

GITZONTK

Narrative of Salagimipun

Informant: James Lewis, ǵai¹?mtkwa, gitxále,
ǵispewudwada.

Haláit powers came from the ?wetstá, who originated the haláit and one wishing to become a haláit had to secure the power from these people. Any misuse of the haláit powers was punishable by death at the hands of the group who controlled it, as is shown by this narrative.

For many years it was the wish of a laxskík house to overcome all others in haláit. A woman chief planned at this time that her return from the heavens to seek power would be in a whale. Her name was haiməsgás. She called together her own gidzontk group and said: "It will be well to make something so that my return may be spectacular. I wish to return upon a whale, for no one has done that before and it will be known in all the villages that we have accomplished something outstanding that was never done before. If we can do this we shall be famed for all time among all the people."

When she had finished the head of the gidzontk group said: "We have heard you, chief, and your wishes. We will endeavour to do this difficult thing, even though it will mean death for us all if the plan miscarries. But we will try to do this which is your wish."

The group then planned to make a lpun (whale) of sea lion skins, which would have a spout from which a vapor would rise by throwing water. In order to make it swim they contrived ropes from

1. gitzon -- in rear. The adding of "t" indicates at secret or definite group who advised the chief in his plans. To this day a group who act as a committee in any group are known as a gitzontk group.

each end by which to pull it. They completed all this in strict secrecy and only the direct members of the house of haimsgás knew of the work.

They were then ready to try it out, and early one morning the huge imitation whale was launched. The lines attached to each end were run out to the various points where men were hidden to pull.

They planned that the initiate would have a double in the whale and the chief woman, haimsgás, would hide on shore to be found later. The whale was pulled about and worked well, and then it was hidden.

On the day of the chief's supposed return from the heavens the man-made whale was taken to the water and launched. Then all the members of the chief's house entered it, taking hot stones. Only members of the chief's house could have contact with a naxnóx such as this.

The naxnóx whistles sounded and the villagers came to the water's edge to watch the performance. They could see the whale naxnóx dive, emerge and spout, and dive again. The whale made a successful crossing and the performers were so pleased that they wished to repeat the trip.

But one of the hot stones which were needed to make the water turn into steam to emerge from the spout hole fell upon the skin lining and burnt through. The whale could not rise again. There was no way for the performers to signal their helpers, but those pulling the ropes knew that something was wrong and attempted to pull the whale to shore. But it sunk and all in the whale were drowned. Only one man and the chief, haimsgás, were left of the house.

The rest of the haláit and gidzontk group knew that they would be punished by death for having misused a naxnóx. So, knowing they

were responsible, they through themselves into the water and followed the lines holding the sunken whale naxnóx. All of the gidzontk group and the haláit attendants committed suicide in the water, and this instance is known as welgilksdétk (wel-- where:, gilks-- themselves; détk--anchored (incomplete); "place where they are anchored themselves").

So great was the wetstá's power that the master haláit at wetstá knew of the mishap the same day and called together his people: "You must go and see what has happened. If they have abused the naxnóx they know the consequence, for the punishment is death."

The men who were to inflict the punishment set out at once, for they were warriors as well as haláits.

At the same time of the mishap, several male members of haimsgá's group with a fellow tribesman were out shooting seals, and they returned at night to find dirges being sung in the village rather than haláit songs. The oldest of the men came to the chief woman and asked: "What had happened? Why are you all singing dirges?"

She replied: "Something terrible has occurred and we are doomed. Through our own carelessness we have lost the whale naxnóx together with all our house and now all of the gidzontk and haláit attendants have killed themselves. Now the great wetstá haláit will come and kill we few that remain because we have misused a naxnóx."

There was great fear and anxiety among the people. The chief woman then said: "We will try and deceive the wetstá by gathering all the people that remain into my house. Every night we will have haláits make a great noise as if there were many more present. Th wetstá will not come in, but if they should enquire we will tell them that the haláits are celebrating the return of haimsgás

from the heavens."

The chief woman called all her people together and said: "The wetstáse will be here at any time and we must pretend that nothing has happened. Every night we will make a great deal of noise so it will appear that we are having a haláit performance." During the day lookouts were placed to watch for the 'wetstás.

One night the wetstás approached the gitga'dia village and heard the beating of the big haláit drum. (The haláit drum differs from the skin drum. It is a long box with high sides, usually 4 feet long, 4 feet high and 18 inches wide. This is hung to the house rafters by a leather thong. This drum was also used to sound an alarm calling everyone together.)

The visitors approached quietly so as not to be seen. Several of them landed to mingle with the people and make enquiries. "Who is giving the haláit?" they asked of different people in the dark. "The chief woman haimsgás has just returned from her voyage to the skies" they were told. They returned to their leader and said: "There is nothing wrong. The people are celebrating in the haláit the return to earth of haimsgás. We have nothing to do but return."

Thus those that survived the haláit catastrophe were saved. Then, as their loss had been so severe a blow, the people moved their village. They were now almost without a royal group as only the chief woman remained. It was at this time that they moved to their present village.

This shows the great respect of the older people for their haláit and the feeling that no one must misuse a naxnóx.