

**RICH FOODS AND REAL PEOPLE
A PROBLEM WITH TSIMSHIAN FOOD CATEGORIES IN BOAS'
TSIMSHIAN MYTHOLOGY**

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For the traditional Tsimshian, all foods were considered gifts from other worlds of sentient beings, and were treated with respect. A large number of the early texts recorded from Tsimshian people include references to the evil consequences of not respecting food and food animals. Foods were, however, according to Boas, apparently categorized as either 'rich or poor'. Boas (1916) mentions in his description of Tsimshian categories that

Very commonly an enumeration occurs of what is called rich food. For instance, whale, sea lion, seal, halibut, and other kinds of fish (184); fresh spring salmon, berries, mountain-goat meat and fat, and grizzly-bear fat (182); meat and tallow of all kinds of animals (244); dried salmon and berries mixed with grease, elderberries, currents; and others of similar kind. Hemlock sap (193) and salmon backs (N 189) were considered poor food. (406)

In this paper I will present evidence that Boas came to the conclusion that there were 'poor' foods with insufficient evidence; there are two apparent types of error. In one case he confused two categories of the same food item that were conceptually distinct when harvested in different seasons. In the second case he simply categorized a food as 'poor' on the basis of a text that is too vague or ambiguous to support his conclusion. After I have presented the evidence of mis-classification I will suggest alternative categories which fit the evidence and resonate with other aspects of Tsimshian culture.

The numbers in the texts quoted here refer to pages in the sets of texts from which data was extracted by Boas; in this case the plain numbers are Coast Tsimshian texts from *Tsimshian Mythology*, (Boas 1916) while those marked N before the number are from the *Tsimshian Texts* (Boas 1902) collected on the Nass River.

As I suggested above, it is necessary to correct Boas' list of 'rich and poor foods' in at least one respect; he refers to page 193 in indicating that 'hemlock sap' was a 'poor' food. That text is "the Story of the Prince Who Was Taken Away by the Spring Salmon"; I have added emphases in the relevant sections for the discussion here:

Toward the end of winter the people had spent all their provisions. There was a famine, and the people were in want of food. At that time a famine was among the people almost every winter. (192)

One day his parents went up into the woods to get the bark of trees, which the people used to eat in those days in winter. Late in the evening his parents came home, bringing much fresh bark which they had gathered. (193)

Boas had apparently confused the fresh bark collected as a survival food during winter famine with the 'hemlock sap' gathered in large quantities during the spring, which was a great delicacy. It involved intensive labour in harvesting, and was served with other prestigious foods at great feasts.

The other 'poor' food Boas mentioned as evidence is salmon backs; the reference is to a Nass River story called "She-Who-Has-A-Labret-On-One-Side" (Boas 1902). Boas' interpretation is not unambiguously supported by the details of the text, which recounts the story of a little slave girl who was seen by one of the friends of the son of a chief

coming down the street. She entered the last house of the town. There she sat down near the fire. Then the wife of the owner rose, took the back of a salmon, and gave it to the little slave girl, but she did not accept it. The little slave girl rose and left the house. She entered another house, and again sat down near the fire. The wife of the owner rose and gave her the backs of salmon to eat, but she did not accept them. She left the house. She did so in every house.

The friend of the chief's son who had gone out re-entered and said to the prince, 'A little slave girl is coming along the street.' Then his friends spoke: "Why don't you marry her when she comes in here?" When she came near the chief's house, they took a mat and spread it in the rear of the house. The prince sat down on it. (188ff)

The little slave girl turns out to be She-Who-Has-A-Labret-On-One-Side, the daughter of Evening Sky, a supernatural being. The son of the chief does marry her, and the girl's mother gives her daughter's husband much wealth, and he becomes a very great chief.

Since in the text as recorded, the girl did not accept offers of any other food either, it is not entirely clear that salmon backs were 'poor' food. She seems to have been looking for a husband rather than a meal. This is the only reference cited by Boas to support the categorization, and it should probably be treated as questionable, though it certainly raises the interesting question of just exactly why the food in the story was salmon backs rather than another item, or several items.

Boas is usually referred to as a descriptive, rather than an interpretive, ethnographer; every description is, however, also an interpretation. We simply don't usually notice the 'interpreter' unless the material comes into factual question. The necessity for re-interpretations of Boas' descriptions does not diminish the incredible contributions made by Boas and his two Tsimshian collaborators, Tate and Beynon; the most problematic aspect of the material is the potential for incorrect generalizations and confusion of categories apparent in such instances as the 'salmon back' and 'hemlock sap' examples mentioned here.

Boas' fieldwork among the Tsimshian was relatively brief, and it is apparent that some of the interpretations he drew from the texts would have required further substantiation. He drew on the massive collections of texts received from Tate for evidence as well, of course, but his interpretations of the texts may occasionally have been 'closed' prematurely.

