Lia Hart

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With Professor Susan Rowley

**How Haida Weaving and Healing are Related**

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My name is Lia Rosemary *Skiljaadee* Hart. I was adopted into the Skedans Clan along with my mother and siblings, at which time I was given the name *Jaada k’yaalt’sii.* I’m the eldest daughter of *7idansuu* James Hart and *Hitwan Jaada* Rosemary Hart. My paternal *naani* is Joan Thelma Rose. I was introduced to many of these phenomenal weavers through my dad, although it was a Nika from Skidegate who first gave me directions on how to try it. Haida artists and weavers are my family, friends, teachers and healers. I identify as an artist, of sorts, and hope to become more adventurous in the art of weaving in the near future. Until then, I wish to always find ways to keep my hands busy…

The story of Haida weaving is best told through the inhabitants of Haida Gwaii. Haida Gwaii, (Appendix 1.0) an archipelago of islands south east of the Alaskan panhandle, has two stories that explain it’s unique biology and culture. The first, derived from geological research, tells us that the islands were excluded from glaciation (Appendix 1.1) at the time when much of the mainland was iced over, resulting in many endemic plant and animal species that can only be found on the islands. The second, known to the Haida is “Loon On The Water” and was passed on to me by Storyteller *Ḵáawan Sangaa* Woody Morrison Jr.

**Loon On The Water.**

*Nang Kilstlaas*: An Ancient One who is born again as Raven-that-walked-the-Earth.

We don't know where this place… Earth, came from. They say it was here before us and before all the other Beings. There is lots we don't know, we could make up things to explain those things or, we can live our lives knowing they exist and, to treat them in such a way that we don't wipe them out. That happened lots of times… things got wiped-out because, they say, maybe it is supposed to be that way.

When we have lots, we don't have to think about those things any more, we just take them. We start thinking about other things and pretty soon we are hurting those things that there was lots of… the ones that made it so we don't have to think about them. So, it is said, we have to tell our stories, our history. How we are related to those things, how we were helped by those things. When we forget them it is like we forget to care for our children, we don't guide them so that they grow up in a good way… that is abusing them and, when they get to a certain point they go away so we don't hurt them any more. Then they hurt other things, they say.

It is said, that Raven-Walking told us that before the world had things living on it, there was no land. Just water, dark brooding water with no land, *hlen-gwaay tleg*, just some shallow places where the Supernatural Beings would pull up and rest. They say there was no life visible except for one lone *Tathl/ Ang Aanii* (Loon) swimming around all by itself. *Tathl* watched those things and remembered them.

After a long time, *TATHL* looked up into the sky, and there in the air above, *TATHL* saw a *Naay* (Place-Where-Beings-Dwell), suspended and motionless. *Tathl* flew up to the *Naay*, settled on the *Naay Xangsii* (place-in-front-of-the-doorway), and removed his feathers and Loon-skin, taking on the form of a Man.

Stepping up to *K’yuuaay* (the door-way), *TATHL* looked in and saw, in the middle of the room, a fire burning between two crystal-clear stones, like a steady *sgik’ajang* (lightening bolt). It was as if the ends of the stones were burning yet neither was consumed by the fire. On the far side of the fire an Ancient One was dozing. There was no one else present.

*Tathl* slipped into the room and took up a position opposite the Ancient One and gazed down on him. The Ancient One seemed so oblivious to his presence that Tathl feared to speak lest he startle him, and so went outside to announce his arrival. There he "announced" as loons do even today across the still waters, ‘*TATHL!’, ‘TATHL!!*’ (*Ang Aanii*)

Tathl returned to his place beside the fire, and still there was no sign of life and movement from the sleeping Ancient. After a time, *TATHL* thought he would try again and, stepping outside onto the *Naay Xangsii* into the empty world, issued his lonely cry: ‘*TATHL!*’ Nothing had changed when he resumed his place in the room.

As the shadows of evening came, Tathl again sent his lonely cry, ‘*TATHL!!’,* into the darkening skies but still the Ancient One did not open an eye. All night long Tathl repeated his ‘announcing’ and all the next day, and there was still no sign that the Ancient One had heard anything.

The evening of the second day, the Ancient One roused and said. *“Guus uu Damtgaas?’* (Who is being noisy?’).

Tathl replied: *Hlaw uu ijang* (It is me). *Ang Aanii, hinuu dii kyaang* (I am called Loon). ‘I keep calling this way because there is no place for Beings to dwell.’

