

# The Indigenous Foundation of the Resource Economy of BC's North Coast

Charles R. Menzies and Caroline F. Butler

Volume 61, Spring 2008

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt61rn01>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Menzies, C. R. & Butler, C. F. (2008). The Indigenous Foundation of the Resource Economy of BC's North Coast. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 61, 131–149.

## RESEARCH NOTE / NOTE DE RECHERCHE

# The Indigenous Foundation of the Resource Economy of BC's North Coast

**Charles R. Menzies and Caroline F. Butler**

THE INDIGENOUS FOUNDATION of the Resource Economy of British Columbia's temperate rainforest is often described as pristine, virgin, or untouched. While some critics may decry the impact of industrial resource extraction upon the landscape, they typically do so by referencing an Edenic, pre-contact setting in which indigenous people – if they are mentioned at all – co-existed with nature outside of the movement of history. This paper explores the place of indigenous peoples in the contemporary and historical resource extraction industry of British Columbia by focusing on the Ts'msyen and Gitxaala, the indigenous peoples of the north coast. We do so by recognizing the history and social organization of the Ts'msyen<sup>1</sup> and the Gitxaala as they actively engage with the world around them from the time before the arrival of *K'mksiwah* (non-indigenous newcomers). To do so is important in our understanding of indigenous peoples as actors, not as subjects acted upon by outside forces.

It is unfortunate to note that the standard account of British Columbia's history is one typically told from the point of view of the *K'mksiwah*. Arriving into what they asserted to be an unclaimed and ownerless landscape, they

1. For many anthropologists, linguists, and others, the peoples of the north coast of British Columbia have been grouped together under the common name Tsimshian. This Euro-American designation reflects the intellectual history of *K'mksiwah* research, in which language, geography, and central foods were used to classify peoples. Tsimshian includes Nisga'a, Gitksan, Ts'msyen (in English, Coast Tsimshian and Skeena River Tsimshian), and Gitxaala peoples. In our paper we have adopted the more accurate distinctions made by the people themselves – Ts'msyen for when we speak of the people now living in Metlakatla; Lax Kw'alaams, or Kitsumkalum and Gitxaala, when we speak of the people whose territories are on the coastal islands from Prince Rupert south to just north of Milbank Sound, whose primary village is at Lach Klan (Kitkatla).

renamed, reclaimed, and resettled the province.<sup>2</sup> Their stories of the development and growth of BC have been told as epic adventures in which hardy men – and some women – arrive into an unknown, bountiful – though unforgiving – world, and carve out a new civilization. Academic narratives have, until recently, followed the same storyline. Common to both popular and academic narrative lines has been the assumption that “real” history began with the arrival of the newcomers.

The backside of this history of development is one of destruction and loss. During the early period of *K'mksiwah* colonialism, the landscape that supported other indigenous peoples for millennia was changed by clear cuts, strip mines, and ruined salmon spawning channels. Early industrialists, such as Bell Irving (fisheries), Dunsmuir (mining), or MacMillan (forestry), engaged in a form of primitive accumulation as they and their compatriots rolled across the landscape plugging canneries with fish, ripping open the earth, and tearing down trees. This is the story that has been obscured by the triumphant narratives of nation building and pioneering that have dogged the historical musings of the *K'mksiwah* for most of the last century.

It would, of course, be unfair to imply that all such accounts start and end with the colonial moment. There is important work that makes an attempt to take the role and perspective of indigenous peoples seriously.<sup>3</sup> However, the mainstream narrative has been one that places indigenous peoples into the prehistory of contact. When indigenous peoples turn up later in the script it is as though they are an afterthought, or a tragic footnote, not significant players in their own right. In this paper, however, we place the world, experiences, and understandings of indigenous peoples – from the viewpoint of the Ts'msyen and Gitxaala<sup>4</sup> – at the centre of our reading of the historical development of capitalist relations of production along the north coast of what has become

2. See Cole Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change* (Vancouver 1997).

3. See, for example: James McDonald, *People of the Robin: the Tsimshian of Kitsumkalum: a Resource Book for the Kitsumkalum Education Committee and the Coast Mountain School District 82 (Terrace)* (Edmonton 2003); Dianne Newell, *Tangled Webs of History: Indians and the Law in Canada's Pacific Coast Fisheries* (Toronto 1993); Antonia Mills, *Eagle Down is our Law: Witsuwit'en Law, Feasts, and Land Claims* (Vancouver 1994); Jay Miller, *Tsimshian Culture: A Light Through the Ages* (Lincoln 1997). Each of these books attempts, in different ways, to take the perspective of indigenous peoples seriously and as a meaningful and significant lens through which to understand the region's past and the implications for its future.

4. While we are hesitant to highlight the subject position of the authors – one an indigenous academic and the other a resident and community member in the area of which we write – we understand that who we are does shape the ways in which we prioritize the importance of an indigenous perspective. While we will make no claim to represent a universalized Ts'msyen or Gitxaala perspective, we do claim to reflect an important strand of an indigenous view and experience of the world and the development of industrial resource extraction. Both authors also have direct personal and professional experience in the resource-based industry of north coast British Columbia.

British Columbia. At the core of our argument is the observation that the social and class relations that emerged on the north coast did so as the result of indigenous actions, decisions, and responses. It was not a simple process of external pressure acting upon a passive population. Rather, and as we describe below, Ts'msyen and Gitxaala people engaged with *K'umksiwah* in accord with their customary social structure and cultural framework.

