early phase of the research provided the data for his doctoral thesis at the University of Washington, which puzzlingly is not cited in the bibliography. Having

worked with Thornton on place-names for many years, I am aware that he has accessed and obtained numerous additional Tlingit place-names from a variety of published (such as de Laguna's volumes on the Yakutat Tlingit) as well as unpublished (Thomas Waterman's manuscripts) sources and developed a database incorporating both the elicited and the manuscript-based place-names, but this database is neither identified nor discussed as an analytical tool used in developing the materials presented in this book.

Theoretical perspectives are laid out in chapter 1, where Thornton positions his understanding of a "sense of place" as both a powerful universal dimension of human experience and an existential location of wide-ranging cultural construction involving language, image, and power, among other things. He holds the view that the experience and understanding of culturally constructed place can only be accomplished through the intersection of being on-site with a substantial degree of awareness of the cultural system. I am in full agreement with this claim. Thornton lays out four "cultural structures of emplacement," which he regards as central to the Tlingit fusion of place and being. These are social organization, language and cognitive structure, material production, and ritual processes. The next four chapters explore each of these in turn. In the elaboration of these conceptual sites, Thornton frequently references Tlingit narratives collected in the 1940s by Walter Goldschmidt, a volume Thornton edited for its publication as *Haa Aanyí, Our Land* (1998), and Tlingit

oratorical performances presented in volumes edited by Nora and Richard Dauenhauer. Chapter 2 elaborates on the practices through which Tlingit bring their social organization (matrilineal descent, *kwaan*, moiety, clan, and house principles) into contact with geographic locations by providing names that, among other things, illustrate critical events of the past that are viewed as creating the relationship of the people to the place. Here, as in chapter 4, Thornton draws heavily on his long-term, deep relationship with Herman Kitka to demonstrate how understanding of place and past ancestral activities in places inform and dictate Kitka's sense of self. Thornton might have included discussion of petroglyphs (Fig. 1) as Tlingit markers of emplacement, but this is an example of regional differences not addressed in the book; Thornton is not nearly as conversant with southern Tlingit cultural practice (where there are far more petroglyphs) as his research has primarily been with northern Tlingit. In chapter 3, Thornton elucidates the linguistic and cognitive foundations of Tlingit place-naming principles in answer to the query "What's in a name?" He provides a case study of Tlingit place-names embedded in a version of the Salmon Boy story/myth told in Sitka that illuminates ancestral ecological conditions and provides detail useful for travel, resource timing, and locational contexts. Intriguingly, the story takes place from the vantage point of a salmon and thus demonstrates an important principle of Tlingit relationality—how to see from the perspective of another. In this chapter, the syntactic structure of Tlingit language, which produces an active rather than passive orientation, is presented as are the Tlingit words (for example, *heen* = stream, river) that provide the basic building blocks of Tlingit place descriptions and names. Thornton shows how Tlingit provides a fine-grained terminology for locating phenomena in relation to the observer. Material production as a "structure of emplacement" is elaborated in chapter 4. The seasonal round of activities of "subsistence" production occurs in "locales" where "projects" of "procurement" take place and thus create the impetus for landscape-making through experiences and naming. Thornton lays out and discusses the way traditional (ecological) knowledge, embedded in the names and traditions, when linked to the relational and spiritual dimensions of Tlingit resource acquisition, makes for responsible, sustainable resource continuity. The exquisite Tlingit ceremonial, the memorial potlatch (*koo'ex*), serves as the focus of chapter 5, where ritual as a site of emplacement is explored. Thornton provides excellent examples of how potlatch oratory grounds Tlingit

existence in place and links generations. He also shows how Tlingit potlatch speakers utilize powerful emotional themes, linguistic forms and demonstrations of deep personal affect to fuse these elements and use them as an agent of collective bonding. In the conclusion, Thornton eloquently lays out how a philosophy of place and being that emphasizes connections and care-taking promotes "biocultural health," and persuasively argues that such enormously valuable but endangered systems need to be cherished, celebrated, and emulated.

Throughout the volume, Thornton deftly weaves in accounts of how Tlingit practices associated with place were continually challenged and eroded by white immigrants and government officials and how various Tlingit resisted and found means to sustain their cultural system, albeit somewhat altered, in the face of this onslaught. He also explores how technological adoptions, economic changes, and governmental policies have also altered and eroded the manner in which Tlingit are able to experience place. Despite these significant changes, Thornton contends that Tlingit "emplacement structures" "persist and adapt...as axes of identity, community, and place-building" providing "wellsprings of being" (p. 196).