The Ancient One began in a slow, dignified way to rub his stomach upward with the fingers and palms of his hands as he reclined before the fire. After a while, a little boy, appeared in his hands, sat up and then stood up. Placing his toes over those of the boy and taking the boy by the arms, the Ancient One stretched him up until he was the full height and girth of a grown man. He turned him around, and there he was - perfect in every way.

The Ancient One then sent the newly-incarnated man to fetch a box for him from his private room behind a front partition such as are found in the Haida dwellings. The box was where the Ancient One said it would be and, the new man brought it out for him and set it at his feet.

It was an inverted stone box, a cube measuring about the length of a young Sockeye salmon. The Ancient One then lifted up the box and revealed a smaller box inside. He lifted it up and still there was another box inside. The Ancient One did this a total of five times until he came to a small wooden box. From this he took a black stone about the size of a man's thumb tip, and gave it toTathl. Then, dipping again into the little wooden box, he brought out a larger shining stone this too he gave to Tathl, saying,

*‘Take these back to earth with you. Drop the little one into the water but be careful not to breathe on it too much. But when you put the big one in the water, blow on it and blow on it, and when you tire, you must still blow on it. There you will have the land and a place on which the people can dwell.’*

Carrying the two stones carefully, Tathl stepped out, donned his Loon skin and feathers, and flew back to the water of the Earth and, did as the Ancient One had instructed him.

Part Two. The Continents Emerge

Loon, as instructed by the Ancient one, careful to not breathe on it, dropped the small black stone into the water. Then, he held the shiny one, *K'iis*, and blew his breath on it; blowing until he got dizzy, then he blew still more. Loon then dropped the *K'iis* into the dark, foreboding water. At first nothing happened. There was no sign that anything was taking place; nothing but the widening ripples caused by the stones passing into another dimension; into the ocean depths.

Then from deep under the water came a sound, like that made by an old man, waking from a long sleep and clearing his throat. Something stirred. Something "down there" stirred, rumbled and shook… real hard *tlegaay hildengs*. Then there were bubbles, gigantic bubbles of steam roiling and churning the ocean's surface, like a pot of water filled with red-hot rocks. It went on for a long time… Loon kept moving, to get out of the way, the water was getting real warm.

Dry land came up from the dark, brooding waters. It was shiny and flat on top. It kept coming up, then it started to change as fire and smoke, lots of it sprayed out of the top and it got jagged, like fish teeth. Later, I don't know how long after, a smaller land came up.

The little stone became Haida Gwaii - hither land, and the big one, helped with much blowing, became *Kwagaqui* - yon land. The born-again man, the one made by the Ancient One from its own body then stepped down from the house into the skies to become *Nang kilstlaas* (the Raven-That-Walked-The-Earth to bring forth *Haadaas* Human Beings) and to teach them all they needed to know.

It was said that when Raven came down with his hands spread out, he pointed with one hand toward the bushes of the island and with the other to a great stone. Mankind came from the bushes and not from the stone, and it is believed that had they come from the stone, they would have been immortal.

Once there, Tathl was to drop the smaller stone into the Ocean, being careful to not breathe on it. The larger stone *Tathl* was to blow on it and blow on it until exhausted then blow on it some more and drop it into the Ocean. *Tathl* did as instructed, and the smaller became Haida Gwaii (formally known as the Queen Charlotte Islands), while the larger became the continent of North America (Turtle Island). The new Person the Ancient One brought into being then swooped down from the *Naay* as Raven; its feathers were pure White. Raven landed at *Yahl K’iik*.”

(Similar to Loon Story in Drew et al. 1980:5)

*Loon on the Water* speaks of the origins of both Haida Gwaii, and the White Raven, the first being on Haida Gwaii. This tale introduces us to the concept of being aware of life so as to not push another out of existence, and preaches the significance of telling the stories of our interrelationships. It reminds us that we cannot forget the beings that have helped us, and it also speaks about our children, who must be guided so that they grow up in a good way, as opposed to the cycles of abuse that can occur if they are not given a good way. According to this tale, White Raven was the first being created. Subsequently, the trickster, a reference made to Raven, either white or black, was the one that discovered and helped bring men and women into existence.

Endemic also to Haida Gwaii is Haida culture. People today who call Haida Gwaii home have a way of understanding the origins of their art forms that is different from academic disciplines. Throughout this paper, I will introduce Haida Weavers, Storytellers and a Healer to discuss how weaving and healing are related.

Healing is necessary for people who suffer and have suffered from cultural misunderstandings and injustice in order to maintain and develop good health. A holistic understanding of health might say that one has to be grounded in who one is in order to be healthy. Many Haida weavers connect to their culture through their art. Some have rediscovered their culture, whereas for others, the art never left.