The extensive collection of complete texts does allow for further investigation of issues that are noticed to be contradictory or improbable.

I have not located any further information on the prestige of salmon backs as food. I would like to suggest, however, that perhaps the two categories 'rich' and 'poor' foods might be replaced by the categories 'real foods', 'other foods' and 'inedibles'. These are parallel to the categories by which people were classified. The Chiefly people or *Sm'gigyeyet* were literally real people, while the 'commoners' or *'liki'gyigyeyet* were literally 'other people'. There were two other categories of people as well, the *wah'ayin* (unhealed people; people whose scabs don't heal; people without origin) and slaves. Halpin (1973) provides further discussion of the classification of humans.

The 'real foods' seem to have been primarily of two types: those animals that were mobile, the successful hunting of which required 'luck'; and fresh fish, berries and other products that were only available in the spring and summer seasons. The 'ordinary foods' seem to have been the foods that were either always obtainable, partly because they didn't move (mussels), or were regularly available in some types of preserved forms (dried clams). The frequent references to the use of 'dirty things' in witchcraft suggests that the human category of *wah'ayin* may have been the parallel of 'inedibles' in the domain of foods (or 'un-foods', in this case). If slaves were involved in this set of categories, it was as objects, not food. Other authors have suggested a parallelism between slaves and coppers, because of the manner in which both were given away at feasts.

Allaire (1984) has analyzed a text recorded by Boas in which there were enumerations of classes of containers and classes of foods, which were paired in prestations at a feast. "Indeed, Tsimshian oral traditions are explicit about the fact that a food without a proper container is ideologically no better than an empty container (Boas 1916:67, 292)." This suggests that the type of container in which a food was stored and/or served might provide additional information on classifications of food. Further analysis is required to clarify the details on the consistency of the conjunctions of foods and containers in serving foods, but there were differences in the types of storage of preserved foods, and these seem to accord with the categories proposed. The preserved foods that were among the 'real foods', such as grease, crabapples or berries in grease, and fat, were kept in closed kerfed boxes, and were available only with the permission of the woman who owned them (Boas 1916:193). The preserved foods that were 'ordinary foods' were generally hung from the rafters of the houses, or were stored in baskets, and were available without restriction. Boas mentions (1916:395) that

In the houses were kept stores of winter provisions, such as salmon (78, 86) and halibut (87). These were preserved in boxes, and the most valuable provisions were kept in smaller boxes that were placed in the larger boxes (193). Slaves (N 182) and poor people (1.167) lived in the corners of the chief's house.

The placement of guests at a feast was one of the most important indicators of rank. Food also had different 'places' in the house.

The fireplace was in the center of the house, just under the smoke

hole. In the daytime the people lived on the floor of the house. The seat of the house owner was in the rear of the fire. Guests used to sit by the side of the fire. The beds were arranged on a platform that ran all around the walls. Provisions were also kept partly on this platform, partly on shelves, which were suspended from the beams and rafters. (1916:48)

My suggestion concerning altering Boas' classifications is intended to be quite speculative, and it is, of course, impossible to see whether there was a direction of influence, or what it may have been (whether foods were seen as like people or people like foods). But if we are to obtain a fuller understanding of the significance of particular foods mentioned in texts, it will be necessary to make a careful exegesis of such categories as Boas' 'rich and poor foods', constantly refining the nuances of terms used for translation.

The paper by Allaire, which I mentioned above, is a broad delineation of some relevant categories, based on the structured association of particular foods and containers as contributions from specific villages, which were paired as gifts at a feast for supernatural beings recorded in a text. His earlier drafts of this work suggested correlations with rank, but thorough treatment of this aspect of his excellent discussion was stymied by a lack of clarity in Boas' data, including the confusion about the 'hemlock sap' mentioned above.

I'd like to mention one rather unusual story in the collection of Coast Tsimshian stories which Boas included in his data, "The Chief Who Married the Robin and the Sawbill Duck" (ibid:179ff). Boas mentions that it "resembles in style the Kwakiutl stories" (note, 179). It includes a rare reference in the corpus to a Tsimshian man marrying supernatural animals. There are numerous stories of such marriages by Tsimshian women, because for the matrilineal Tsimshian, the children of a marriage were members of the mother's group, so that the supernatural potency acquired through the women's marriage remained with the Tsimshian, and the acquisition was remembered in a story. This unusual story is of special interest here because it mentions another type of food which was 'poor'.