The emergence of industrial resource capitalism simultaneously relied upon and attempted to transform indigenous relations of production. In what follows, we explore this contradictory moment from the vantage point of the indigenous peoples of BC's north coast. In so doing we draw upon more than ten years of research by Menzies and Butler into the Ts'msyen world and upon Menzies' experiences as a member of the Ts'msyen and Gitxaala communities. Through the course of our research, we have interviewed a wide cross-section of community members who have worked in logging and fishing. Since 2001, we have worked closely with Gitxaala Nation on topics of ecological knowledge,<sup>5</sup> selective fisheries,<sup>6</sup> and respectful research methodology.<sup>7</sup> Over the course of our research with the Gitxaala Nation, we have had the opportunity to meet and learn from all sectors of the community. The account that follows draws upon over 100 interviews, dozens of community meetings, and countless informal conversations and observations. While we do draw upon aspects of the published *K'mskiwah* literature, the outline of Ts'msyen and Gitxaala involvement in the industrial resource economy comes from having lived with and among the very people we are now writing about. This perspective is significantly different from more distant writings that draw from sources held within the vaults of *K'mskiwah* institutions.

### The Indigenous World of BC's North Coast

The lands of the contemporary Ts'msyen and Gitxaala peoples cover an area of nearly 90,000 square kilometers. These people live in six contemporary village communities – for the Ts'msyen, Kitselas, Lax Kw'Alaams, Metlakatla, Kitasoo, and Gitga'at, and, for the Gitxaala, Lach Klan. Their combined territories reach from the mouth of the Nass River in the north to Milbank Sound in the south and eastward along the Skeena River to the Kitselas Canyon about

5. Charles R. Menzies, "Putting Words into Action: Negotiating Collaborative Research in Gitxaala," *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 28 (2004), 15–32; Caroline F. Butler, "Researching Traditional Ecological Knowledge for Multiple Uses," *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 28 (2004), 33–48.

6. Charles R. Menzies and Caroline F. Butler, "Returning to Selective Fishing Through Indigenous Fisheries Knowledge: The Example of *K'moda*, Gitxaala Territory," *American Indian Quarterly*, 31 (Summer 2007), 441–64.

7. Charles R. Menzies, "Reflections on Research with, for, and among Indigenous Peoples," *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 25 (Spring/Summer 2001), 19–36; Menzies, "Putting Words into Action," 15–32; Butler, "Researching TEK," 33–48.

150 kilometres upriver. More than 2000 live in these six villages and an additional 5000 plus members live in the towns of Prince Rupert, Port Edward, Terrace, and elsewhere.

Each village community is politically independent. Within each village, it is the matrilineally-based housegroup, or *walp*, that is the effective political and economic voice. The customary leadership – *Sm'gyigyeyet*<sup>8</sup> (hereditary house leaders), *Lik'agyet* (councillors or leading men) and *Sigyidmhana'a* (matriarchs) – retain a level of importance that is often misunderstood by the *K'mksiwah*. Despite economic changes in the productive base of these indigenous societies, the social and cultural authority of the customary leadership continues to this day. Few decisions can be made or enacted without the support of the established elders and leaders.<sup>9</sup> Each *walp* is headed by a *Sm'oogyit* or *Lik'agyet*. The *walps*, in turn, are ranked in order of prominence and the *Sm'oogyit* of the highest ranked house is the head chief of all of the housegroups based in that particular village community.<sup>10</sup> Within this social organization, it is the social relations of kinship which are predominant.<sup>11</sup>

Anthropologist Eric R. Wolf has outlined, in his books *Europe and the People Without History*<sup>12</sup> and *Envisioning Power*,<sup>13</sup> a Marxian framework of three modes of production: kin-ordered, tributary, and capitalist. For each mode, he describes a set of social relations of production and class structures. It is Wolf's kin-ordered mode of production that applies best, in an analytic sense, to the indigenous peoples of the north coast.

8. *Sm'gyigyeyet* is the plural form of *Sm'oogyit*.

9. This observation is based upon our field research with members of Gitxaala Nation.

10. Some have argued that the paramount chieftainships of *Ts'ibassaa*, *Shakes*, or *Legaix*, for example, were a byproduct of *K'mksiwah* interventions (see, for instance, Andrew Martindale, "A Hunter-Gatherer Paramount Chieftainship: Tsimshian Developments through the Contact Period," in R.G. Matson, G. Coupland and Q. Mackie, eds., *Emerging from the Mist: Studies in Northwest Coast Culture History* (Vancouver 2003), 12–50). Our research with Gitxaala suggests that the rise of paramount chiefs predates the arrival of *K'mksiwah* and further predates the so-called "proto-contact" effects. This point can also be documented in the accounts of early coastal traders such as, for example, James Collnett (1787), Jacinto Caamano (1792), or Charles Bishop (1795) where prominent local chiefs are clearly in existence and firmly established prior to the arrival of coastal traders. *Sm'gyigyeyet*, such as *Ts'ibassaa*, were quick to assimilate new technologies and knowledge and to wield these in their exercise of power and authority within their specific communities.

11. Kinship was and is important. However, this does not mean that in the absence of a kinship relationship, goods and services, interchange, trade, barter, etc., was impossible. One need merely take note of the many references within the journals of early Euro-American coastal traders to trade for various and sundry food items (such as, but not limited to, salmon, halibut, eulachon) to put to rest the inaccurate assumption that Ts'msyen or Gitxaala people would not trade fish like salmon with either Euro-Americans or other non-kinship.

12. Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley 1982).

13. Eric R. Wolf, *Envisioning Power: Ideologies of Dominance and Crisis* (Berkeley 1999).

The productive property owned by each *walp* is both material – i.e. specific places on land and in the ocean and a host of physical things – and immaterial, that is, the *adawx* (history), *ayaawx* (laws), *tagyigyet* (which means, simultaneously, ancient people and tradition), and the knowledge linked to managing all of these forms of property. The social relations of production (which would include both material and immaterial forces) are structured through a combination of matrilineal kinship and ranked hereditary names. Names are akin to social positions in the structure of power. The more prominent a name, the higher the rank and the greater capacity to control the labour power of other members of a *walp* and, in the case of a prominent *Sm'oogyit*, the labour power of related and confederated *walps*.

