

Dupe

The origin of swfnsk haláit

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There were many types of haláit. Some were dancing haláits used in the reception of visiting chiefs specially invited to a feast, and these were called xpegá'wem haláit. This was used as a direct symbol of peace.

The visiting chiefs never landed directly at a village, but sojourned in the immediate vicinity in full view of the hosts until a messenger came for them. Then the visiting chiefs prepared for their reception. The visitors had their own songs and also claimed an imaginary supernatural power which threw from the canoes to their host on the shore. Those on shore pretended to catch this ^{subdued} power, overcame it after a hard struggle, and began to sing in their turn. They threw the naxnóx back to the visitors' canoe, who wrestled it into subjection and threw it back. This performance went on until the host threw it up into the woods.

Next the great haláit drum was beaten as a signal for the guests to land, and as they did so their names were announced and carried on into the house. The guests were led up and as each entered greeters announced each chiefly name and called each to his place.

When all the invited chiefs had been greeted and were in their places the host gave a reception dance, wearing his dancing garment (gushaláit) and his dancing hat (?amhaláit) the hollowed crown of which was full of eagle down (pelkwá) which he spread upon his guests as he danced.

The spreading of down denoted peace; and if it was not done the

for their loss. To protect his property, or if the owner is himself a member of any haláit group he can protect self and property by placing upon the objects a lu^oi or cedar bark ring that has been used in a haláit performance. The lu^oi is also used to safeguard everything when it is hung outside a house during the period of a haláit performance, for no one not a member of the haláits may enter the house until the lu^oi is taken down, even though they may be a member of that house.

There are many other haláits (which is the general term for dancing). There are the drama haláits at which the various powers or naxnóxs of each owner are demonstrated. At such haláits, all the guests having these powers came in dressed as the power or being they had the right to represent, and as their names were called they danced the dance or haláit of that power.

Such a naxnóx was ghost (lá^olx). The owner was costumed as a ghost with a mask representing death. This dancing was called haláit.

((It may be noted that whenever the people dance any of the modern white man's dances this is termed me^oos--like dog or influenced by dog. This term is applied because they dance in couples, whereas Indian dances are performed by an individual dancer. The modern dances have the appearance of two dogs wrestling.))

Another important haláit is the swénsk haláit, which is acquired from supernatural sources. Firstly this power is inherited, but the haláit in the making became ill and went into a trance. When he was revived to strength he would change his personality. While in this trance many visions came to instruct him as a swénsk haláit. These visions gave him his aides, which often took animal forms such as the

white mink, white marten, white owl or otter. His power was believed to come from these aides, and they told him what to do to effect a cure. His haláit song also came to him in visions.

The paraphernalia of a swénsk haláit was a bear skin robe, bear claw crown, a round rattle, and an amulet suspended around his neck which represented his animal aide. The amulet was used in curing by placing it upon the patient in the afflicted area.

It is said there were several places where some swénsk haláits acquired powers from the supernatural source. One of these was a deep cavern at the head of the gitg.á?ete river and another in the vicinity of Kitamat whose whereabouts was known to only a few swénsk haláits. The person who is to acquire swénsk haláit powers is led to these caverns and then lowered down into the caves which are in total darkness.

As he is slowly lowered strange insects cover his body and he is sometimes severely bitten, and there are also lizards in great numbers. Finally he reaches the bottom and follows a trail to the entrance of another cave. In this cave is a being who seizes the initiate and lays him upon a flat board. There the initiate goes into a trance and remains there until he has recovered and been given power and aides by this being.

When the initiates return all tributes are given to the swénsk haláit who led the initiate to this hole and led him back. Before he was able to practise his swénsk powers he was apprenticed for some time to an older haláit who has already established his reputation among the people. Then when the initiate feels he can take a very famous case he is called in and given an opportunity to establish himself. If he has superior aides, that are able to

overcome the aides of the other swénsk haláits he is in a powerful position, for it is said that both the haláits and their aides are rivals and fight among themselves.

An account of the making of a swénsk haláit

A man named senósk, who was a hunter, had been acting queerly for a long while. His uncle before him had been a haláit.

senósk was a very successful hunter and one day he set off from his camp alone, intending to be gone only a short while. When he had been gone a number of days his nephews set out to search for him, and followed his tracks until they found the place where he lay face down in the snow, apparently dead.

They carried him back to camp and he lay as one near death, unconscious and muttering in a strange tongue. They then carried him back to the village at gitg.á?ete, for the uncle saw that senósk was about to become a swénsk haláit. Here he lay ill for a long while, attended by many haláits who came day after day to dance over him in an attempt to restore him to his normal condition.

senósk had been born with a caul (pótk) and had always been considered an extraordinary person. After many months of illness he began to gather strength, and he was taken away and kept in seclusion.

