

Culture

NESHAKI: KINFOLK AND TRADE

E. P. Patterson



Volume 10, Number 2, 1990

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081335ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081335ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASA),
formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne
d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Patterson, E. (1990). NESHAKI: KINFOLK AND TRADE. *Culture*, 10(2), 13–24.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1081335ar>

Article abstract

A variety of written documents make reference to Neshaki, a Nishga chief who had a successful trading career, challenged other chiefs through feasts and a pole-raising and was a prominent early convert, before her marriage to a retired Hudson's Bay Factor. The picture of Neshaki that can be drawn out of the written sources is partial and is certainly shaped by the nature of the written records; even at a distance and through such strained focus, it is a portrait of a remarkable woman.

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne
d'Anthropologie (CASA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society /
Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1990

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit
(including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be
viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal,
Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to
promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

NESHAKI: KINFOLK AND TRADE

E. P. Patterson

University of Waterloo

A variety of written documents make reference to Neshaki, a Nishga chief who had a successful trading career, challenged other chiefs through feasts and a pole-raising and was a prominent early convert, before her marriage to a retired Hudson's Bay Factor. The picture of Neshaki that can be drawn out of the written sources is partial and is certainly shaped by the nature of the written records; even at a distance and through such strained focus, it is a portrait of a remarkable woman.

Différents textes font référence à Neshaki, chef Nishga qui eut un grand succès commercial, lança des défis à d'autres chefs en organisant des fêtes et des érections de totems et fut une convertie reconnue bien avant son mariage avec un intendant de la Baie d'Hudson. Malgré la distorsion qu'apporte la nature même de ces documents, on retrouve dans le portrait de Neshaki, les caractéristiques d'une femme remarquable.

Introduction

In the third quarter of the 19th century among the Indian traders at Fort Simpson, British Columbia, a chief emerged who played a key role in the development of the wealth and prestige of the Nishga¹ Indians in the fur trade. She was a major contributor to this period when crest poles and other forms of wealth, prestige and status-raising flourished on the Nass River, the Nishga homeland.

This essay examines the career of Neshaki as she appears in the historical sources from fur traders, missionaries, and government documents, as well as anthropologists' fieldnotes. She was a fur trader, Christian, wife of a senior Hudson's Bay Company officer and previously of a senior Eagle clan chief of the lower Nass River. She was also a Nishga chief (a "Real person"). The records partially reveal her in all these roles. Unfortunately the gaps in information don't permit a more detailed view, nor do they allow us to make a completely satisfactory closure between the portrait possible here and the placing of her within the intricate workings of Nishga society. Nevertheless the evidence from the non-native sources sheds some light, and it is instructive to examine the extent and form of the record. It shows Neshaki as an adaptive person of rank and prestige operating with-

in the culture contact situation. From this evidence we see her responding to and incorporating influences from the cross-cultural linkages as a chief and leader among the lower Nass Nishga. She is operating within the premises, values and culture of the Nishga. An examination of her activities as recorded in documentary sources gives insight into Nishga culture, as well as demonstrating the range of perspectives in the written resources available to scholars.

Neshaki's World

Nishga culture was neither rigid nor closed. They were in touch with a variety of other peoples by the 19th century — both native and non-native, including British, American, Russian, Polynesian and Chinese. Migrations of Tlingit had helped to form the Nishga. New peoples, new customs, languages and traditions were being received and responded to by the Nishga in the first half of the century. The earliest contact was likely with Vancouver's crew in the early 1790s. The Nishga (or Nisga'a) Indians of Northwest British Columbia are a part of the Tsimshianic peoples in language and culture. They, along with the Coast Tsimshian and Gitksan and formerly the Southern Tsimshian, constituted the Tsimshian language family. Their home is the Nass River valley and adjacent lands. In 1831 the Hudson's Bay Company erected a trading post at the mouth of the Nass River to which Nishga readily resorted. This location was where each spring several thousand Indians, Nishga, Tsimshian and their neighbours, such as Tlingit and Haida, came to fish for the eulachon, to process it and to trade, and sometimes to fight. In 1834 the fort was relocated in the territory of the Coast Tsimshian. The Nishga continued to trade with the fort while maintaining other sources of trade, including shipborne trade and inter-tribal trade, especially with their neighbours the Tlingit and interior peoples (Patterson 1983). It is most likely that by 1830 Nishga had visited the Russian post at Sitka to trade and to see the curiosities of the Europeans.