The social control of the *Sm'gyigyet* is not absolute. The *ayaawx* limits and constrains their capacity to act, as do the structures of kinship that create certain responsibilities and obligations. This system does, however, allocate significant power to the *Sm'gyigyet* and, when supported by other named members of the *walp* and associated *walps*, provides a significant political economic basis for the control of territories and the labour power of others. This was the basis upon which the Ts'ymesen and the Gitxaala engaged with the incoming *K'mksiwah* and the way in which they began to draw upon the new economic opportunities that arrived with the coastal traders in the late 1780s and the subsequent development of industrial capitalism.

### Emergence of Capitalist Resource Extraction

Historical accounts of the mid-19th century in British Columbia have tended to focus on the fur trade as the nexus of economic relations between First Nations and Europeans or Euro-Canadians. While mercantile trade was pivotal in shaping and establishing networks of communications and alliances, the role of industrial capitalism in shaping these transformations has been overlooked. One might suggest that, in fact, the key feature of BC's history is the transformation from the chiefly economies to industrial resource extraction capitalism. This transformation has often been discussed in terms of frontiers, settlers, and discursive patterns. However, it is more empirically useful to examine the material transformations and social relations of production that stem from BC's transition to industrial capitalism, which make its history and social formation unique within Canada.<sup>14</sup>

It was during this time that First Nations began to engage in both wage labour and commodity production in the developing timber trade. Simply because indigenous peoples began to incorporate wage labour into their economy, however, does not imply that their sense of history and their cultural

14. This thesis is more fully developed in a manuscript Menzies is currently writing that focuses on the social relations of production and the transformation from chiefly economies to industrial resource capitalism on the northwest coast.

framework suddenly came to an abrupt end. Rather, adapting to and absorbing new forms of economic activities such as engaging in paid labour for the Hudson Bay Company (HBC)<sup>15</sup> is more appropriately understood as indigenous peoples taking advantage of an opportunity.

During the early years of the outpost, the HBC men were scared to leave the fort to harvest wood when there were large numbers of “Indians” gathered outside. At this time, the Ts’msyen peoples traded pickets and cedar bark as well as furs and fish to the fort, but the sale of timber appears to have decreased as the fort began recruiting Indian labour for logging. The HBC men gradually recruited larger and larger numbers of First Nations men to log and process building timbers, gather and cut firewood, cut wood for coals and other activities. The logging trips lasted several weeks, and the time required to unload and process the logs suggests significant levels of production. Persistently reluctant to allow First Nations men to enter the fort, the fur traders hired First Nations women to carry the wood inside the gates. Indigenous men were also employed to cut wood for the steam ships that visited the fort. Supplying steamboat fuel employed indigenous people between 1864 and 1911.<sup>16</sup>

The fort became increasingly dependent on indigenous labour, as documented in the HBC Fort Simpson Journal: “The fact is without the labour of 20 Indians daily, the duties of the Establishment could not be performed. We have not one man that can saw on a piece of wood properly....”<sup>17</sup> This issue is repeated some years later: “Employed cutting firewood 6 of our men. They do not cut so much by one third as the Indians.”<sup>18</sup>

After 1840, there was a steady employment of First Nations men cutting firewood, sometimes alone, sometimes with fort men. During the summer months, however, the journals record only fort men cutting firewood. This suggests that First Nations woodcutting employment for the fort ceased during the fishing season. For the first three decades after the establishment of Fort Simpson, the Ts’msyen integrated HBC work with their seasonal movements between resource harvesting sites. The logging expeditions tended to occur during the early fall and winter, after the fishing season. The first year that logging was not interrupted by eulachon fishing was 1857. It was at this moment in history that some Ts’msyen men began to focus on wage labour as one economic strategy in combination with longstanding indigenous practices, and it was at this point that an indigenous forestry worker began to emerge.<sup>19</sup>

15. James McDonald, “Trying to Make a Life: The Historical Political Economy of Kitsumkalum,” PhD dissertation, University of British Columbia, 1985, 322.

16. McDonald, “Trying to Make a Life,” 327.

17. Hudson Bay Company, “Journals For Fort Simpson,” 1834–1864, 15 January 1852, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg [hereafter HBC, Fort Simpson Journal].

18. HBC Fort Simpson Journal, 6 December 1857.

19. Charles R. Menzies and Caroline F. Butler, “Working in the Woods: Tsimshian Resource Workers and the Forest Industry of British Columbia,” *American Indian Quarterly*, 25 (June



In contemporary interviews with Ts'msyen, Gitxa'la, and Gitga'at elders, a work pattern that integrated engagement in cash and non-cash remunerated labour is commonly alluded to. These oral histories reveal a desire on the part of BC's indigenous peoples to stay as close to ones' *la\_xyuup* (*walp* territories) as was feasible and to draw upon what mechanisms – be they wage labour or otherwise – as were available to do so. Additionally, it seems to be the case that those who began to engage in full-time wage labour did so as members of their *walp*, not as individuals. Thus, what we see emerging is not so much the beginnings of an indigenous proletariat as it is the continuous practices of the *Sm'gyigyey* deploying *walp* members and their labour power to take advantage of economic and social opportunities that structured how wage labour was apportioned. The timber harvesting conducted by and encouraged by the HBC was thus a critical entry point for Ts'ymesen people into the waged economy and into the large-scale commercial production of timber products, but it was an entry point mediated by customary structures of indigenous power and decision-making.

The earliest indigenous historical record of north coast industrial development comes from the diary of Arthur Wellington Clah. Clah was a Ts'msyen man born in 1831, and he learned to speak English working at the HBC's Fort Simpson. Later, the missionary William Duncan taught him to write in exchange for lessons in the Ts'msyen language. Clah then kept a daily diary for 30 years, which provides a detailed and sustained account of fur trade relations and the economic activities of Native peoples in the region.<sup>20</sup>

Clah's diary often mentions his own forestry work and that of others. In January 1874, he worked for 13 days cutting logs and earned \$52. In June 1887 he and a man named George Cook were sawing logs for firewood at a price of \$3 a cord. He also traded lumber for traditional commodities such as eulachon grease (March 1889). Later references mention absent friends working in canneries and sawmills and logging. Many entries focus on the building of new houses in Metlakatla and Port Simpson. Men went out after logs and brought them to the sawmill (Metlakatla) to be milled into house lumber. Other men were selling logs to the mill.<sup>21</sup>

Ts'msyen loggers had expanded their work for the Hudson Bay Company to the missionary-run sawmills that flourished in the later decades of the 19th century. Prior to 1910, the majority of sawmills in the Ts'msyen territories were established as part of the missionary efforts to transform the social and economic lives of First Nations peoples. The Protestant missionaries established various industries in order to encourage the Ts'msyen people to cease their sea-

---

2001), 409–430.

