*Ancient Language, Digital Tongue: A Framework for the Biography of Chaqweekash*By Miguel Strother

**Acknowledgments**

This research paper would not be possible without the inspiration and wisdom of Haisla elders Ken Hall and Ivy Maitland, the dedication of my teachers Shirley Hardman and Dr. Michael Marker, the love, patience and hot tea of Ineke Strother, the wind’s voice through the fir trees connecting my home to Comox First Nations Reserve 1 and by the joy and hope held within my two children. To all these great blessings, I give thanks.

**Fisherman, Captain, Chief: An Introduction**

The Kitlope Valley, near the town of Kitimat, British Columbia is home to the people of the Haisla First Nation. Currently the Kitlope is being observed as a world-class example of environmental purity. The expansive, 780,000 acre Greater Kitlope ecosystem thrives without significant human interference and is one of the most ideal locations in the world for conducting research on old-growth forest ecology. And while the natural landscape remains pristine, the language of the people who have called this landscape home, and all the rich knowledge and cultural value held within that language, is nearly extinct.

Chaqweekash Ken Hall of the Haisla and the Kawesas territory, who believes himself a direct extension of the Kitlope, has made a commitment to making sure his language and culture survive. The following is an attempt at taking a step forward in helping Ken realize that dream by establishing an appropriate methodology for telling his life story and simultaneously helping to preserve the ancient language of the Haisla.

Ken was born on a trap line in 1938 and learned his position as a respected boat captain by observing the ins and outs of his father’s fishing boat beginning at the age of six. Ken’s been offered fortunes for the rights to his land but he and the elders before him have boldly declared that the Kitlope will never suffer the environmental degradation that other areas in the region have succumbed to at the hands of industrial giants such as Alcan. Instead, Ken and his people have faced all manner of challenge in their commitment to maintaining the integrity of their ancestral home.

I met Ken while working with a group of senior educators at Simon Fraser University. We developed a strong connection, perhaps based on the respect Ken had for one of my then colleagues, Dr. Mark Selman. From that point on Ken and I began to build a trust and friendship which saw us spend many hours beginning to record the experiences of his life. Additionally, Ken began to share with me several of the ancient stories passed down to him by his ancestors. It was our intention to use this process and these stories to write a biography of Ken's life.

Eventually, we believed we had secured funding for our efforts moving forward. However, the stock market crash and subsequent economic downturn of 2008 proved to have a significant impact on that funding and left the project in limbo. Perhaps it was the best thing. And perhaps it was a natural thing. For me, there was no real barrier to accessing Ken's life, which is different than what researchers such as Lara O. Kowalsky, Maria J. Verhoef, Wilfreda E. Thurston and Gayle E Rutherford have experienced and describe as stopping, waiting, transition and acceptance[[1]](#footnote-1). Instead that bond with Ken has allowed me significant access, which I've learned may be somewhat uncommon for outsiders conducting research with First Nations communities angered by disrespectful, exploitative experiences with colonizers and researchers. However, with the time to reflect as a result of the loss of potential funding, I began to consider much more deeply how our work could serve many interests within Ken’s community; I began to understand how perhaps a book alone might not be the best format for such a project, rather one component of a much larger effort; and I began to understand just how important this project was not only to Ken and I, but potentially to his entire community and to anybody interested in alternative epistemologies and the significant knowledge of aboriginal people. The point here is that no matter how busy my life became, I could not let Ken's story go and that period of reflection helped foster the drive to continue.

Eventually, and quite by coincidence, I was introduced to Dr. Jo-Ann Archibald. After some time I shared with Jo-Ann the components of the potential project and she encouraged me to seek the support and guidance of UBC's Faculty of Education. This I did and although it's only been several months of work, this advice has proven invaluable and our project has taken on a new life. I have been introduced to extensive scholarship on working with First Nations people, preserving indigenous languages and the mysteries and value of Indigenous storytelling. Additionally, I've been pushed to question what exactly it is that Ken and I are trying to accomplish, what methods we should use, and what the impact, both positive and negative, of those methods might be.

Of particular importance in the pages that follow I hope to expand upon exactly what the implications are for using modern digital technology to preserve elements of ancient cultures, particularly language. And all of this effort is dedicated to Ken Hall and his ancestors and to finding the best way to preserve and share the stories of his life and leave a positive and lasting legacy within his community through language and storytelling.