First Nations culture was initially suppressed in order for Canada to come into being. Residential Schools were created, children taken, families split up, language suppressed, land encroached on, and entire ways of life were silenced into submission in order for a new system to exist. Institutional racism allowed generations of children to be reared far from their parents. Last names were given out in a fashion that failed to recognize pre-existing relationships. Land was settled by immigrants, while First Nations people were forced onto reservations, small parcels of land a fraction of the size people needed to survive. Foreign concepts were thrust on Native ideology and personhood affecting the way many indigenous people saw themselves and their culture. Misunderstandings across cultures, prejudice and discrimination are the weapons that continue this war.

Since the 1960’s we have seen and felt a resurgence of Indigenous cultures in North America. These Indigenous cultures, originating at a time before contact, but continuing into today, are so rich and deep; they are a culture that changes and is influenced with the addition of each new person that identifies as being “Native”. Understanding the link between healing and weaving then, will give us more insight into the interconnections that exist between people and plants, people and the land, and people and themselves. I hope that in reading this paper you as a reader will develop a greater appreciation for both the process of weaving, and the people that channel their energy into this exceptionally complex form of expression.

The Four Categories of Haida Weaving

Haida weaving can be categorized into four groups. Cedar bark *ts’uu k’al* (Appendix 1.3), spruce root *ts’uuii* (the inner part of the roo*t)* (Appendix 1.4)*,* *naaxiin* Chilkat (Appendix 1.5), and Raven’s Tail *yelth koo* (Appendix 1.6). Cedar bark weaving uses the inner bark, or cambium, of the Western Red Cedar tree *Thuja plicata* or Yellow Cedar tree *Cupressus nootkatensis* harvested in the summer when the sap is running.

To collect bark a horizontal incision about ten centimeters across is made and a vertical section of bark removed, so as to allow the tree to continue to grow. Next, the outer bark is removed and discarded and then folded for dry-storage for use at a later time. Typically, the bark is cut into sections and soaked before weaving. It has been recorded that the bark can also be pounded and greased to become more pliable, and water repellant (Vanderhoop/ *Kujuuhl*, pg.9)

*Giihlgiigaa,* Todd Devries recounted to me the origins of the first cedar trees.

They (three ladies) were standing on the beach, cleaning their salmon. Raven comes along, “Oh! They’re cleaning salmon”. You know how raven’s always hungry. They (the ladies) are trying to scare him away from the salmon, so he thinks, “how can I get that fish? How can I get it away from them?” So he’s thinking- (and then) waddles up to the three ladies and asks, “Are you ascared[sic] of bears?”

“No, why?” (says the ladies)

“Just wondering. Wolves?”

“No, no” (says the ladies)

“Aaa. Are you ascared [sic] of martins?”

“No”. (Replied the ladies)

“Are you ascared [sic] of anything? Owls?” (Asked Raven)

“Yeah. We are really scared of owls”(Admits the ladies).

“Wow, I found something that they like”. So Raven says, “Oh well just wondering what you gals are scared of”.

There are these bushes behind the girls. He waddles away (and) the ladies just ignore him. The ladies don’t notice that he ducks behind the bushes. He starts making all these owl notices, “Hoo Hoo”. The girls are totally frightened; they never thought an owl would come along. So they run up the mountains (their hair long and shiny flowing behind them) and turn into beautiful young cedar trees. That’s why their bark is soft and shiny.

And of course raven in succeeding in scaring them, gets all the fish.

This oral narrative tells of the transformative power of fear, and how fear can be used to achieve an objective. Although the three ladies were unafraid of seemingly dangerous animals, the sound of what they thought to be an owl in the bushes scares them away from their task. It should be noted that, for the Haida, owls have been associated with death and witches (Hans, Personal communication, 2012). Not only does the trickster, Raven, use fear to provide a meal himself, but his mischief also gives rise, maybe by mistake, to cedar trees, an invaluable resource to people on Haida Gwaii. This further shows the strong link between Haida and cedar trees.

*Ts’uuii* is harvested, like cedar bark, in the early summer. The roots must be unearthed, and the outer root roasted off soon after. Splitting the roots is done using a natural line that occurs in the root, ultimately dividing the root in half. *Ts’uuii* is lighter in colour than red cedar bark, and displays different characteristics when weaving. Its semi-circular shape, and its more wiry nature produces a weave that is visibly different from cedar bark. Often people who weave will start with cedar bark, before they refine their skills and try spruce root.

*Giihlgiigaa,* a Haida weaving enthusiast told me a story about how the first spruce root basket was made.

