THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO
ALBUQUERQUE

DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

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Dear Wilson,

Just a short note to tell you that I'll be at the coming Northwest meetings in Seattle in ten days and that I hope we'll finally have an opportunity to meet and talk. I'm going to read a paper Saturday morning on the Gitksan prophet I told you about in an earlier letter.

Hope to see you soon.

Sincerely,

Bruce

Bruce Rigsby

26-9686

Sorry to have missed you. I may come through Vancouver this summer if I join Geo. MacDonald on the Coast + Lower Skeena for a few weeks.

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"An Early Nineteenth Century Prophet Among the Gitksan"

The "Prophet Dance" is the name which the late Leslie Spier gave to a series of millenarian movements which developed in the Plateau early in the nineteenth century and spread to neighboring culture areas. The Prophet Dance should be distinguished from later nativistic or revitalization movements in the Plateau such as the Smohalla cult or Dreamer Religion, which, though derived from the Prophet Dance and based upon similar cultural beliefs, seem to have had a different character. Spier's original Prophet Dance monograph dealt with both the Prophet Dance and several derivative movements. Ten years ago, Wayne Suttles published an extensive study of the Prophet Dance among the Coast Salish peoples. Suttles suggested that the Fraser River had served as the main route for the diffusion of the complex from the Northern Plateau to the Coast Salish area. Both Spier's and Suttles' studies included some materials on the spread of the Prophet Dance down the Skeena River to the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian-speaking peoples of the northern Northwest Coast. Both men suggested that the immediate source for the northern Northwest Coast Prophet Dance might have been Bini, a Bulkley River Carrier prophet.

At the time Spier wrote his Prophet Dance monograph, there were only two sources of information on Bini: some fragmentary materials by Father Morice and a semi-fictionalized account by Marius Barbeau. Canny historian that he was, Spier noted that

a close reading of both accounts had led him to suspect that there had been earlier prophetic movements in the Carrier-Gitksan area which had been confounded with the later Bini cult. In a personal letter to Spier, Marius Barbeau suggested that Bini began his prophetic career about 1820. Barbeau also mentioned Prophet Dance activity among the Nass River Tsimshian at Port Simpson in 1832. However, Diamond Jenness' later (1943) account of Bini clearly indicates that Bini's career spanned only some 15-20 years, ending with his death about 1870. The accounts of my own older Gitksan informants, whose grandparents had seen and heard Bini preach, corroborate Jenness' dating.

I want now to show that Spier was indeed correct and that there was at least one pre-Bini prophetic movement among the Gitksan of the Upper Skeena. Our prophet's name was ʔyaqa sii tée. He was a Gitksan who lived in the village of Kisgegas, located on the Babine River a few miles above its confluence with the Skeena. Though now deserted, in the nineteenth century Kisgegas was a populous village with some twenty-one resident houses or core matrilineages: twelve Wolf houses; six Frog houses; and three Fireweed houses.

My sole field source of information on ʔyaqa sii tée was Simon Wright who was known among the Gitksan of Hazelton and Kispiox for his knowledge of the past. Simon died of a heart attack the week after I began work with him, so my field notes are not as full as I hoped they would be. Several other informants knew the name of ʔyaqa sii tée and his identity as an early prophet, but only Simon knew the specifics of his career. Bearing in mind that Simon Wright was my sole informant and that a variety of personal biographical factors color his account, we may still use a number of external checks to appraise the historical accuracy of parts of his narrative.

There is a small amount of ethnohistorical and ethnographic information which confirms ʔyaqa sii tée as a historical personage and provides some dating for his short career. The early fur

trader, John McLean, in his Notes wrote a sketchy account of the spread of the Prophet Dance to the neighboring Carrier in the autumn of 1834 or 1835. McLean wrote: "When the Columbia religion was introduced among them, our interpreters had to invent a term for the Deity- Yakasita- the "Man of Heaven." I believe that we have here a reference to our prophet, who is said to have received this name from God. Simon Wright was unable to translate it. Simon's grandmother, who had seen and heard Bini preach when she was a child, told Simon that yaqa sii tée had preached many years before that time. Sometime during the period 1830-35 would seem a reasonable dating.

The native peoples of this region had known of and had immediate contacts with the Whites since 1808. In fact, a party of men from Kisgegas visited the small Hudson's Bay Company outpost at Bear Lake forty miles away soon after 1808. There they were sufficiently impressed by the Whites that wii kát, a Fireweed chief, adopted Mr. Ross' dog as a crest, and ma lúulaq, a Frog chief, adopted the palisade as a crest and renamed his house cm hiyás in the palisade.

Yaqa sii tée's career began with his disappearance from a berry-picking party one August and his reappearance the following August when a party found his corpse suspended high up in a poplar tree. The young man's corpse was taken back to the village and laid out properly, though it showed no signs of decay. After midnight, the corpse began to sing two strange songs in a low voice. The young man then sat up, returned to life, and untied himself. He announced that God had summoned him and had given him a message which he was to preach until God summoned him again. He admonished the people of the village to observe the seventh day of the week, big teey móos, as a day of worship and rest, and he taught them the two songs and a dance which they were to perform before God. The songs told of the impending end of the world. The sky and the moon would turn red and the sun would disappear.