**The Digital Bridge**

According to 2001 census data, there were only 110 fluent speakers of the Haisla language alive at that time. More recent information made available through the “Report on the Status of BC First Nations Language 2010,” which I will refer to several times throughout the course of this paper, claims only 80 fluent Haisla speakers are alive today. Perhaps most troubling is the fact that the average age of these few remaining speakers was 61.5 years old, and that again was in 2001. With so many of the fluent Haisla speakers at such an advanced age, and based on a rate of decline similar to that between 2001 and 2010, even a conservative estimate makes things look very grim when it comes to the survival of this ancient language. The same report referred to above makes this statement:

“Each language encompasses immense cultural, historical, scientific, and ecological knowledge. This knowledge is vital not only for the language communities themselves, but also for the sum of all human knowledge.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

Further to that statement, UNESCO Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura writes about the great impact language extinction can potentially have on all of mankind:

“The death of a language leads to the disappearance of many forms of intangible cultural heritage, especially the invaluable heritage of traditions and oral expressions of the community that spoke it – from poems and legends to proverbs and jokes. The loss of languages is also detrimental to humanity’s grasp of biodiversity, as they transmit much knowledge about the nature and the universe.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

It is the position of this paper that combined with traditional art forms, language is the most important component for defining and preserving a distinct culture. Based on this view it's impossible to ignore how critical taking a multilingual tact to telling Ken's life stories is, as Ken himself is one of those 80 remaining fluent speakers of the Haisla language still living. Not only are the unique experiences of his life important to share, so too is the language he interpreted many of those experiences through. And as such, any attempt at preserving those stories needs to, if possible, account for the importance of that language and its reliance on the oral form.

Most First Nations storytelling methods are steeped in oral traditions and Haisla traditions are no different in this regard. And although the accuracy and validity of these oral traditions is high as compared to those such as the Western literate tradition,[[4]](#footnote-4) the oral form does make it difficult to pass on stories and preserve distinct languages, especially in the face of a modern society dominated by the unrelenting global spread of the English language and multiple modes of communication ranging from photography to the constantly evolving digital landscape, all of which are rooted in Western traditions. And based on the work of researchers such as Dr. Jo-Ann Archibald we know that oral traditions are vitally important for passing on the complex meanings wrapped inside traditional First Nations stories:

“Indigenous stories have lost much educational and social value due to colonization, which resulted in weak translations from aboriginal languages to English, stories shaped to fit a Western literate form, and stories adapted to fit predominantly Western education system. The translations lose much of the original humor and meaning and are misrepresented and/or appropriated by those who don't understand the story connections and cultural teachings.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Archibald adds:

“Whenever indigenous oral tradition is presented in textual form, the text limits the level of understanding because it cannot convey the storyteller’s gestures, tone, rhythm, and personality.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

These important points have made me question how accurately even a masterfully written biography can contribute to some of the central challenges facing the Haisla, namely the preservation of their language. Clearly, there is value in work such as Verna J. Kirkness and Chief Simon Baker’s co-authored autobiography “Khot-La-Cha”, but for our purposes I've begun to think about a much more multi-faceted approach to capturing and relaying Ken's life stories.

The idea for this project with Ken has evolved and presently involves using digital technology such as video and audio to try and more fully capture the oral traditions of the Haisla. I’ve theorized that by choosing several of the key stories relayed by Ken and producing short, detailed, mirrored scripts of each story (either experiential or legend) in both English and Haisla and then recording them with digital video and audio, we can create something of a living dictionary through storytelling. As part of the process of researching this approach I've come across several examples of similar projects that have been successfully undertaken. The one that most closely resembles our thinking is the “Stories of Our Elders” project based on 22 stories of Cree and Ojibway elders that can be found In the Natioanl Library digital archives[[7]](#footnote-7). This particular project uses a web platform that incorporates digital audio, digital video, English and the written form of the Cree and Ojibway languages. Where the project differs significantly is that there are multiple elder stories involved in that project rather than a comprehensive overview of one individual.

It seems quite clear to me that this multimedia approach, in addition to any written work, makes the appropriate considerations for the oral nature of Ken’s and the Haisla’s cultural traditions as it has the ability to capture things like intonation, facial expressions, and body language, all of which, as noted by Archibald, are essential to helping conveying the full impact of oration. However, the use of digital technology comes with many of its own challenges, particularly as it relates to the concept of holism, which will be discussed in more detail later in this work.

