

xgedom halact

ʔsibasa' envies powdige  
of gunarnuk, tries to  
have his nephew initiated  
into the xgedom halact.  
at Kitimat.

Nephew dies

The narrative of a secret society initiation of gitxála

Informant: Mark Spencer ni's'ois, gispewudwada, gitxála

'tsibasá was the very powerful head chief of the gitxála and as one of the privileges obtained from his tribesmen he had proclaimed that all sea otter hunters owed him as tribute the first sea otter killed by each group of hunters. This was done.

'tsibas-a accompanied the hunters, but he stayed at the camp and took no active part in the hunt, but only remained there to claim his tribute.

'tsibasá had proclaimed this privilege at a special feast, and his claim went unchallenged. In return 'tsibása always gave food and feasts to his tribesmen.

But this great chief was not satisfied with this privilege: he envied a privilege belonging to a fellow chief, gunaxnú'tk, whose people (house) was established among the gitxála people before 'tsibása's people came from temlax'am.

gunaxnú'tk's special tribute was the first seal killed by each group of hunters. This was a more important privilege than that of 'tsibása, because it assured a steady supply of food and provided the hides for wearing apparel and moccasins.

'tsibása coveted this privilege for his nephew ni'sxísf's, who was <sup>to be</sup> his successor. He also desired to initiate his nephew into the xgédem (cannibal society) haláit to which only gunaxnú'tk was privileged to belong among the gitxálas, because his house had come before 'tsibása's group.

There was much counselling among the great haláits as they claimed that although 'tsibása was a powerful man and it was his haláit



power which opened the haláit season, neither he nor his nephew and successor, ni·sxtí's, could become members of the xgédem haláit.

This angered tsibása, and he planned to initiate his nephew in any case. When the haláit season had been declared open by tsibása and ni·sxtí's the nephew became affected by haláit powers and was taken into the heavens. It had not yet been revealed to the people which group he would be initiated into.

Messengers came from git'amét at this time to invite gunaxnú·tk and his attendants to a great haláit performance of the xgédem haláit. They were the only ones invited from gitxála. As soon as tsibása knew of this he at once desired that his nephew should make his return to earth at git'amét in front of the members of the xgédem haláit.

gunaxnú·tk and his attendants <sup>made plans to leave</sup> ~~left~~ for git'amét, a two day journey by canoe. Soon after, tsibása sent for lutkútsémti, his headman, and said: "ni·sxtísis shall make his appearance in front of the great haláits at git'amét, and thus he will be a member of the xgédem haláit."

tsibása called in his other lakagigét to ask their advice. kulahahúel (kula-- continually; hahubel--night) and another headman named txa'alótk were told of his plans. tsibása warned the men: "We must never make this plan known to anyone or it would be the means of our death. Tomorrow while it is yet dark we will set out with ni·sxtí's for git'amét. We must arrive even before gunaxnútk arrives."

After a long while the headman lutkútsémti spoke: "As it is your wish, chief, we will do this thing. Today we will take our strongest young men and pretend to go hunting for seals.



In reality we will go to the mountain wel<sup>1</sup>?u?ya<sup>1</sup>ox to get nisx<sup>1</sup>tsi's and set out at once for git<sup>1</sup>?am<sup>1</sup>t. We must arrive there before daylight in order to make our plans for the re-appearance of your nephew. There will be no suspicions about his whereabouts, for everyone knows he is yet in the heavens. Should it ever become known that nisx<sup>1</sup>tsi's has broken the laws of the hal<sup>1</sup>ait by coming into contact with us, (for we are not hal<sup>1</sup>ait attendants and contact with such as we is not allowed during the period of the initiate's withdrawal to the heavens) death will be the punishment for all. We must do this secretly. We must call in our own hal<sup>1</sup>ait to have charge of everything and no knowledge of this must go to other people."

'tsib<sup>1</sup>asa called his hal<sup>1</sup>ait and said: "gunaxn<sup>1</sup>.tk is leaving for the wuta-hal<sup>1</sup>ait performances at git<sup>1</sup>?am<sup>1</sup>t tomorrow. I wish nisx<sup>1</sup>tsi's to reach there ahead of him, in your charge. This must be done in the greatest secrecy. Tonight you shall go with my lakagig<sup>1</sup>t and some picked men to take my nephew from the secret cave and hide him in the canoe. We shall then leave at once for git<sup>1</sup>?am<sup>1</sup>t."