20. Robert Galois, "Colonial Encounters: The Worlds of Arthur Wellington Clah, 1855–1881," *BC Studies* 115–116, (1997–98), 105–47.

21. A copy of Clah's diaries was held by the now defunct Tsimshian Tribal Council and was reviewed in their offices by the authors in 1998.



sonal migrations to resource harvesting sites. They also wanted to transform the housing patterns in order to disrupt the clan system. They encouraged the building of single-family dwellings to undermine the chiefly power that was supported by the big house structure. The missionaries believed that sawmills and other industrial enterprises would contribute to both of these missionary projects. History has shown otherwise, as the chiefly system continues to this day.

### The Canneries and Village-based Labour

After the early sawmills fulfilled the missionaries' requirements of "civilized" housing, the primary market for their timber was the burgeoning canning industry.<sup>22</sup> The first salmon cannery was built on the Skeena River in 1876. During the next eight decades, there would be almost 40 cannery sites developed, and later abandoned, on the north coast of the mainland.<sup>23</sup> While Ts'msyen, Gitxaala, and other First Nations people provided the bulk of the labour and fish for these canneries during the early era of the industry, they were steadily displaced and replaced as producers and workers.<sup>24</sup>

The northern canning industry was quite literally built upon the traditional fisheries of the Ts'msyen.<sup>25</sup> Some canneries were located at Ts'msyen shore stations and village sites, which interfered with traditional patterns of harvesting.<sup>26</sup> During the late 19th century, the canneries relied on supplies of fish from both their fleet of gillnetters and from the traditional fish camps of the indigenous chiefs.

Indigenous peoples on the north coast developed an efficient yet sustainable method of harvesting salmon as they returned to their creeks to spawn. Tidal traps built around the mouth of creeks caught the fish at low tide in stone-walled pools. The fish were smoked and dried, and later traded throughout large commercial networks that extended far beyond the immediate settlements, premised on the housegroup or village.<sup>27</sup>

The stone traps were eventually replaced with drag seine nets. A large

22. See Menzies and Butler, "Working in the Woods."

23. Gladys Young Blyth, *Salmon Canneries: BC North Coast* (Lantzville, BC 1991).

24. For a thorough discussion of First Nations' labour in the canneries see Newell, *Tangled Webs of History*; Rolf Knight, *Indians at Work* (Vancouver 1996); and Alicja Mujsynski, *Cheap Wage Labour: Race and Gender in the Fisheries of British Columbia* (Montreal 1996).

25. Menzies and Butler, "Returning to Selective Fishing."

26. James McDonald, "The Marginalization of the Tsimshian Cultural Ecology: The Seasonal Cycle Native Peoples," in Bruce Alden Cox, ed., *Native Lands: Canadian Indians, Inuit and Metis* (Ottawa 1991), 208.

27. From field research with Gitxaala community members 1998–2008. See also Margaret Anderson, "The Allied Tribes Tsimshian of North Coastal British Columbia: Social Organization, Economy and Trade," Expert Opinion for Allied Tsimshian Tribes, July 2006.

net was set from a boat and winched in to the beach. The drag seine camps employed extended kin to harvest and process various species of salmon. With the establishment of the canneries, the hereditary chiefs, who organized production, integrated the sale of salmon to the canneries into their established patterns of trade, sale, and community consumption.<sup>28</sup>

Gitxaała drag seine camps operated until 1964, when they were officially shut down by the Department of Fisheries for “conservation” reasons. However, prior to this point, industrial fishing interests attempted to undermine the ownership of these sites and associated fishing rights. The canneries obtained official ownership of the drag seine sites by the early years of the 20th century.<sup>29</sup> Customary control and ownership continued to be recognized and practiced within the Ts’msyen and Gitxaała worlds. The canneries found it necessary to recognize chiefly authority over these operations in order to ensure a reliable supply of fish and labour power.

This general pattern can be explored in more detail through the case of *K’moda*, a medium-sized coastal watershed midway along Grenville Channel. *K’moda* drains an extensive four lake and river system that has been rich in coho, sockeye, and dog salmon. The surrounding forests and mountains have provided the house of *Ts’ibassa* with riches for many generations. Sm’ooygit H:el (the late Russell Gamble) explained that for much of the 20th century and before, members of his *walp* and Chief *Ts’ibassa’s walp* before him (Edward Gamble, Joseph Ts’ibassa) would spend as much as four months of each year at this site collecting, harvesting, and processing food and other materials.<sup>30</sup>

Early on, *Ts’ibassa* drew upon his *walp’s* access to and ownership of this site by selling surplus fish to the newly emerging canneries as recorded in the 1890 Sessional Papers: “The chief at Lowe’s Inlet, assisted by his sons, caught and sold to two canneries on the Skeena River forty thousand fish, at an average of seven and eight cents each.”<sup>31</sup> This fish was initially harvested by use of customary stone traps and then beach seines made first of tarred cotton and, more recently, tarred nylon. As late as World War II, the beach seining was complemented by indigenous fishers gillnetting from dugout canoes in the nearby inlet and Grenville Channel. When seine boats were introduced, fishers from Gitga’at and Gtixaała ran these boats first for the local cannery and then,

28. From field research with Gitxaała community members, 1998–2008.

29. See British Columbia Archives, GR 435 (Box 16, file 137), Memorandum of Understanding between the Province of BC and the Federal Government of Canada, dated 9 November 1912 [hereafter BC Archives, Memorandum of Understanding].