There (were) these two girls. And there wasn’t a whole lot of food in the village, so they were very hungry. And the mother went out and got some berries. She put them on the bench and said, “No one touch these until dinner time” and she went outside to do some other things. The little girl, the younger of the two, was really hungry. When she thought (that) Mum wasn’t looking outside, she ate them all. Mum comes back inside, and she’s really upset, cause that was the family dinner. So she strikes her daughter and tells them to go outside, and go do something. So the two girls go outside and the little one is kind of sobbing, but satisfied. She’s covered in salaal berries.

They go out in the woods, they are crying by a tree and a little spider comes down and dangles beside her and says, “Grab some of those roots there.” It was a spruce tree- so there were these roots on the ground, and she (the spider) says, “Weave like I do.” So she starts weaving a little basket. As she’s adding more roots to it, it’s getting bigger ad bigger and bigger. The little spider says “Look behind the tree now, you’ll see all those berry bushes,” those same ones that she was eating and they were just full of salaal berries. So she picks all the berries and asks her sister to help her and she keeps on weaving the basket, and it is getting really big, and it’s full of berries. They can’t drag it- it’s too big.

The elder sister runs back to the village and it’s not that far away, a couple hundred yards, gets the brothers and asks “Can you help us grab this basket of berries to the house?” So they drag it all the way to the house. When the Mum comes back from her errands she looks at the basket of berries, and she’s so embarrassed. The little girl says, “Those are for you Mummy.” She (the mother) feels so ashamed she dies on the spot.

This narrative displays the importance of generosity, exemplified by both the daughter and the spider. Although treated poorly and scolded, the young daughter returns to her mother with a generous portion of salaal berries and a hand-made spruce root basket. The shame that the mother felt must largely have had to do with the woman’s inability to feed the very child that ends up offering to feed her. Generosity out weighs authority and cruelty, and can be rewarded through teachings from other life forms, such as the spider teaching the little girl how to weave. In many areas of the world spiders have long been associated with the art of weaving because of their ability to create webs (Gillow 1999).

Harvesting and Collecting Materials

Before both *ts’uu k’al* and *ts’uuii* are collected, blessings and prayers are made before the tree to give thanks. Without the blessing, and knowledge of how much to take, future generations of weavers and trees could be negatively impacted because of limited supplies and the time it takes for regrowth. For example, taking too many roots from a single spruce tree could result in the tree having a difficult time absorbing water from the ground to feed itself. Taking too much *ts’uu k’al* from a tree could result in the death of the tree. Like the warning of the *Loon On The Water,* we can push others out of existence if we are not careful. The same goes for our harvesting practices. Offering something to the tree is of utmost importance if a good relationship is to continue. Talking to the tree is another method for paying respect, *yahguudung*.

Chilkat is a name associated with a group of Tlighit living in northwestern British Columbia and southeastern Alaska (BC Geographical Names, “Chilkat River”). The meaning of the world Chilkat is “salmon storehouse” (Bright 2004) in the Tlingit and Haida territories’. *Naaxiin* or Chilkat is a type of ceremonial weaving using wool. These blankets have been described as a boundary between worlds, and as an item that holds a presence. Their designs are typically geometric in shape (Emmons 1907). Although I don’t know any weavers that produce their own wool, many acknowledge the work that goes into raising a flock that produces wool. Some weavers spin raw wool, a time consuming process that adds to the hand-made element of the blanket, headband, apron, tunic, robe or various other garment being constructed. Traditional thigh spun “Z” warp is sometimes used, however commercial “S” twisted yarn is becoming popular (Reid 2010:11). Unspun mountain goat wool was used as currency, and had a standard value up and down the coast in a time before coin currency among people along the coast (Murray et. Al. n.d.).

I am uncertain if Haida in the past, used dog hair in addition to mountain goat wool, but evidence of dog hair in blankets has been found along the coast (Murray et. al. n.d.). Mountain goat wool probably would have been traded, as I have not come across evidence, or stories of mountain goats on Haida Gwaii. Today sheep and wool from white buffalo are used in *Naaxiin* and raven’s tail weaving.

The patterns used in *Naaxiin* use yellow, black and blue/green dyed wool. These colours can be obtained using local products. *Saxohli* Wolf Lichen (*Latharia Vulpina)* has been used for the yellow. For the black- iron, urine and fresh alder bark are combined. Lastly, the blue/green is a product of the oxidization of copper in urine (John Brent Bennett, personal communication, 2012).

*Naaxiin* designs compared to *yelth koo* have a different type of woven pattern traditionally made in white and black. *Naaxiin* often display particular animal or supernatural crests, whereas *yelth koo d*esigns are purely geometric. I am uncertain about differences in meaning, or status pertaining to the design. Both styles can take from months to years, to weave.