Additionally, my hypothesis has grown to include working with school-age children (elementary, junior high school, high school) on this project as it could be of great benefit for language preservation. By including multiple generations of schoolchildren, and perhaps even getting them to work on and produce the bulk of the digital elements, I feel like we might be able to increase interest in Ken’s stories among youth and simultaneously build capacity for storytelling through digital works, a key skill in today's digital economy, which above and beyond solidifying ongoing respect and reverence for Haisla culture, language and elder knowledge, could also broaden future opportunities for those involved. Based on the success of digital video projects such as “Fraser River Journey” in Chilliwack, British Columbia, “March Point” in Skagit County, Washington, and “Our Voice, Our Culture, Our Community” in Richmond, British Columbia, it stands to reason that involvement in a project like this would stimulate interest in the Haisla language within this key demographic (6-18 years). I was quite convinced of this approach of involving only school-age children and youth, but my opinion, much like that on the format, has altered substantially as a result of consultation with Haisla community elders.

Perhaps no statement more than the one made by Ken's sister Ivy Maitland illustrates how important it is to immediately take measures to preserve the Haisla language. When I first contacted her about this project she told me quite openly that she goes to bed every night worrying that another elder will pass into the spirit world and with them more knowledge crucial to the survival of the Haisla's culture. "It is my worst nightmare to lose another elder," Maitland told me.[[8]](#footnote-8) Those words perhaps more than any others, validate the importance of this project. Fortunately, Ivy is a teacher and she works with school-aged children in an effort to encourage and revive multilingualism in the Haisla community. These efforts include up to five hours of instruction in the classroom every week for elementary school children. Unfortunately, based on what Ivy says, it is a very difficult thing to keep the children interested as the language is not spoken in most homes and five hours per week is not nearly enough to develop fluent speakers.[[9]](#footnote-9)

When I outlined this project for Ivy she showed immediate interest and like her brother was very forthcoming with information. But even though she was quite keen on the idea of utilizing digital technology, she was not nearly as enthusiastic on the approach I outlined involving school-age children. This surprised me considering A) her lack of use of technology (she like her brother doesn't even have an e-mail account) and B) her ongoing hands-on work in elementary schools. I thought perhaps her hesitation to this approach was caution related to allowing an outsider to work with children, which is perfectly understandable. And even though this might be part of the reason for her hesitance, it's now clear to me that it's not entirely the motivation. In her subtle way and through multiple conversations, Ivy kept gently encouraging me to contact several people in the community who are in their 50s to work on this project. Personally, I was hesitant to do so because I felt the most potential lays within school-age children, but after the fourth or fifth time, it finally sunk in that she's probably right. By encouraging multilingualism in this older group it is possible there will be a trickle-down effect within the community. In fact this approach is validated by several sources including this statement from the First Nations language status report:

“Adult language learners are an excellent resource, as often the adults learning a First Nations language are the ones who teach what they have learned and/or assist elder speakers in passing on the language to children. Unfortunately, however, most programs do not emphasize the creation of fluent speakers of the languages, and the resources and time spent on language are inadequate to achieve healthy levels of fluency. There are also concerns within communities that there is an intergenerational gap between those learning the language at school and the elders in the community. Since a relatively low number (690) of parent-aged (25 - 44 years) adults are learning the language, children who are learning the language in school often have no one to talk to at home. Language programs involving children along with their parents are needed in order to bridge this gap.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Although Ivy had convinced me that the approach of involving older people was essential before I read this passage, it certainly does validate her natural instincts and understandings regarding key language issues. And as is so often the case, as is noted by researchers such as Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley and Ray Barnhardt, local knowledge, and particularly elder knowledge is precise and often profound and must be accessed and respected, no matter how foreign it might appear to outsiders, in order to have projects such as the one I’ve begun to outline, reach full potential.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**Many Voices, One Goal: Collaborative Research in the Digital Realm**

Before my formal involvement with UBC as it relates to this project, I was quite naïve about the impacts research efforts such as this one could and have had on First Nations communities. For me, I started out with nothing but the best intentions — in pursuit of a good story, to help a good man and his relations, and to grow personally as a storyteller — and it was hard to conceptualize how others may have more nefarious intentions. Certainly I thought about the impact that colonization has had on the Haisla and have discussed residential schools in particular with Ken, but I never really considered my position as an outsider too much. I thought that everybody would surely see there is nothing but good intentions attached to this project. Perhaps they have, but as the project grows and word of it gets out within the community, it is now apparent to me that it will be important to have a clear and transparent framework for proceeding in an ethical manner based on principles of collaborative research outlined by skilled and experienced researchers such as Dr. Charles Menzies.