Simon Wright told me that ʔyaqa sii tée preached and prayed in a number of languages. He would say only a few words in a strange tongue, then in Gitksan he would explain their content to his audience. It is not unusual that he spoke Gitksan, the Coast Tsimshian, and two Athabaskan languages, as polylingualism was fairly common among the Gitksan. However, when we learn that he also spoke Łikitáat, we are led to suspect that he had travelled to the south during his diappearance and acquired his new religious knowledge. Łikitáat is Sahaptin, spoken some hundreds of miles to the south in the Southern Plateau. Simon Wright knew nothing of this; he knew only the name of this strange tongue which the prophet had reputedly used.

It is not clear from Simon's narrative how long ʔyaqa sii tée's prophetic creer lasted. It is my impression that it was a short one. On succeeding Sundays, he preached that the lúulaqʔ, <u>the dead</u>, would soon return, bringing a new technology with marvelous objects like horses, glass windows, the radio, the telegraph, trains, etc. Some of these prophecies are without doubt later additions. They are virtually identical with those of the later Bini as described by Diamond Jenness. The same prophecies imputed to other prophets are widespread over the Plateau and the Coast. There is no mention of a marriage dance as known for the Interior Salish peoples of the Northern Plateau.

According to Simon's narrative, the people of Kisgegas were frightened by ʔyaqa sii tée's prophecies of the strange new objects, but they were even more disturbed by his prophecies that the lúulaqʔ, <u>the dead</u>, would arrive in increasing numbers each year and that the dead would intermarry with the living. The women were particularly frightened at the prospect of marrying corpses. In traditional Gitksan culture, the dead are objects of fear to the living. ʔYaqa sii tée also said that there were to be no more chiefs in Kisgegas, there was just to be the one chief, sm ʔóokit laxʔ há, <u>the Chief in Heaven</u>. I do not know whether

ʼyaqa sii tée was a noble or a common person, nor his house affiliation. Simon Wright, or wii ʼqaax, Big Wing, was the leading chief of ʼem qáaq, in the Raven, a high ranked Wolf house in Kisgegas.

ʼYaqa sii tée definitely equated the imminent return of the dead with the coming of the Whites. The Whites were the dead. He said that the Whites had been formed from the ashes of the dead which had blown from the cremation pits across a big lake where they were revivified as White men. The word for White man in both Tsimshian languages, ʼqam ksi wáa, means completely bleached-out. In coming to the Gitksan country, the Whites were simply returning to their own country. "We are of the same blood," ʼyaqa sii tée said, "but the flesh is different. Lots of people of different colors are coming."

ʼYaqa sii tée evidently performed no miracles of note during his career, save for restoring to health a woman who had been stricken with illness as a result of drying fish on a Sunday. Even then, he claimed to have served only as an agent of God.

In the fall, ʼyaqa sii tée called the people of Kisgegas before him and announced that sm óokit lax há had summoned him for the second time. He evidently had a book under his arm and he said that he would soon die for ten days. Upon his return to life, he would read from the book about the new life the people of Kisgegas were to lead and how they would make and obtain the new items of technology. ʼYaqa sii tée then went out into the mountains with a party hunting marmots for robes. Fourteen days out of Kisgegas, when all the hunters were asleep in camp, ʼyaqa sii tée died again. Before they had retired, ʼyaqa sii tée told them not to cremate his corpse. He said, "I won't die. I'll come back after ten days. You just cover me with a blanket and leave me. In ten days. I'll catch up with you. I'll have the book, and then I'll tell you more of what the new life will be like."

On the fourth day following the prophet's second death, the group discussed the matter. There were also men from the Gitksan villages of Kispiox, Gitanmaks, and Gitsegueela present. The group decided, "If we burn him, the lúulaq' won't come." So, on the fifth day they attempted to cremate the corpse. They tried all morning until noon, but not even the clothes of the corpse would burn. Two old women beseeched the corpse, "Sonny, we know that we've made a mistake, but you had better leave us alone. We heard you preach that we will all meet after we die, but, sonny, leave us alone." Suddenly the flames consumed the corpse and only the bones were left. Ten days later, some men and the two old ladies saw two white apparitions rise from the ends of the pyre. Thus ended the career of yaqa' sii tée.

While Simon Wright's narrative undoubtedly provides us with some knowledge of a historical personage, I hesitate to push its interpretation too far. However, I believe that it would be fair to characterize yaqa' sii tée's message as one of accommodation to the incoming Whites. It is definitely millenarian. There are no hints of hostility toward the Whites in his message. The millenium would bring the institution of a new cultural order, not a nativistic revival of the aboriginal order. Indeed the aboriginal cultural order still existed relatively unchanged, but sufficient people so feared the prophecied return of the dead that they cremated the prophet against his instructions in an attempt to forestall the millenium.

For Simon Wright, knowledge of yaqa' sii tée and his message provided a way of relating the old and the new orders and an explanation of their relationship. Simon also told me that yaqa' sii tée had prophecied the coming of a tqal' wílmɬk^{w}, a servant, who would talk to God and have the power to heal. Simon was the leader of the small Pentecostal faction in Kispiox village. He believed that either Oral Roberts or Brother Allen, a local radio Pentecostal preacher, was the prophecied tqal' wílmɬk^{w}.