The story tells of a chief who had married two women at the same time; one was the daughter of the Robin chief, the other was the Sawbill-Duck Woman. During the winter the daughter of the Robin chief returned to her father to bring back food to the Chief, whose people had used up their provisions. She brought back much fresh summer food, and her husband was happy and gave feasts for all the Tsimshian people. When the Robin woman returned with so much food, the Sawbill-Duck Woman went to her father to ask for food; he sent her much rich food, including "all kinds of meat and fish and animals" (185). On her way back she saw a large pile of mussels hanging on a rock, which she took and placed by her side. When the attendants of the chief reported that she was coming back with many mussels he became angry and told them to capsize her canoes.

Boas mentions this (1916:436) "Certain kinds of food are considered unfit for chiefs. Mussels are mentioned as cheap food (185)". One of the things said now about mussels is that they were originally used as food only by slaves. Since Boas suggests an affinity of this story to Kwakiutl types, it is interesting to point out that the trade in slaves on the Northwest Coast

moved from the south to the north. It should also be remembered here though that one of the words for slave among Tsimshian people was related to one word for 'Tlingit' as well.

One theme that is implicit in the materials here is the 'lucky woman'; hunting success often came to the sons of women who married supernatural beings. This is related to the complex of ideas about hunting luck, which includes the notion that the wife of a fisherman could spoil his luck by 'fooling around' during his absence. In the same vein, a man who had completed the ritual fasting and purification could obtain extra luck in his fishing by 'going to' a lucky woman; the wife of a successful fisherman may be seen as a 'lucky woman'. In my fieldwork I have found that both of these ideas are remembered in Hartley Bay now.

During the exploration and trade periods a number of items were rapidly added to the Tsimshian food system, and many of these initially scarce foods were prestigious. Gunther (1972:179) cites Lisiansky, who reported the following adoptions among the Tlingit, the northern neighbors of the Tsimshian in 1814:

Foods like rice, molasses, wheat flour, and tea were secured from traders and incorporated into their diet as their money or tradable goods would afford. Not only the kinds of food but also their cooking methods and utensils changed. Meat and fish were at first roasted on sticks around the open fire, but after trading began these were boiled in iron, copper or tin kettles. Wealthy people had European stoneware dishes and basins, but the poor continued to use bowls or boxes of wood they made themselves and served and ate with ladles and spoons of mountain sheep or mountain goat horn.

It should be noted here that fish and meat were traditionally cooked by a number of methods, including dropping heated stones into food in watertight kerfed boxes or spruce root baskets in addition to the method mentioned in this particular passage by Lisiansky.

This seems to be a continuation of patterns during aboriginal times, when the Tsimshian had shown partiality to scarce foods, foods obtained by trade with other groups, and foods requiring substantial labour for preservation. At the present time 'whiteman' food is obtained easily for earned income, while native foods are generally only available to those who have harvested, processed and preserved them, or who have equally scarce foods to trade for them. For instance the trade of coastal produce such as grease for interior produce such as soapberries is maintained by some individuals. The difficulty in obtaining them has led to an increase in the value attached to traditional foods. There have, of course, been a number of changes in the methods used to harvest, process and preserve local foods during the past two hundred years; some details of present methods used in Hartley Bay are included in Seguin 1984c.

Boas also distinguishes food from wealth, which seems accurate, but in his discussion he may overvalue hunting as a direct route to wealth:

While the possession of what is called rich food was essential for maintaining the dignity of the family, the provisions themselves were not counted as constituting wealth. Wealth is obtained by selling

provisions for other kinds of goods, which, after they have been accumulated, are distributed in the potlatch. It seems that the ordinary road to wealth was through success in sea hunting or in land hunting. In a great many cases we are told that the successful hunter who has accumulated a great deal of food sells it for property. Elk skins are most commonly mentioned among valuable objects. Following is a list of objects offered in exchange for food. (435)

The references Boas cites in his list of goods exchanged for food are derived from a type of 'Horatio Alger' story about the successes of orphans, youngest sons, and children of abandoned wives. He neglects to mention that these, with many other Tsimshian stories, usually involve incidents of the marriage of Tsimshian women to 'animals, foreigners and supernatural beings' (Dunn 1984; Seguin 1984b) as a source of supernatural potency. The women may receive wealth directly from their supernatural husbands, or the husband may make gifts to their son, who then acquires wealth by hunting. These may be seen as much as instances of the 'lucky woman' motif as they are of the likelihood of hunting as a direct path to wealth; success in hunting did, of course, depend on 'luck', but 'luck' was perceived by the Tsimshian to be an indicator of ritual cleanness and supernatural potency. The emphasis on hunting may have been as much to show the quality of the heroes of these stories as it was a comment on economic realities.

This paper has been a brief and straight-forward discussion of several minor problems in re-interpretations of Boas' descriptive ethnography. In addition to clarifying several specific issues, I hope that it demonstrates that interpretation of Tsimshian culture is not a new ethnographic activity, and that our interpretations can still legitimately be kept open to data grounded in Tsimshian categories.

Notes:

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