Menzies writes extensively on the importance of observing protocols and building strong levels of trust between researchers and First Nations communities in order to properly account for the wrongs of the past. His work points out that even the slightest effort at recording interactions with First Nations communities and even minor collection or documentation of indigenous knowledge can have significant ramifications and needs to be respected and accounted for by the researchers involved:

“What we write in our field notes and published papers has the potential to be more than simple private jottings, debates over key concepts, or unique insights into the social world around us; they in fact contain living moments of the worlds we describe and the power of these words extend beyond ourselves.” [[12]](#footnote-12)

The impact that Menzies describes is likely exponentially larger as information migrates to the Internet and as such any efforts made at digital collection and archiving within the scope of this project needs to be undertaken in a highly responsible manner. For example, determining what is accessible and where and to whom will be a key element to the project scope. The Haisla Community School, led by principal Wendy Bolton, for example, is already utilizing sites like Firstvoices.com and we wouldn't want to trip over those efforts, rather work in a way which is respectful of and strengthens these efforts.

Menzies’ efforts to ensure that all knowledge and information gathered through research for his project was returned to the Gitxaaɫa Nation is inspirational and has significantly influenced my thinking related to this project. It is my hope that by taking the lead from Menzies’ efforts and by drafting a collaborative research agreement based on the finding of this research paper, an even greater acceptance and interest in this project will be realized by as many members of the community as possible, and that this project will truly become a collaborative research effort. And without that agreement and collaboration, insight such as Ivy’s might be taken for granted or even completely overlooked, which the example about adult learners above demonstrates would contribute to substantial flaws in the project.

**Electronic Question Marks**

Although the benefits and wonders of modern technology appear to have the potential to serve the interests of rural communities in particular, there are many considerations to be taken when incorporating these technologies into projects within aboriginal communities such as the one I've begun to outline. Perhaps the most important learning related to Aboriginal culture and tradition is about the significance of holism and a holistic approach to research and life in general. The indigenous philosophical concept of Holism is defined by Dr. Jo-Ann Archibald as referring to "the interrelatedness between the intellectual, spiritual (metaphysical values and beliefs and the creator), emotional, and physical (body and behaviors/action) realms to form a whole healthy person. The development of holism extends to and is mutually influenced by one's family, community, band, and nation,” [[13]](#footnote-13). It is clear to me that any project that will have lasting success within an aboriginal community, or any community for that matter, will incorporate the principles of this philosophy. However, that presents some challenges, specifically as it relates to the use of digital technology.

As amazing as digital technology is for archiving and capturing data, and as much as it seems to capture the human imagination, that of youth in particular, there are some significant drawbacks that many researchers, including myself, can potentially overlook. Corporations would have us believe that using computers will save the world all kinds of time and money, which is quite often true on the surface, and that they will have very limited negative impact and an overwhelming number of benefits. But what are the costs of producing machines that require such a tremendous amount of energy to use? And what are the repercussions related to machines that require the mining and repurposing of such a significant amount of natural resources such as oil and precious metals and have become practically disposable (According to a report from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the average computer lifespan has dropped from six years in 1997 to two years in 2005)? And perhaps most importantly, how far do these technologies remove human beings from their natural environments, a particularly significant concern as it relates to First Nations communities? Dr. Jerry Mander examines these questions in detail in his book “In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nation”. Mander writes:

“Unfortunately, the major question about computers is not whether they serve you or your organization or your business well. I wish it were so simple to just take this personal view. We must look at the totality of how computers affect society, and life on earth. We need to dredge each dimension of their impact and put it all together into one picture before we can judge their existence is beneficial or harmful.” [[14]](#footnote-14)

Mander goes on to point out that many of the materials used in modern computers are highly toxic both in pre and post-production, that these machines have significant impact on human interaction and communication, and they separate humans even further from their connection to the natural environment, which is so critical to many indigenous traditions:

“Meanwhile, with nuances, moods, and personal observations subtracted from the information model — the very elements by which humans and nature have traditionally communicated with one another — the end result is passionless: a net loss in intimacy with, caring for, and love of nature.” [[15]](#footnote-15)

This viewpoint has significant ramifications for the multiplatform storytelling model I've tried to outline for this project with Chief Ken Hall. It sends a clear warning about relying solely on modern technology for communication and about the impact it can have on the values and traditional methods of storytelling within First Nations communities. It also strongly supports the argument outlined by Craig Howe in his influential paper “Cyberspace is No Place for Tribalism,” where he writes:

“If Indian communities wish to stake out a place in cyberspace, then they must understand that in doing so they are capitulating to the underlying philosophy of the Internet. Cyberspace is a fantastic technological achievement sounded on the ideas of Western civilization. But it is not merely the latest "foreign good" — such as cooking pots, firearms, and automobiles — to be adopted into tribal communities. Whereas those other technologies had analogues in tribal communities and could be incorporated into tribal worldviews, the pervasive universalism and individualism of the World Wide Web are antithetical to the particular localities, societies, moralities, and experiences that constitute tribalism.” [[16]](#footnote-16)