(The informant remarked: " I remember I was a boy at the time that this occurred. Then some time after, senósk related to me what had occurred to him.")

As senósk was walking along the trail he met a huge white bear which immediately embraced him, and senósk fell as dead. He had met the spirit being which was to control him. He felt that he was being

engulfed in a huge river of foam which he could not escape, and then he became unconscious. Then visions came to him. A white owl came to sit by him and said: "You shall become a haláit and make many wonderful cures. You will have as your aides a white owl and a white grizzly bear, to come to your assistance and tell you how to cure the people who call upon you. There will be many coming from afar to see you, for you will be as great a haláit as your uncle, who was very famous."

When sen'sk was well again it became known that he was now a haláit.

The most famous ^{swénsk}/haláit among the tsemseyán was ni's'aínáts, of the gin'ax'engik, for he was not only a swénsk, but he was a seer who could foretell coming events with the help of his supernatural aides.

Once ni's'aínáts was sitting on the beach below his house at Metlakatla. He came up and announced: "Before the sun sets several canoes from the ñinkits will land here." That same night there did come several canoes of ñinkits. This man was also skilled in magic.

His great competitor was wideldál, the famous gitsel'ase, haláit.

One winter the Skeena was frozen and impassable, and ni's'aínáts was sitting by his fire at Metlakatla (on the coast) thinking of his friend wideldál at gitsel'ase (canyon) on the Skeena. Speaking aloud, he said: "I wish that my brother wideldál would send me down some temf't." (This was a cluster berry that only grew in early summer on the interior plateaus, and was preserved in oolichan oil for future consumption.) Soon

after he expressed this wish a huge quantity of fresh temf't began to come down through the smoke hole. This ni's'aináts served to everyone in the house. It was almost unbelievable.

Then wideldál, the great gitseláse haláit sat before his fire and expressed the wish: "Oh, I wish my brother ni's'aináts on the coast would remember me and send me some cockles."

This was in midwinter when the river was frozen over and impassable and moreover it was the tabu season when no one travelled or hunted. Yet while wideldál was sitting at the canyon (Skeena) village a great quantity of fresh cockles came through the smoke hole of his house. This was served to the people, and thus the haláits demonstrated to all their supernatural powers.

Another great swánsk haláit was tsák, of the gitwelgiyóts tribe of the tsamsiyán. He was an orphan cared for by his maternal grandmother, but he had an uncle who was very powerful and wealthy. tsák was a very bright young man and he took good care of his old grandmother.

This was the time of a great famine and food was very scarce among the people. tsák came upon a grizzly bear that had raided his grandmother's small store of food and in anger began to taunt the grizzly. It became angry and gobbled tsák in one gulp. But in the grizzly's stomach tsák took out his fire drills and made a fire in the beast's stomach which killed it. Thereupon he took the huge carcass and with his grandmother's help cut up the meat and dried it. He kept this store of food secret.

Suddenly a strange being came to tsák and said: "I am hungry, can you give me food?" tsák took him to the little shelter he had made

and told his garndmother: "Give my friend some food, for he is hungry."

When the being had finished eating he turned to tsák and said: Now that you have given me food I will repay your kindness. I will give you this pebble which will be your power. You will make a great swínsk haláit. When you wish to cause anyone to be ill, just place this pebble on any portion of your own body, and it will cause pain or illness in that same portion of your victim's body."

tsák tried this on various people and when they fell ill he sent his grandmother to tell them that her grandson tsák could cure them. In this way he soon became widely known.

Now that he had become famous as a haláit tsák wished to marry his cross-cousin, the daughter of his uncle. This uncle was very haughty and wealthy, and his daughter was very beautiful.

He told his grandmother: "You must go and ask my uncle, for I wish to marry his daughter." The old woman knew it would be useless to go, but on tsák's insistence she went. Her brother refused.

So tsák went past the girl's house and touched his magic pebble to his back while wishing: "May many pains come to your back."

His uncle's daughter at once became ill and none of the haláits called to attend her could cure her. His sister, the grandmother of tsák, then called on the girl's father and told him: "I am sure that tsák can cure your duaghter." The father then sent gifts to the young haláit but he would not bother to come. Finally, since his daughter seemed to be dying the chief sent his spokesman to tsák saying: "Tell tsák that if he cures my duaghter he may take her as his wife."

tsák came at once to the place where the young woman lay. He placed his mat over her and began to dance and sing his haláit song. He waved the magic pebble over the region where the woman ailed and

almost immediately she was cured. Later tsák took her as his wife.

There were many other haláits that were famous in the tsem-siyán groups. All swénsk haláits were hereditary, and all had the same pattern.