It has been suggested that the Mourning Cloak butterfly (Appendix 1.3) influenced the selection of colours seen in *Naaxiin* blankets (Brown, personal communication 2007). As with much of Haida culture, it would make sense to see a reflection of nature in human expression. Much about the origins of the *Naaxiin* blankets, however, remains a mystery. Although I haven’t uncovered any stories about their origins, weaver *Kuujuuhl* Evelyn Vanderhoop describes their symbolism. *Kuujuuhl* says, “ Wrapped in the woven crest symbols, a high-ranked person simultaneously displays wealth, ancestral origin, accomplishments, and all his clan’s prerogatives” (Williams 2005:113).

Harvesting and collecting materials remains a significant part of the process of weaving. Many of the weavers I spoke with emphasized the process of harvesting and collecting. *Aay Aay* Albert Hans recounted to me how he could gather before he knew how to prepare. *Kuuyas 7waahlal Gidaak* Lisa Hageman Yahlgulanaas spoke about memories of being out on the land around age four, witnessing and being aware of the process her female elders enacted while collecting materials to weave. *Jaad Kuujus* Meghann O’Brian perceives weaving as a gift from the plants and animals. She views cedar, for example, as wanting to be woven, inviting us to be part of their cycle. Weaving is also perceived by many to be a powerful connection to the land and ancestors. *Jaad Kuujus* believes that the materials we use can often be seen as our teacher, “What we choose to work with is very important.”

## For *Giihlgiigaa* weaving began with the task of collecting bark for someone else.

In 2001 I went to the six pole raisings in Skidegate. And Nika (*Jisgang* Nicole Collison-Robertson) took me a tour around Skidegate, and we went to her house and she showed me this bark she had. “Can you get me bark?” She said.

“Sure,” I said, but I need to go back to Nelson. I got to feed the kids. Maybe I’ll get it from there and ship it up.”

She said she wanted Haida Gwaii bark. And I said we’d have to work that out later. And then when I went back home I went and harvested some bark. Never knew how to do it, it seemed to come to me- anyways and instead of giving her raw bark I ended up making a bunch of big square baskets and mats, and that’s what got me started.

## As a beginning weaver myself, gathering the materials it takes to weave prepares me as a weaver. It puts me in a good place mentally, physically, spiritually and emotionally to weave. The relationships created on my way to weaving, help me to continue to practice the art. Each process emphasizes something different, giving me a deeper understanding and connection to the materials I choose to be work with. For my purposes, the closer I can get to the materials, the better. However, because of time constraints, and access to different resources and transportation, there were things I could do well, and things I could have changed to improve the process of harvesting materials for this paper. For example, it would have been nice to gather over a longer period of time, in a way that did not leave a “carbon footprint”.

## It takes about two hours to roast, and remove the outer bark of all the *ts’uuii Ilsgide* uses for the year. She especially enjoys weaving with freshly roasted roots, as a certain smell radiates from the piece. *Ilsgide* also only uses traditional dyes when weaving *ts’uuii*.

## *Ilsgide* says

## “ I love gathering the materials, which I have learned to do with my grandparents and my siblings when we were kids. We were taught to respect the materials, the trees, and the spirits of the forest. It takes me five days of spruce root digging and harvesting for a year’s supply.” (Reid 2010:50)

## Acquiring the materials needed for *naaxiin* and *yelthkKoo* can be difficult and expensive. Depending on whether the material is in its raw state and whether it is locally or internationally produced affects the price. Today, the interconnections around the world, allow us access to some of the most finely made wools in the world. Flexibility in thinking allowing us to utilize products from around the world can be, and is, highly transformative for many artists and their work.

## Being in tune with your materials, knowing where they come from and how to get them adds to the spiritual depth of the piece of work created. As *Jaad Kuujus* sees it “there is a spirit residing in the woven designs”. An old Haida belief also says that the “spirit of the artist” is included in each creation (*Kuuyas 7waahlal Gidaak).* Knowing where the materials come from, and the material’s story before it is woven, adds to the narrative that becomes the piece.

## *Jaad Kuujus* and other weavers, acknowledge that many of their works may still exist after they are no longer with us. Many old blankets found in museums are said to have a presence, and give off a feeling of another time. Knowing this, it is important to use materials that will stand the test of time, so that future generations can learn from what we’ve done. As *Jaad Kuujus* puts it, it is “more tuning into knowledge…. all the knowledge that has been or ever will be. Things that haven’t been discovered yet, it all exists, we just (have to) tune into it.”