30. Traces of this place can also be found in the K’mskiwah historical record. The late 1800s land commission reports and recommendation for the reserves of the Gtixaała were signed and dated at *K’moda* 10 July 1891, and one of the first north coast canneries was built there in the late 1800s.

31. Canada, Department of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Year Ended 31st December 1889*, (Ottawa 1890), 149.

when the cannery closed in the early 1930s, for the company that owned the cannery.

Russell Gamble described the relationship between customary fishing sites and the industrial fishery on a trip to his *la\_xyuup* at *K'moda* (Lowe Inlet). He spoke of his time spent at this site as a child, working with and watching members of his *walp* fish with a drag seine for commercial fish companies. He also spoke of the many other foods and items that were harvested there – from berries to clams and cockles, to mountain goat and deer, to salmon (to be smoked and dried for domestic consumption and trade with other indigenous peoples) and other fish including, but not limited to, flounder and rock cod. While the site was indeed linked to the industrial salmon fishery, it was not defined by that linkage. In fact, it is more accurate to suggest that the commercial salmon fishery was shaped by the presence of indigenous practices at *K'moda*. The seine boats – multi-crew vessels that use a large encircling net to catch fish – were typically skippered by named hereditary chiefs, such as Ernie Hill Sr. (F.V. Qitontsa), Johnny Clifton (F.V. Kwatsu), Johnny Nelson (F.V. Sandra L.), Simon Lewis (F.V. B.C. Maid) and Johny Vickers (F.V. Clovis), and their crews came from their extended families. While the bulk of the fish they caught was sold to canneries – consistent with the longstanding Gitga'at, Gitxaala, and Ts'msyen practice of trade in fish for economic benefit – each seine boat in the community would also distribute fish to village members. As with the customary practices, food flowed through the matrilineal house groups in accordance with social proximity to the boat's skipper. In the latter years of the 20th century, when gillnetters had become more typical, similar distribution networks continued.

While many chiefs and their families spent part of the fishing season at their drag seine camps, the majority of village members began to move to the canneries for fishing and processing employment. The canneries used "village bosses" to recruit fishermen and processing workers, typically hereditary chiefs or their *g\_a\_ldmalgya\_x* (chief's speaker). The articulation of customary social relations with the emerging capitalist economy thus occurred within the constraints of the indigenous framework. This is even more evident when one considers the fact that sometimes the whole village would move to a particular cannery. Present day elders recall that the Ts'msyen and Gitxaala villages were often empty in the summer (as they were prior to the development of industrial fish canning), with only an elderly man left behind as caretaker.

The canneries became a site for the reproduction of the indigenous economy and society in much the same way as gathering places, like the Nass River eulachon settlements, were summertime centres of indigenous commerce. Families brought the foodstuffs they had produced to the canneries to trade and sell. The industry drew from both coastal and interior villages and thus provided the opportunity to trade for the particular food specialties of each community. Gitxaala women traded dried herring eggs, abalone, clams,

cockles, and seaweed for moose meat and berries with Gitsxan women and for eulachon products with the Nisga'a.

The canneries provided a nexus for indigenous trade and created avenues to maintain aboriginal networks in the emerging industrial economy. The development of the north coast economy can, in fact, be described as having emerged in response to pre-existing indigenous social networks. Marine fur traders used harbours next to prominent sites controlled by chiefs: the HBC forged an alliance with *Legaix*, a leading Ts'msyen sm'ooygit, and relocated their fort in 1834 to a location within *Legaix's* territory. The fishery developed on top of customary fish sites and was reliant upon aboriginal labour power. However, industrial development on the north coast also worked to disrupt and inhibit the First Nations economic system. The reserve system, natural resource regulations, and government attempts to regulate indigenous peoples worked in combination to expropriate First Nations' land and resources, in contravention of crown obligations, to create a labour force for the developing industries. Later policy worked to exclude First Nations people from the work force and to replace them with "white" workers and resource producers.

### Restrictions on Land and Sea

The official expropriation of First Nations land began with the creation of the first reserve in Victoria harbour prior to 1852. The reserve system was essentially a tool for opening up land for settlement and development. In British Columbia, the reserves were considerably smaller than in other parts of Canada. The creation of many small reserves in British Columbia was intended to encourage industry, thrift, and materialism, and to provide cheap seasonal labour to the industrial economy.<sup>32</sup> The reserves averaged five hectares per person compared to allocations of up to 260 hectares in the western interior<sup>33</sup> and tended to be placed on or near customary fishing sites (this is especially the case for coastal reserves).

The multiple, small reserves allocated to First Nations in BC also reflected the assumption of continued access to fisheries for subsistence and livelihood.<sup>34</sup> The reserve commissioner O'Reilly reserved fishing stations in 1881 for every band he encountered, protecting traditional fishing stations and summer village sites.<sup>35</sup> Rolf Knight suggests that over half of the reserves in

32. Cole Harris, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance and Reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver 2002), 65.

33. Newell, *Tangled Webs*, 56.

34. Newell, *Tangled Webs*, 56.

35. Harris, *Native Space*, 202.

the province were intended for fisheries.<sup>36</sup> However, the federal department in charge of fisheries was opposed to exclusive Native fishing rights and restricted access to these anticipated resources. The department discouraged the allocation of coastal fishing stations as reserves, and refused to sanction exclusive aboriginal access to specific fisheries.<sup>37</sup>

The 1888 Canadian Fisheries Act made a distinction between a registered Indian's right to fish for the purpose of food, (which was exempt from certain regulations), and the right to sell, trade, or barter fish. This distinction was based upon erroneous mainstream colonial conventional wisdom that the selling of fish or the trade of fish for benefit was not an indigenous practice. The effect of this regulation was to facilitate the incorporation of indigenous fishers within the growing capitalist fishery.

