

TSIMSYAN

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

by

WILSON DUFF
(1958-1959)

from materials
collected at firsthand

by

MARIUS BARBEAU

and

WILLIAM BEYNON
(1915-1957)

for

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF CANADA

Statement of Project

The files of the National Museum of Canada contain voluminous field notes on the Tsimshian and other North Pacific Coast tribes, assembled over many years by Dr. Marius Barbeau, and considered by him to be his chief contribution to research in Canada. Much of this information could no longer be obtained in the field. Nobody else has become conversant with this body of material, and some of it is written in a private shorthand which Dr. Barbeau alone can read. The first part of my plan, therefore, is to work at the National Museum under the guidance of Dr. Barbeau, becoming familiar with the contents of these files and transcribing the field notes where necessary.

Some of Dr. Barbeau's published interpretations of these materials, involving for example the recency of certain aspects of Indian art and social organization, and the evidence for recent migrations from Siberia, have not met with complete acceptance. It is therefore desirable that another active scholar become conversant with Dr. Barbeau's basic data, in order to support or re-evaluate his interpretations. A second part of my plan is to make such a critical evaluation of his previous publications.

Further field research among the Tsimshian without the benefit of this vast body of information, by myself or anyone else, would be a senseless duplication of effort. It is therefore important that the basic data, and studies based upon them, be published as soon as possible. The final part of my plan of research is therefore to work in collaboration with Dr. Barbeau preparing manuscripts for publication. These will deal with Tsimshian social structure and traditional history (subjects central to my field of interest) and with other subjects which may be fully treated in the files. My own ultimate aim will be to relate these studies to problems of the nature and development of the unique culture of the Northwest Coast, and of recent diffusions of culture from Asia.

The number of publications resulting from the project will be limited by the time allotted to it, which is one year. In view of Dr. Barbeau's advanced age, it should be started as soon as possible. I suggest July 15, 1958. Facilities for publication exist both at the National Museum and at the Provincial Museum of British Columbia, and still other publication outlets may be used. The project already has the approval of Dr. Barbeau and of the Director of the Canadian Museum of Human History (National Museum of Canada).

It is my intention in future to continue research in the field of Northwest Coast ethnology and prehistory to as great an extent as my work in the Provincial Museum of British Columbia will allow. An added value of the project would be that the association with the National Museum would improve my qualifications as a museum curator.

6 copies

Progress Report

on

"Tsimshyan Social Organization"

November 15, 1958

Wilson Duff

I have now completed four months work on the Tsimshyan data assembled between 1915 and 1957 by Dr. Barbeau. I have found the material exceedingly voluminous, detailed, and rich. Mainly, it is of two kinds: first, Dr. Barbeau's original field notes on social organization collected during several field seasons since 1915, and second, a large number of narratives collected mainly by Dr. Barbeau's field assistant William Beynon between 1915 and 1957. Altogether, it represents what in many respects is the most complete body of information on the social organization of any Indian nation. One main accomplishment of my first four months has been to become familiar with this vast body of information.

My purpose is to compile and arrange the data on social organization for publication. So far I have dealt with ten of the almost 30 ^{Tsimshyan} Tsimshian tribes; namely, the nine tribes of "Tsimshyan proper" of Fort Simpson, and the Gitrhahla tribe of Porcher Island. For each tribe I have established filing folders for the following topics: 1) Houses (the kinship units); 2) Personal Names; 3) Crests; 4) Territories; and 5) Traditions of Origin.

- 1- Houses: The "houses" or lineages are the basic kinship units, and each tribe consists of from 12 to 45 "houses" arranged in order of rank. The houses fall into four main divisions or "phratries", all of which are usually represented in each tribe. They also fall into two social classes, one of which is termed "royal". Tables have been constructed for the 10 tribes studied, which

are comprised of about 230 "houses".

- 2- Personal Names: Each house owns a set of hereditary names, which are considered as their exclusive property. The names belonging to each house have been listed, translated, and analysed. More than 2500 names are listed for the ten tribes. Abstracts have been made of traditions of the origins of names. The naming system in general exhibits many interesting features, and progress has been made in its analysis and description.
- 3- Crests: Each house also owns a number of crests, which it may display in a great variety of forms. The crests of the houses and their manner of use have been compiled for eight of the ten tribes. The historical relationships among the houses are revealed partly in similarities of their crests, and progress has been made on an analysis of crests to show the structure of the Tsimsyan nation.
- 4- Territories: Resource areas and habitation sites were owned by houses or by the tribe as a whole. A work map has been drawn to show all the villages and other important named places. In addition, separate maps and lists have been made for 6 of the 10 tribes, showing how the tribal territories were ^{divided} ~~divided~~ among the houses.
- 5- Traditions of Origin:

Each house owns traditions which explain its history, the origins of its names and crests, and its rights to territories. These stories reveal most clearly the interrelationships among houses and their groupings into larger units (clans). They also reveal clearly the historical growth of the tribes into

their present forms.

Most of these traditions will be (or have already been) published by Dr. Barbeau; therefore in my study I plan to use only brief abstracts where necessary. I have already prepared a number of such abstracts.

I have spent some time assisting Dr. Barbeau with the handling and arrangement of the four volumes of Tsimshyan narratives he is preparing for publication. These contain a vast fund of information, and in several instances where they have dealt directly with social organization I have made abstracts for use in my study.

In order to synthesize the materials on the structure, functioning and historical development of Tsimshyan society, I have established files for a large number of topics; for example, "the Eagle phratry", "the naming system", "potlatches", and so on. These will provide the framework for the general description of the social system.

To sum up, I have read and absorbed a large part of the material, I have almost completed the compilation of data for ten of the thirty tribes, and I have made progress on the general analysis of Tsimshyan society.