Familial

Weaving is heavily associated with family. The social relationships made during the process of weaving are just as important as the weaving work itself. Early exposure to the weaving process, and continuity between generations is a common experience, although not all weavers learn this way. *Kuuyas Waahlal Gidaak* talked about a “tradition of excellence” left by her great-great-grandparents Charles *Tahayghen* and Isabella Edenshaw. Being born with a predisposition to weave is also something that is spoken about by present day weavers *Giihlgiigaa* and *Jaad Kuujus*.

At a young age *Ilsgide* would hide from her siblings, and, while in hiding would start to weave. She would appear with small woven pieces, and it was only then that her family knew what she was doing when she was hiding all those times. *naani* (grandmother)Selina would come and visit from Alaska. Once *naani* Selina left some *ts’uu k’al,* which *Ilsgide* was able to get her hands on and weave. Later, in the 1970’s *Ilsgide* got into carving. After *naani* saw the small projects *Ilsgide* had done, she made *Ilsgide* choose between carving and weaving*. Ilsgide* chose weaving, and was invited to learn from *naani* Selina at her home in Ketichan, Alaska*. Ilsgide* comes from an unbroken chain of weavers from the north end of Haida Gwaii and into Alaska. Her nieces, *awaa* (mother) and *naani* were and are carriers of the weaving tradition.

Connecting the work of spiders to the work of a weaver, *Jaad Kuujus* was given a pouch filled with cobwebs by an acquaintance. The work of a spider has long been associated with the work of a weaver, and was highlighted earlier in the story about how the first spruce root basket was made. In my interview with *Jaad Kuujus* she was reading some journal entries she made months earlier about the “roots of trees talking about gifts that were left unused inside the body and that.. took my veins and wove them into thinkings and memories from my ancestry”, around that same time she started weaving.

*Aay Aay* Albert Hans, like *Ilsgide,* comes from a long line of weavers. From his old *nuni* (Skidegate *Xaad Kil* for grandmother), his great-great-grandmother Fanny Young, weaving has been a tradition. *Aay Aay* was able to learn how to weave while passing time as a Watchmen on *Gántl k'íinaas* Hot Springs Island from his *nuni* Golie Hans.

*Nalaga* Avis O’Brian learned about weaving through her sister *Jaad Kuujus*. It became a point of connection between the two, and has enriched their relationship. Although their Haida/Kwakwakawakw mother tells them that weaving came from her, *Jaad Kuujus* was taught by weaver *S’xaanjaad* Sherri Dick and her daughter Carrie Dick.

Weaver and weaving teacher, *Giihlgiigaa,* learned about weaving during middle age. It seemed to come to him naturally as he gathered and wove for the first time. Several years later, he has now acquired a studio space in an East Vancouver Park, where he leads a small but dedicated group of weavers.

After conducting many of the interviews I needed for this paper I came to the realization that weaving was almost lost at one time. *Naani* Selina Petrovich was hugely influential on many of the weavers as a teacher. Legend says that she travelled down from Alaska to Haida Gwaii to teach weaving. Many credit her as to why weaving was able to continue on Haida Gwaii.

*Jaad Kuujus* spoke to me about how there was a time when she felt like the culture inside of her was “pretty dead”.

“I think although these things are inside of us, things that can get lost, … Before I started weaving I didn’t have much interest in our culture, or family or knowing anything. I feel like it was pretty dead.”

She goes onto say how if she had had children, she probably wouldn’t have passed

on much to them, in terms of culture.

*Kujuuhl* Evelyn Vanderhoop notes that,

“In the last hundred years much assimilation of culture has happened but through these torrential changes our enduring visual art language has retained its meanings. It is the art based on our ancestral stories that continually remind us of who we are and where we come from. Drummers, dancers and leaders clothed in the products of the weavers’ hands once again boldly pronounce our stories. Textiles are again taking their place in the ever-changing matrix of our evolving culture.” (Reid 2010: 11)

What we don’t know today, however, may be uncovered in the near future, as the practice of weaving has grown on Haida Gwaii in recent times. Weaving workshops, exhibitions and even a *’wáahlaal* put on for public awareness, and respect for the unveiling of a *Iitlagadaa* robe has happened. These displays of adornment reflect a growing interest in an art once thought to be dead, as George T. Emmons, a Lieutenant in the United States Navy wrote, “the use of the blanket is past” (1907). If Mr. Emmons could only see what the rediscovery of blankets and the practice of weaving, in some cases, and the continuation, in others, has developed into, he might be shocked to see just how alive the culture is.

Energy and Weaving

Energy and life are central to the weaving process. Although the definition of life is a highly contentious issue, to most of the weavers I interviewed, life would take on a definition that encompasses both plants and animals.