Next 'tsib<sup>1</sup>asa sent word to another hal<sup>1</sup>ait who was closer to him than to gunaxn<sup>1</sup>.tk, although the hal<sup>1</sup>ait was to accompany the latter to git<sup>1</sup>?am<sup>1</sup>t and said: "Well, brother, I wish to tell you of this thing, which only you shall know. You will make the preparations at git<sup>1</sup>?am<sup>1</sup>t for ni<sup>1</sup>.sx<sup>1</sup>tsi's reappearance from the heavens. We shall arrive early in the morning and you shall lead

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1. wel-- where; lu--in; ?ya<sup>1</sup>ox-- hidden. "the mountain where hidden". There was a large cavern in this nearby mountain back of the gitx<sup>1</sup>ala village where all hal<sup>1</sup>ait initiates were kept hidden when they were supposedly on their journey to the heavens. It was here that ni<sup>1</sup>.sx<sup>1</sup>tsi's lay hidden.



my nephew in when he appears. Do not speak of this to anyone, but listen for the naxn'x whistles so you will know when ni'sxtsif's is about to appear. I shall send a messenger to meet you to make the final arrangements so there will be no mistakes."

The name of this haláit was mi'ns.

After noon that day the men tsibása had selected got into their canoes, making it known in the village that they were going to hunt seals. They travelled into a very narrow hidden channel and landed at the foot of the hidden cavern where ni'sxtsif's was waiting with his haláit attendant. The initiate was wrapped about with bear robes to hide him from view and taken to the canoe by his attendant, and the group set out for git'amst.

~~They reached the village full day ahead~~

tsibása could travel only at night for fear of being seen, because if it became known that he had broken the tabu on contacting a haláit initiate while the initiation was yet in progress his punishment would be death.

(Beynon's note: I once visited a reserve on Kuper Island, a few miles from Nanaimo on Vancouver Island, where I was scheduled to hold a meeting. A dancer was being initiated, and it seemed to be the equivalent of the ?nuim among the tsemseyan. When I entered the dancer was led out into the woods, and I was given to understand that I must leave together with those who accompanied me as soon as the initiate returned to the hall.)

The initiate ni'sxtsif's was kept from contact with the others in the canoe, and when they landed at dawn his attendant took him up into the woods, apart from the rest. The canoes were drawn up and hidden



and the group rested throughout the day. As soon as night fell the initiate was taken to the canoe and they again set out. The initiate made strange sounds whenever the paddlers relaxed in their work, which put great fear into them and they paddled more strenuously. In this way great speed was made, and they landed when all were asleep at git'amét. 'tsibása, one of his headmen and ni·xstísia got out. The initiate and his attendant went into the woods back of the village to await whatever arrangements had been made.

It so happened that 'míns, the haláit, had forgotten about the arrangements 'tsibása had demanded he make, and nothing had been done.

When the initiate had been hidden the lekagigét 'txa'alótk, who could converse in the git'amét tongue went to the haláit house where all the gitxála who had accompanied gunaxnútk lay. The prearranged signal, three hoots like an owl, was given, but there was no answer from 'míns, who lay asleep with all the others.

'txa'alótk was not in any way connected with the xgédem haláit, so it was tabu for him to enter this house. He again gave the signal for 'míns, but it was not heard. Daybreak was near and the performance must be soon. The initiate was ready and the gitxála attendants began to blow the naxnóx whistles to announce the arrival of a haláit initiate.

Meanwhile 'míns became alarmed at his forgetfulness, and also 'txa'alótk had dared to enter the haláit house, without regard for the consequences, and rebuked 'míns: "Why have you neglected to do as you were told."

'míns replied: "I had forgotten all about it, and nothing is ready. You must all return to Kitkatla where ni·xstísia may be



initiated into the *Mnuim*. He cannot remain here and become a member of the *xgedem*. This will mean death to us all."

By this time the *naxnox* whistles were sounding all around the *halait* house, and very soon even on the top of the house. The *git'amst* were taken unaware and did not know what was happening.

As soon as it was known that their plans had miscarried the *gitxáia* fled to the hills without being seen. They set out to return home.

Now at *git'amst* began to wonder about the sounding of the *naxnox* whistles, for they had no initiate due to return from the heavens. There was considerable excitement among them. Then a *git'amst* man remembered a stranger speaking *git'amst* had asked him where *'mins* slept. The man had directed him, thinking that the man was a *git'amst* and a member of the *halait* house.