Nearly 25 years later, the province of British Columbia and the government of Canada entered into a memorandum of understanding (MOU) in 1912 to create a white-settler dominated fishery.<sup>38</sup> Up until that time, the large fish companies on the north coast maintained exclusive control over federally issued fishing permits, referred to as the "boat rating system." Under this system, the established canneries worked out a distribution of fishing effort amongst themselves. The companies then distributed their permits to reliable fishermen in such a way as to control the supply of fish to their canneries. On the north coast, this meant that the majority of fishermen remained First Nations as this ensured a reliable cannery labour force. This also served to keep new competitors out of the processing industry.

From the perspective of the primarily white, male, propertied electorate, the established canners' boat rating system excluded them from participating in the fishery. For this sector, the clearest path into the fishery involved breaking the large canneries' monopoly over fishing opportunities by creating a class of independent white fishermen. Thus, the clause in the 1912 MOU, to wit: "it is eminently desirable to have the fisheries carried on by a suitable class of white fishermen. . . . The Fishery Regulations and the policy of both Departments should have in view hastening the time as much as possible when such will be the case."<sup>39</sup>

The MOU goes on to lament that while desirable, the creation of a white-only fishery "will require some years." In the interval, the MOU set out the procedures whereby a guaranteed number of independent licenses would be held for "bona fide white fishermen." The agreement further set up the provision that "the reservation [of permits] will be sufficient to cover all applications from

36. Knight, *Indians at Work*, 306.

37. Harris, *Native Space*, 202.

38. BC Archives, Memorandum of Understanding.

39. BC Archives, Memorandum of Understanding.

bona fide white fishermen.<sup>40</sup> Explicit and otherwise, the regulations, such as the 1912 MOU, that governed the establishment of fishing and forestry during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, worked to exclude indigenous peoples as full participants in the market economy as owners while relegating them to sources of labour power to be extracted analogously to the natural resources of fish, trees, and minerals. This discriminatory policy, which was explicitly designed to marginalize indigenous peoples, also contributed to maintaining the structure of the chiefly system. Isolated on the margins of the industrial economy, the customary laws and territories of the Ts'msyen and Gitxaala were crucial for their survival.

### **Primary Production: Hand logging, Fishing, and the Indigenous Economy 1900–1950**

Until the middle of the 20th century, many Ts'msyen people combined forestry and fisheries work with the harvesting of traditional food resources. Family units moved throughout their house territories harvesting resources for use and for sale, and worked seasonally at sawmills and canneries.

During this era, the majority of timber harvesting on the north coast was done by small, independent operations, many of them individual handloggers. The quality and accessibility of timber on the coast encouraged small scale production for local mills. Hand logging involved falling trees by hand on a small parcels of land on the coast, dragging the trees to the shore and towing them by boat to a mill. Most handloggers worked alone or in small teams and used their fishing boats for transport. First Nations' families hand logged into the 1950s, even as it had ceased to be a common scale of production for Euro-Canadians by the early decades of the century. Indigenous loggers' integration of timber harvesting with subsistence activities allowed them to persist in small-scale, independent production longer.<sup>41</sup> Even large-scale, industrial mills, such as BC's first coastal pulp mill at Swansons' Bay in the early 1900s relied heavily upon First Nations hand loggers to feed its pulp and paper plant. As recorded in company records<sup>42</sup> and recounted in First Nations oral accounts, many community members from Gitga'ata and surrounding communities engaged in harvesting logs for the mill during the off-peak fishing times.

Dolores Atkins<sup>43</sup> grew up in Port Essington on the lower Skeena River and recalls logging with her father and brother during the 1940s:

40. BC Archives, Memorandum of Understanding.

41. McDonald, "Trying to Make a Life," 358.

42. British Columbia Archives, GR 1397, Records Relating to Whalen Pulp and Paper.

43. The names of respondents reported in this section of the paper are pseudonyms in accordance with the provisions of the certificate for research with human subjects that this research was conducted under. Names quoted in other sections of the paper are not pseudonyms.

They would saw them down with those two-handled saws. Then after it falls down then they would start to clear off the branches. They would peel the log, I guess, so it slides easier. Then they would pull it down with ropes until it got into the river. When they had enough for a boom, we went into the mill.

Dolores and her brother would accompany their father at the beginning and end of the summer, when he logged before and after the fishing season. They logged timber-harvesting areas leased from BC by the owner of Brown's Mill on the Ecstall river, where they sold their logs.

Many of the Ts'msyen hand loggers applied for timber sales on their house territories, or "traplines" as these lineage-owned properties came to be commonly called. McDonald suggests that later the beachcombing areas on the Skeena River were also related to indigenous fishing grounds, but the provincial lease areas were much smaller than the traditional territories.<sup>44</sup> Harvesting on their own house territories was both culturally appropriate and convenient, making it possible for Ts'msyen loggers to combine hand logging with other harvesting activities.

Mabel Richards' family accompanied her father to various sites where he logged. David Richards felled the trees while his family limbed them, and the women and children would also harvest and process food. While at Cook's Inlet, they would harvest clams, mussels, crabs, salmon, and sea cucumber. At other camps they took halibut, seaweed, herring eggs, abalone, and octopus. The family effectively combined commercial and subsistence harvesting:

He would try to do a little bit of logging, little bit of trapping until March. Then we would move out to another camp and then we go halibut fishing. While he is halibut fishing we are gathering food.... From there we move back to Port Essington. In the summer he would gillnet ... my mother always worked in the canneries, my grandparents always worked in canneries. While the men are fishing the women are working. Even wee little kids will stand on boxes. Then after the summer season he goes and does a bit of logging for Christmas money.

Both Dolores' and Mabel's fathers also worked at local sawmills in the winter. Bob Atkins worked at Brown's Mill during the winter months as an edgerman. When Brown's mill closed, and hand logging claims became scarce, he moved to the Georgetown mill and continued to combine this work with fishing. David Richards, like many other First Nations men from Port Essington (and during the war, some women), also worked at Brown's Mill and/or delivered logs to it.