*Jaad Kuujus* describes weaving as “old energy coming out of (her) bones.” Sisters *Ilksgide* and Energy Healer *Skiljaadee* work together to produce the finest spruce root creations. *Ilsgide* can talk about her work with her sister *Skiljaadee* to gain insight about the piece she might not know alone. Designs, and mental blockages are two aspects of the creative process that *Skiljaadee* can help her sister with. Channeling familial spirits is one method *Skiljaadee* uses to help *Ilsgide* with her work. Being witness to the relationship between these two sisters, and to see the product of their efforts is a remarkable occasion. Each piece of work done by a weaver is an achievement of a lengthy, usually laborious process.

Energy from the plants and animals used to create woven products is transformed for human use. Mimicking nature in design, and sometimes shape, harvested or gathered materials transforms life into a beautiful piece with a spirit of its own.

The energy in the surrounding environment, seen in the forms of waves, storms, and whales, among other natural phenomena, are interwoven into the fabric we call weaving today. Many woven designs represent the surrounding natural environment, such as a slug’s trail, or lightening. Weaving is a culmination of human energy and energy from the surrounding environment. The reinterpretation of what we perceive around us, as seen through a weaver’s work is part of an international language (*Kwiaahwah* Jones) known by weavers throughout not only Haida Gwaii, but also throughout the world.

True understanding of Haida weaving can only come from experiencing the weaving process. As Sherri Dick puts it

“Weaving is a spiritual experience. Traditional weavers bear the responsibility to receive the hereditary teachings of previous generations with full understanding. We accept this gift and protect it for the generations who will own the rights to these techniques and patterns after us. I encourage any person who has a sincere desire to weave to pursue their dream, but I urge all weavers, both Native and non-Native, to respect that Native designs are cultural and family property, and to weave only those designs to which they are entitled”. (Reid. 2010: 34)

Emphasis on balance has been something that weaver William White works to achieve. Finding a medium between history and progression serves to steer William into a good place to weave and teach weaving (Reid 2010: 72).

Weaving as Occupational Therapy, as a Repetitive Movement and for Community

Weaving gives a person meaning in life. When a person weaves so much that it becomes core to their existence and identity, weaving can be said to be their “life blood.” As a core value of Occupational Therapists in Canada (http://www.caot.ca/) “occupation is an important determinant of health, well-being and justice”. Being skilled at something such as weaving, gives the artisan a stronger voice and confidence to speak up about issues that matter to them. Art, like weaving, can also be perceived as a cultural-political tool for higher objectives such as reviving culture.

A second value held by Canadian Occupational Therapists is that “Occupation organizes behaviour”. Weaving organizes behaviour into naturally occurring cycles in nature. As many of the processes involve harvesting, plants as well as weather cycles need to be known. Knowledge of “when the sap is running,” to the best season to collect roots, helps the harvester obtain materials which are the most pliable and easy to use for the year. For the person who collects the wool used to weave Raven’s Tail and *Naaxiin*, knowledge of the seasons and the animals producing the wool is also a necessity.

“Occupation shapes and is shaped by environments”. This statement held by the Canadian Occupational therapists holds especially true to weaving and weavers. Haida Gwaii nourishes the trees that give themselves to be transformed into exceptional pieces of artistic expression. Many of the designs and woven patterns featured on hats and baskets come from the surrounding physical and supernatural environment. This holds true also for *Naaxiin* and *Yelth Koo* blankets. The dyes used for the blankets came from the surrounding environment although some today use commercial dyes.

Lastly, weaving has therapeutic potential. As it is a discipline, weaving gives the weaver a chance to focus their energies into something physical and specific. Over time, this skill can be developed and improved, giving the weaver the confidence necessary to face the outside world. As *Aay Aay* describes it, “You have to be in a good place to weave. You have to have positive thoughts…”

Weaving as a repetitive movement helps a person to deal with physical and emotional issues. Repetitive movements can induce a person into a healing state of mind, helpful especially for a person who has felt discrimination, and frustration in their lives. Mindfulness evokes a relaxed state, helpful for reducing stress and anxiety and which also gives a person the ability to stay in the present. As *Nalaga* says, “When I’m weaving I’m not anxious, and I’m not afraid, and I’m not obsessing. I feel connected and present.” *Kuuyas 7waahlal Gidaak* adds, “I think there’s a sense of healing tied in with weaving because of the sense of calm and well being that you have to foster within yourself… you have to learn to sit down and calm yourself.” There is also scientific evidence that repetitive movements, such as such as weaving boost serotonin levels improving our mood (Cantor 2010, Ratey 2008).