After much inquiry it was learned that this stranger was a *gitxáia* who had broken the tabu on non-members entering the *halait* house. The head *halait* was angry when he knew what had occurred, and said: "When *ni·xstis* lands at his *halait* house he will make just one circle around the house and then he will die, just as will the uninitiated man that entered the house here."

The *gitxáias* arrived at Kitkatla with *'tsibása* and the initiate was returned to the mountain cavern to hide until he should make his return from the heavens. The others landed at the village and continued their pretense of having been away hunting for seals.

*'tsibása* was angry at the miscarriage of his plans and laid the blame upon his tribesman *'mins*, whom he had trusted. They were in great fear, for they knew they were in danger of death if it was discovered that they had broken the taboo.

They had still to plan the initiate's return at Kitkatla, and since they did not know of the *git'amst* curse they proceeded



with their plans. (curse--lagadá·lx; wongly/speak).

Some days afterward, the naxnóx whistles were heard during the night in the woods back of tsibása's house, warning the village that next morning nisxtsis would return from his sky journey.

Before dawn next morning the people gathered at the beach and saw a huge grizzly of the sea swimming towards shore bearing the initiate on its back while the naxnóx whistles of the ?nuliim haláit sounded all around.

This being swam about a short while and then headed away from shore again. The naxnóx whistles sounded up in the woods and the people looked about to discover nisxtsis, whom they had just seen on the grizzly of the sea, standing in front of tsibása's haláit house. They looked back and saw that the grizzly was just sinking into the sea.

The initiate was very excited and angry, and was tied to a leash held by the haláit. After they paraded ni·sxtsis in front of the village he was led into tsibása's house, which was the haláit house of the village. Here he was expected to dance behind the haláit performer and make several circles around the house. But before nisxtsis had completed one circle he died, and as soon as the haláit touched the body he also died. Thus was the git'amst curse fulfilled and tsibása humiliated.

Being thus humiliated tsibása became a tyrant and was feared by all as he said: "I will avenge the disgraceful death of my nephew."

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1. medig.em dzao'i'áks

grizzly of in water.



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But this great chief was not satisfied with this privilege: he envied a privilege belonging to a fellow chief, gunaxnú'tk, whose people (house) was established among the gitxá'la people before tsibása's people came from temlax'am.

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tsibása coveted this privilege for his nephew ni'sxí'sí's, to be who was/his successor. He also desired to initiate his nephew into the xgédem (cannibal society) haláit to which only gunaxnú'tk was privileged to belong among the gitxá'las, because his house had come before tsibása's group.

There was much counselling among the great haláits as they claimed that although tsibása was a powerful man and it was his haláit



power which opened the haláit season, neither he nor his nephew and successor, ni·x̄t̄i·s, could become members of the xgédem haláit.

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Messengers came from git'amst at this time to invite gunaxnú·tk and his attendants to a great haláit performance of the xgédem haláit. They were the only ones invited from gitxála. As soon as tsibása knew of this he at once desired that his nephew should make his return to earth at git'amst in front of the members of the xgédem haláit.

gunaxnú·tk and his attendants <sup>made plans to leave</sup> left for git'amst, a two day journey by canoe. Soon after, tsibása sent for lutkutsémti, his headman, and said: "ni·x̄t̄i·s shall make his appearance in front of the great haláits at git'amst, and thus he will be a member of the xgédem haláit."

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After a long while the headman lutkutsémti spoke: "As it is your wish, chief, we will do this thing. Today we will take our strongest young men and pretend to go hunting for seals.



In reality we will go to the mountain <sup>1</sup>wel<sup>1</sup>u<sup>1</sup>yáox to get ni<sup>1</sup>sxtsi<sup>1</sup>'s and set out at once for git<sup>1</sup>'amst. We must arrive there before daylight in order to make our plans for the re-appearance of your nephew. There will be no suspicions about his whereabouts, for everyone knows he is yet in the heavens. Should it ever become known that ni<sup>1</sup>sxtsi<sup>1</sup>'s has broken the laws of the haláit by coming into contact with us, (for we are not haláit attendants and contact with such as we is not allowed during the period of the initiate's withdrawal to the heavens) death will be the punishment for all. We must do this secretly. We must call in our own haláit to have charge of everything and no knowledge of this must go to other people."

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