And while both Howe and Mander’s arguments are entirely valid and need to be reviewed critically by anyone considering technology’s use in a First Nation’s research context, I think they somewhat overlook how powerful the benefits might be, particularly the potential of reviving and preserving languages and knowledge on the verge of extinction. Researchers Larry J. Zimmerman, Karen P. Zimmerman and Leonard R. Bruguier point out:

“Without a unique language, a culture uses the language of the dominant society, losing many of its important processes and altering its worldview. Also print media and conventional classroom language instruction are difficult to use in traditional cultures reliant on oral presentation. On CD-ROMs, voices and text can be combined with video, photographs, pictures and music to give an accurate, contextualized hesitations of linguistic and cultural knowledge.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

Additionally, it's also important to make the point that First Nations storytelling doesn't need to stay cemented in the past to maintain the power and integrity of traditional stories and elder knowledge. To suggest that allowing only for the use of traditional mediums would be to discount the work of writers like Eden Robinson, Tomson Highway, and Joseph Boyden and filmmakers like George Burdeau and Alanis Obomsawin. The fact is a good story is often a good story no matter what medium it's told in, whether that be orally, through carving or through fiction, poetry, painting, photography, film, claymation, animation or any number of other media. Marshall McLuhan’s classic statement “the medium is the message,” holds truth to be sure, but it's the message that artists and audience should remain most interested in. And how could Howe’s argument, for example, even be made to a significant audience without reliance on the Western literate form? The truth is that the motive, intelligence, insight, and the emotional connections that are made through art should transcend the medium. Similarly, the messages and intelligence and wisdom of traditional elder stories can transcend the oral form.

Lorenzo Cherubini, who writes extensively on the oral traditions of First Nations people, takes a similar position by stating that elder knowledge in particular stands to benefit and persevere from the use of digital technology while maintaining the integrity of the knowledge itself:

“The metamorphosis of the oral tradition of storytelling into the digital medium creates a sense of audience for the elders who self-profess to be intermediaries from one generation to the next. As John Miles Foley (2008) insightfully suggests, oral tradition and digital technology are the frameworks to the fading era characteristic of the printed page. Digital storytelling situates the elders in the line of public gaze, where once their audience was more immediate and culturally relative. The presumed influence of their stories involves the variation of exposition, the representational language, and the latent relationships between the human and spiritual realms according to Aboriginal peoples’ worldviews. The elders’ role is to sustain the continuity of belief and so accept the digital as a means to reach a broader audience and illuminate a complex system of interrelated values.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Clearly there needs to be a balance between digital formats and oral traditions in order to help facilitate the survival of Haisla traditions, no matter how pervasive technology has or may become and no matter how it may be used in this project or by the community moving forward. Like any good work, digital works must pay respect to the master works before it. But technology's use does not need to take away from, degrade, nor breakdown the rich cultural value of Ken’s stories or the Haisla language. In fact it should add to the fabric of that tapestry.

**The Story to Follow**

Relaying the stories of Ken Hall's life is an important task. It is at project that has the ability to directly impact many generations of people both within the Haisla community and beyond. As such it needs to take into account the significant traditions of the Haisla and harness the intelligence and knowledge of the people within the community, particularly elders. The insights of Mander also demonstrate that any equipment that's used within the context of a multi-media project related to First Nations culture needs to be purchased and cared for in an ethical way so as not to contribute to the ongoing separation of human beings from the natural world and the disposable culture created by the corporations responsible for producing and manufacturing technology. The elder wisdom of Ken Hall’s sister Ivy Maitland demonstrate that local knowledge must be the first point of reference in determining the best directions for this project and be openly and respectfully acknowledged as such. And the research of people like Dr. Jo-Ann Archibald and Lorenzo Cherubini show that technology does not need to take away from the oral traditions of the Haisla, rather it needs to respect and supplement those traditions. Without this acknowledgment and without these steps, it would be very difficult to claim that the project is done in a collaborative manner or serve the Haisla in a holistic way, which would be counter intuitive and disrespectful to the natural environment and traditions that this knowledge is born from. And without these pieces woven into the methodology of a collaborative project involving multiple languages and multiple generations of Haisla people, this crucial story about Chaqweekash Ken Hall would be incomplete.

**Postscript**

After this paper has been reviewed by Shirley Hardman it will be adjusted accordingly and once again be sent to Ken Hall and Ivy Maitland for review. Pending any changes it will then be sent to the Haisla Language Authority, which has already agreed to review, and the Kitimat Village Council with the hope it will build interest in and momentum for constructing an updated official project proposal based on its findings. The final paper and all the research and notes will be delivered to and remain the property of Ken Hall.

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