*Kuuyas 7waahlal Gidaak* furtherdescribes what would happen to her weaving if her state of mind was not conducive to weaving

And, the interesting thing about Raven’s Tail, because it’s gravity weighted and there’s no tension on the warps (is) I have to create the evenness of the piece from left to right, top to bottom through control of my body, it’s the control of my mind and where I’m at emotionally and spiritually- so if I’m upset about something, if I’m anxious, angry or in a hurry that tension within me translates into my weaving. So there’s an interesting sense of I have to get all the elements that contribute to the weaving within me in the same place everyday before I can begin otherwise it’s defeatist, otherwise I have to go back and redo the weaving.

Weaving can also promote community healing. At the Urban Weavers Studio, *Giihlgiigaa* has created a community of weavers from various backgrounds and ages. Twice a week weaving is offered where one can improve skills and socialize with other weavers. Not limited to *ts’uu k’al* and *ts’uuii Giihlgiigaa* has experimented with other materials such as ivy. It’s a place for open expression about a variety of topics, and often is a place where problem solving occurs.

Essentially, weaving gives the weaver an avenue for expression, a vessel for communication and a way to tell their story. Every story of a Haida weaver is a story of survival against biological warfare, residential schools, racism, and the blatant oppression used to try and destroy this unique and rich culture. Weavers acknowledge that their participation in this art facilities the growth of the culture. These weavers have retaliated by speaking their truth. “And” as film maker Christine Welsh states, “as long as (we) speak, the fire will burn” (Welsh 1994).

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Concepts and Terms Explained

*Aay Aay*- Albert Hans

*Gántl k'íinaas* - Hot Springs Island

*Giihlgiigaa*- Todd Devries

*Haida*- group of First Nations on Haida Gwaii

*Ilsgide*- Isabel Rorick

*Jaad Kuujus*- Meghann O’Brian

*Kujuuhl*- Evelyn Vanderhoop

*Kuuyas 7waahlal Gidaak*- Lisa Hageman Yahlgulanaas

*Kwakwakawakw*- group of First Nations on northern Vancouver Island

*Litlagadaa*- Chiefly robe

*Naani*- grandmother (Massett)

*Naaxiin*- Chilkat

*Nalaga*- Avis O’Brian

*Nuni*- grandmother (Skidegate)

*Saxohli*- wolf lichen

*S’Xaanjaad*- Sherri Dick

*Turtle Island*- concept for North America

*Ts’uu k’al*- cedar bark

*Ts’uuii*- inner part of the spruce root

*’wáahlaal-* potlatch

*Watchmen Program*- An arrangement made to protect the culturally significant sites in Gwaii Haanas, UNESCO World Heritage Site

*Xaad Kil*- the Haida Language

*Yaguudung*- Respect

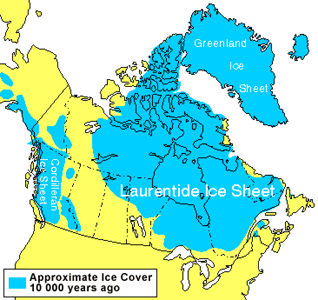
*Yelth Koo*- Raven’s Tail

Appendix



1. Map of Haida Gwaii (formally known as the Queen Charlotte Islands) off shore from mainland British Columbia. South of the Alaskan Panhandle. North of Vancouver Island.

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1.1 Glaciation 10,000 years ago 

The Canadian Encyclopedia. 2011. “Ice-Free Corridors.” < <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCESearchMedia&Params=A1&MediaId=2365&EventId=365&RelArticles=1>> Access date Dec. 2012.



* 1. Mourning Cloak Butterfly. Note that very old Naaxiin blankets displayed a red/black colour, similar to the wings of the Mourning Cloak. However, I’m unsure if this is the original dye colour, or whether it faded or changed over time.

Wanderingnome. <<http://www.statesymbolsusa.org/Montana/butterfly_mourningcloak.html>> Retrieved Dec. 2012.



* 1. Example of cedar bark weaving

Devries, Todd/ Giihlgiigaa. 2012. Giihlgiigaa- Haida Weaver “How to Weave a Spider” < <http://ithkilgaa.blogspot.ca/2012/02/how-to-weave-spider.html>> Retrieved Dec. 2012.



* 1. *Ilsgide* weaving spruce root in her studio.

Unknown. 2000. First Nations: Weaver of Spruce Root. Coast & Kayak Magazine. < <http://www.wavelengthmagazine.com/2000/on00weaver.html>> Retrieved Dec. 2012.

1.5 Example of Naaxiin



1.5Example of *yelth koo* Raven’s Tail weaving