The coastal Ts'msyen and Gitxa'ala communities were less involved in hand logging than the people on the Skeena, but they did integrate logging and beachcombing into their seasonal round. Gitxa'ala people delivered logs to the mill at Oona River, on Porcher Island, until the 1970s. Often they would bring logs to be sawn for housing lumber, on a 50/50 basis. Families from Gitga'ata, Kitlope, Kitamaat, and Kitasoo sold logs to the pulp mill at Swanson's Bay.

44. McDonald, "Trying to Make a Life," 351.



Community members have also engaged in casual beachcombing while travelling in their fishing boats. This activity became increasingly important as a source of supplemental income as hand logging and commercial fishing declined in the latter years of the 20th century.

With the shift to machine-based logging, which accessed larger patches of coastal timber, and to Tree Farm Licenses (TFL), which allocated huge areas to major companies, hand logging permits and opportunities became more and more difficult to obtain. South of the Ts'msyen and Gitxaala territories, in the Kitamaat region, John Pritchard suggests that timber access began to shift towards large companies as early as 1913.<sup>45</sup> Forestry regulations developed in favour of larger operators and speculators. The bid system disadvantaged smaller, undercapitalized operators, as did the granting of larger and larger timber leases. Furthermore, Pritchard cites several examples from the Forestry Service records that suggest discrimination against indigenous handloggers regarding the awarding of timber sales.<sup>46</sup> However, it was not until the 1950s that hand logging became a lost component of the Ts'msyen and Gitxaala seasonal economy. In 1944, there were timber sales granted to First Nations people living in Port Essington of up to 1620 acres in size. In the decade that followed, the first Tree Farm License was granted to Columbia Cellulose in the Nass and Kalum valleys. Thereafter a shift occurred to large-scale, industrial logging in the Ts'msyen territories. Mabel Richards remembers the impact of this policy shift:

My dad had handlogging claims. He did handlogging, and logging to the Native people, and all the old people, Native and non-Native, having a logging claim was just like having money in the bank. They get what they need and leave the other standing. Then they brought in the big companies, that did away with the bank account. Someone else took it. So they lost all their logging claims.... But they were allowed to get a permit and beachcomb. But they never got much. Very little.... So it was always the same, the big company that swallows up the little people.

At the same time, Ts'msyen peoples were gradually being excluded from the fishing industry. Michael Kew suggests that First Nations' participation in the fishing industry as owner-operators peaked around the time of World War II.<sup>47</sup> It is primarily the participation of northern First Nations fishermen that kept the numbers up, because on the Fraser River, indigenous fishermen were gradually displaced and replaced after 1900.<sup>48</sup>

The increasing capitalization of the fishing fleet put First Nations fishers at

45. John C. Pritchard "Economic Development and the Disintegration of Traditional Culture Among the Haisla," PhD dissertation, University of British Columbia, 1977, 13.

46. Pritchard, "Economic Development," 146–48.

47. Michael Kew, "Salmon Availability, Technology, and Cultural Adaptation in the Fraser River Watershed," in Brian Hayden, ed., *A Complex Culture of the British Columbia Plateau Traditional St'l'at'imx Resource Use* (Vancouver 1992), 177–221.

48. See Knight, *Indians at Work*.

a disadvantage. Unable to obtain credit based on property (due to the reserve system), First Nations fishermen were less able to keep up with the technological advances, beginning with the shift to motorized boats in the early 20th century. Indigenous fishermen were thus kept closely tied to the canneries for credit and for boats. Increasingly, they were operating cannery-owned vessels. This prevented many from enjoying the advantages offered by independent fishermen's organizations, such as the Prince Rupert Fishermen's Co-operative.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, their ability to effectively negotiate fish prices was also restricted. The dependence on the canneries as a source of credit and boats eventually contributed to the decline in First Nations' participation in the fishing industry. As the canneries steadily consolidated and centralized after the 1930s, they offered less and less employment to First Nations. In the north, cannery closures between 1944–1953 left 50 percent fewer women hired in processing fish.<sup>50</sup>

### Post-war Industrial Concentration

The shift to large-scale, industrial logging and the concentration of production in the fishing industry had a critical impact on the ways in which Ts'msyen and Gitxaala peoples interacted with the capitalist resource extraction industry. In logging, they shifted from small-scale, hand logging to working for major companies logging both Tree Farm Licenses and patches of reserve land. While some continued to combine forestry work with commercial fishing and subsistence harvesting, this integrated livelihood became increasingly difficult to pursue. For those, such as Gitxaala, who concentrated on fisheries, the period of concentration started a little later (mid-1960s) but had similar implications.

At least a few men from each of these communities have been involved in industrial logging at one point in their working lives. Men from Metlakatla have had careers in heli-logging. Gitxaala and Gitga'at community members nominally participated in forestry in the early industrial period, preferring to focus on commercial fishing. Many Kitsumkalum men worked for Columbia Cellulose, which held the first TFL, and logged the Nisga'a and Kitsumkalum territories during the 1960s and 1970s. Anthony Richards started working as a logger after he returned from residential school. His first training in the forest was hand logging with his father, David Richards:

I moved to Terrace and the only work here was the logging, so that's why I went into logging. Started off highlead logging at the Kalum valley here. Started to work my way up from whistle punk and I went chasing, and rigging slinging, and hooker. You just work your way

49. See, for example, Charles R. Menzies, "All That Holds Us Together: Kinship and Resource Pooling in a Fishing Co-operative," *MAST: Maritime Anthropological Studies*, 6 (1993), 157–179.

50. Muszynski, *Cheap Wage Labour*, 204.

up like that in logging. Then I went into bucking and landing, second loader....

