

Final Report

on

Tsimshian Social Organization

July 24, 1959

The project has been described in the original application and in the interim report. Briefly, its main purpose was to spend a year at the National Museum of Canada working with the extensive files of information on the Tsimshian Indians of British Columbia assembled by Dr. Marius Barbeau. It was intended to gain control over this vast body of material with the aim of preparing it for publication. A second purpose was to improve my qualifications in the field of museum work as such.

Procedure

I left Victoria on July 1, 1958, and returned on July 21, 1959. The journeys to and from Ottawa were made by car, and I visited a large number of museums en route. My family travelled both ways by air. The period from July 16, 1958 to July 9, 1959 was spent in Ottawa, except for a two week period spent at McGill University attending a course in museum display techniques. Every facility was extended to me by the National Museum and by Dr. Barbeau, so that I was able to work steadily and fruitfully for the entire period in Ottawa.

It is necessary to appreciate the great volume of the files on Tsimshian social organization and traditional history. These are the result of eight seasons of field-work by Dr. Barbeau (between 1914 and 1947) and the additional contributions of his interpreter and assistant William Beynon between 1916 and 1957.

The material was predominantly in the form of original field notes (some of them in Dr. Barbeau's private shorthand). The main task was to extract the relevant information from the field notes, having the shorthand transcribed where necessary, and assemble it into an orderly file of my own. This task was accomplished fully.

The next step is the analysis and rewriting of segments of the material for publication, and a start has been made on this, but is a large job which will require several years to complete.

Results

1. The primary aim of the project has been achieved, in that another active scholar now has control over Dr. Barbeau's Tsimshian data. The material falls into at least three divisions, which will form the bases for separate publications:

- (a) Tsimshian social organization
- (b) Tsimshian ceremonials
- (c) Secret societies among the Tsimshian.

(a) Tsimshian social organization:

This is the major topic. The notes give complete coverage for all of the Tsimshian tribes. The Tsimshian fall into three geographical divisions: Tsimshian proper (15 tribes), Gitksan (7 tribes), and Niska (3 tribes). For all of the 25 tribes there is information on the following topics:

1. **Tribal Structure:** The basic kinship units are the "houses" or lineages, and each tribe consists of from 10 to 45 such "houses" arranged in order of rank.
2. **Personal Names:** Each "house" owns a stock of names. About 5000 names have been listed, translated and analysed, and abstracts have been made of many traditions of origin of names. A start has been made on the analysis and description of the complex naming system.
3. **Crests:** Each house also owns a number of crests, which it displays on totem poles and in a great variety of other forms. These have been listed and described, their traditions of origin have been abstracted, and a start has been made on the analysis of the crest system.
4. **Territories:** The hunting territories and village sites owned by all of the tribes and houses have been listed and mapped.
5. **Traditions of Origin:** Each house owns traditions which explain its history, its names and crests, and its rights to territories. These are partly mythical, partly factual, and give the clearest insights into the structure and growth of the Tsimshian nation. Most of these will be published in separate works under preparation by Dr. Barbeau, but I have made abstracts of a large number for use in the present study.

In addition to the information on specific tribes and "houses", there is much general information pertaining to social organization. I have opened files on such topics as the potlatch, phratries, marriage, names, etc.

(b) Tsimshian ceremonials:

In working through the field notes, I became aware of the existence of a complex of ceremonials which has not been previously described in the literature. These family-owned "nax nax" or "spirit" ceremonies are the most characteristic type among the Tsimshian, and are of such theoretical interest. The data are on hand for a separate study of such ceremonialism.

(c) Secret Societies among the Tsimshian:

Material is also on hand for a good description of the diffusion of Kwakiutl secret societies to the Tsimshian and their integration into Tsimshian culture.

2. Some time was spent assisting Dr. Barbeau in the preparation of publications of his own, based on the Tsimshian traditional narratives in the files. Many of these narratives contain incidental information on the subjects discussed above, and carbon copies of about 200 of them were obtained for my file.

3. My knowledge and appreciation of museum problems in general was much improved by the year's association with the National Museum, the visits to other museums, and the attendance at the course in museum display. In addition, my presence was of some value to the National Museum, contributing somewhat to the

solution of some of the problems there. A copy of a memorandum I prepared on certain of their problems is enclosed with this report.