The ethnographic approach taken by Thornton provides an insightful foundation for encountering Tlingit cultural practice, but it is important to recognize the limitations of that approach as well. It does not provide a systemic gazetteer à la Robert Galois' (1994) impressive study of Kwakwaka'wakw settlements in British Columbia, nor is it a single-source-based comprehensive approach to a region like Shem Pete's Alaska (Kari and Fall 2003). Unfortunately, Thornton's approach sometimes gets bogged down in what might be termed a panethnic presentist perspective (he refers to it as an "idealized temporal composite") that does not pose or even countenance variability along the well-recognized linguistic (dialectical), regional (*kwaan* division), or social (clan and house groups) divisions that characterize Tlingit life. Nor does he explore how that variability may in fact be the basis for contested claims in Tlingit existence, a reality that continues to surface in certain Tlingit groups. Another vantage point missing from the panethnic presentist perspective is a temporal one in which place-name characteristics such as distribution and construction might be used to approach significant questions about Tlingit longevity on the coast, patterns of movement identified in clan oral traditions, and other topics related to change through time. However, it should be noted that Huna Tlingit place-

names in Glacier Bay (Seeti Geeyi) are used in the book to demonstrate the processual (becoming rather than existing) aspects inherent in Tlingit place-naming, which in turn can be used to implicate temporality as it relates to periods in the past when processes revealed by the place-name could be observed. Also missing is attention to the impacts of the historical period on place-naming, although, as noted above, Thornton describes the forces that have increasingly separated Tlingit from the places and language that traditionally fused to provide their template of being. Since the late 1700s, the Tlingit have been in contact with and interacted with various Westerners, but Thornton does not examine how those contacts might have affected places named and place-naming practices. Finally, although Tlingit groups interacted extensively with their neighbors, such as the Eyak, Haida, Nishga, and Coast Tsimshian among others, Thornton does not examine the possibility that some Tlingit names may have entered the language as loan words resulting from contact with these groups. Particularly significant in this regard is Jeff Leer's observations about the apparent Eyak linguistic foundation for a number of Tlingit place-names in northern southeast Alaska.

It is interesting that while it is commonly assumed (and Thornton leans in this direction as well) that Western (European and American) visitors typically engaged in place-naming colonialism by ignoring or rejecting indigenous place-names, such practices were far more characteristic of the early explorers and traders due to their minimal contact with and lack of linguistic comprehension of the Tlingit than they were of at least certain American colonizers who came later. John Muir, perhaps surprisingly, eschewed his own elaborate place-naming schemas for locations he visited in order that subsequent mapping expeditions would identify and utilize local Tlingit names. Some of the later map and chart makers of the Coast Survey acted upon similar sentiments as can be seen in the vicinity of Tuxecan Island (along the west coast of Prince of Wales Island) where virtually all the cartographic names are Anglicizations of Tlingit terms elicited from Tlingit experts, perhaps those hired to guide the Americans through these waters. In this area of the Prince of Wales Archipelago, it appears that the Coast Surveyors memorialized one such assistant by naming a prominent peak in the vicinity of Mount Kogish after him. This name is a relatively discernible Anglicization of Kaukeesh (now Kookesh), a prominent Raven "chief" in the area at the time as noted in Orth's *Dictionary of Alaska Place Names* (1971).

A final ironic note on the failure of the volume to address how place-names and place-naming practices were altered by contact with Europeans and Americans is the cover of the book. I am quite familiar with the image, as it has been a powerful iconic statement for generations of Tlingit fishermen from the village of Hoonah linking them to their territorial fishing grounds in the Inian Islands of Icy Strait. The drawn image is of a rock formation that is called the "Indian Head" by the aforementioned fishermen. In that sense the rock formation and its name are emblematic of the processes that Thornton carefully and elaborately details. However, the physical features of the head profile appear to correspond more to the classical aquiline form of the Plains Indian (the American Indian in the eyes of nonindigenous Americans) than they do to the more flat-nosed profile characteristic of the Tlingit. The ironies here are that there is no Tlingit term for this rock (it has only an English name) and that the rock was likely recognized for its form and given this name by American fishermen (perhaps of Slavic descent) in the early part of the twentieth century, when salmon fishing in the Inian Islands began. The Tlingit in turn not only adopted the visual perspective and the term but wedded it in quasi-traditional fashion to their being. We can certainly hope that there will be future publications in which Thornton will follow up on this truly special volume to provide us with additional analyses drawing on the extensive database he has developed and his excellent interpretive skills to illuminate more of the complexity of place and being in Tlingit life.



Figure 1. Noyes Island petroglyph

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