Lax Kw'Alaams has been the community most involved in industrial logging during the last four decades, primarily due to the timber harvesting on the band's reserve lands. Many band members got their first jobs logging on the reserve and then moved into other jobs throughout the province. Despite a lull in on-reserve harvesting, and the general decline in logging jobs in the north, there are still a number of career loggers in the community. However, the position of First Nations loggers in the industry was often unstable.

Andrew Carter started at Georgetown mill when he was fourteen years old. From there, he was hired by logging contractors who supplied the mill. Over his more than 30 years in logging, Andrew has worked his way through the hierarchy of forestry jobs. He suggests that career advancement was sometimes difficult for indigenous workers:

It was hard to move up for us anyway, First Nations people. I was on chokerman for a long time and even though we know how to splice, we know how to hooktend, they wouldn't put us in charge of hooktending. And we are logging our own reserves too. We don't pay income tax so they left us down in chokerman and let someone else do the hooktending. That's been ongoing, right until today. It's still the same yet.

Ts'msyen and Gitxaala loggers have experienced racism in both hiring and on the job site. Chris Camden of Metlatkatla suggests that, as a First Nations logger, he needed to fight to overcome stereotypes and build a reputation as a good worker: "You had to produce a lot more. You had to prove yourself, your capacity." Jake Turner of Lax Kw'Alaams heard stories of the racism that his father faced during the 1960s, but suggested that things have improved and that he has encountered less prejudice.

Involvement in the fishing industry in the post-war period also reflects the dominant drive toward concentration of ownership and rationalization of production within a capitalist mode of production. In fisheries, economic processes combined with government regulation to drive indigenous fishers out of the industrialized fishery. Throughout much of the mid-20th century, Gitxaala supported a core of salmon seine skippers who ran cannery-owned boats, several dozen privately owned and rented gillnetters, and a host of other types of vessels. Government regulations turned licenses to fish into property. The companies that had previously owned fish boats to rent to fishermen (many who were First Nations) responded by redirecting their capital away from the boats into the more lucrative licenses. The white settler fishery that colonial capital had long envisioned was finally becoming a reality as more and more indigenous skippers were driven off of their rented company boats and were replaced by white fishermen.<sup>51</sup>

51. From field research and interviews with Gitxaala fishermen, 1998–2008. BC Archives, Memorandum of Understanding. Due to a variety of rules, regulations, and legislation, aboriginal participation in the *K'mksiwah* commercial fisheries has been steadily declining since the first canneries opened on the north coast. At the same time, indigenous control and manage-

Some of the men who logged also tried to combine logging and fishing, but as access to fish became more and more restricted, they privileged logging jobs over summer fishing opportunities. Industrial logging has been more difficult to integrate with other income-generating and food-harvesting activities. Unions emphasize seniority, which limits the feasibility of leaving logging to pursue other activities and then returning to a forestry job. In spite of these economic pressures, all of the people we spoke with also highlighted the importance to them of their communities. Though contemporary indigenous people may work for wages, they maintain their social ties to aboriginal worlds through participation in and contributions to customary and traditional aspects of Ts'msyen and Gitxaala society. Andrew Carter, for example, is one of the community's language teachers. Many of these men hold traditional names. Involvement in wage labour acts as a mechanism to continue Ts'msyen and Gitxaala ways of life.

## Conclusion

Throughout the course of the past two centuries, Ts'msyen and Gitxaala peoples have played a critical role in the development of British Columbia's resource economy, first, as independent producers, and then as labour power. As those in charge of crafting legislation and policy well understood, the success of the natural resource industries in British Columbia depended upon the movement of labour from the indigenous economy to the industrial economy and the eventual enclosure of First Nations' labour power within the authority of a market-based system of wage labour. The success of these industries depended on the movement of resources from the aboriginal economy to the industrial economy – the capture of fish and trees, and the capture and control of land and sea. On the coast, this resulted in a high degree of participation by Ts'msyen and Gitxaala peoples in the industrial economy. However, indigenous participation was to a great extent severely limited by *K'mksiwah* who, using the power of the state, attempted to keep indigenous peoples out of the centres of power.

This exclusion was not simply a matter of an external force imposed upon Ts'msyen or Gitxaala peoples. From the early interactions in the fur trade through involvement in the emerging fishery and forestry sectors, and through to the late 20th century, Ts'msyen and Gitxaala peoples have adopted some elements of the *K'mksiwah* economy while rejecting others. They have acted simultaneously within and against the emerging capitalist order. The outcome has been the continuation of indigenous peoples rooted in a clear sense of their history and their culture.

As discussed in this paper, the social and political landscape for the Ts'msyen

---

ment of these same resources has been maintained within the communities. Current legal and political struggles are now starting to address these matters.

and Gitxaala shaped the early establishment of industrial resource capitalism. Mills and canneries were established in relation to traditional Ts'msyen and Gitxaala harvesting sites, camps, and villages. While the state attempted to define the formal ownership within *K'mksiwah* terms, effective use, access, and control of these sites were retained within the domain of Ts'msyen and Gitxaala *walp* and village leadership. The structure and organization of labour power was also contained within the customary system.

It is perhaps ironic that the mechanisms that the *K'mksiwah* hoped would assimilate and remove First Nations peoples actually contributed to their continuity and perseverance. Over the past 150 years, Ts'msyen and Gitxaala men and women have integrated involvement in the waged economy within the structure of their indigenous social organization and culture. They have, in effect, made history, even if they did so under conditions not of their own choosing.

*We would like to acknowledge the many years of support, encouragement, advice, and direction that our friends, family, and research participants have provided us. We would particularly like to acknowledge Ernie Bolton, who has worked with us and mentored us. Though this paper may not show it, it has been Ernie's guidance that has shaped much of what we have learned. We also acknowledge Teddy Gamble for the many conversations he shared with Charles. This research has been funded through a variety of research agencies, including the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; the awkwardly named Province of British Columbia granting agency Forest Investment Account – Forest Science Program; National Research Council of Canada Climate Change Impacts and Adaptation program; the University of British Columbia and the University of Northern British Columbia.*