By the mid-19th century a new generation of Nishga traders to Fort Simpson was emerging. The relative decline of skins from Tsimshian sources led to an elevation of the importance of the Nishga trade at the fort. The third quarter of the nineteenth century on the lower Nass was a volatile period. There were both internal and external rivalries. Nishga chiefs vied with each other, and with Coast Tsimshian chiefs such as Legaic, for trade, wealth and prestige. Chiefs invaded each other's river

valleys to compete and, at times, to fight. These conflicts sometimes resulted in injuries and deaths, as well as feuds. Part of the significance of Neshaki's career is that she participated in these rivalries, overcoming other chiefs, but also took advantage of peculiar circumstances to advance her own wealth and presumably her family (household). From time to time the sources refer to her brother, her brothers, her family. The journal keeper at Fort Simpson may not have understood fully the elaborate workings of the Nishga's social-economic system, but we may reasonably conclude that some of the information of Neshaki and her family trading implies the workings of the household (*wilp, waab*), that is, the economic unit of the Nishga.

The fluid state of affairs along the lower Nass may have encouraged adaptive change by the Nishga. If Neshaki and other Nishga women could accept white spouses, they could in a measure incorporate the whites into the Nishga social-economic system. From the mid-nineteenth century and for several decades before and after, the Nishga groups were in flux. They were engaged in joining, separating and moving. This resulted from a variety of causes including demography, political power, factional interests and changing relationships and linkages among themselves and with close neighbours such as the Coast Tsimshian (McNeary 1976:155).

Written Sources

Most of our information about the early trade is derived from HBC sources, especially the fort journal, letters and accounts. In the late 1850s and 1860s another white element became regularly present, the missionaries, clergy and lay persons. These were predominantly agents of the Anglican church and, in the 1870s, of the Methodists. Both of these were forms of British Protestant Christianity and their missionaries were mostly drawn from Great Britain. The missionary records — annual reports, letters, diaries, journals and parish records — become an additional source for the Nishga by the 1860s. The coming of Indian administration by the 1880s provides a further source of documentary evidence on Nishga-white contact. It was at this time that the debate over land claims and territorial allotments led to commissions, investigations, interviews and consultations, all of which constitute documentation on the late 19th-century Nishga.

A fourth important source for historical study of the Nishga in the late nineteenth century, Neshaki's lifetime, is the anthropological evidence gathered by Marius Barbeau and William Beynon between the

years of about 1915 to early 1950s. Much of the information collected describes persons and events of the latter half of the 19th century, when the Nishga lived in several villages along the Nass River. Each village was a political unit and was composed of several households (wilps). This is the unit that Seguin has described as "the functioning feast group." Seguin notes that both men and women held "high names," derived matrilineally and owned by the wilp (or waab). Each name was associated with an origin story, crests, songs, dances and economic power (Seguin 1984:111; Halpin 1984:18; McNeary 1976:16, 133ff; Garfield 1939:184). The Nishga were divided into four matrilineal, exogamous clans, each with an animal crest: Laxibu (Wolf crest), Laxskik (Eagle crest), Ganhade (Raven crest) and Gispawudwade (Killer Whale crest). Not all clans were found in all villages, and there were alternative names for some groups.

Among the Nishga, McNeary observes, the titles or names in a household (wilp) were ranked within the clan. The highest name of the highest house in a clan was also clan chief. A village might contain several such chiefs. The chiefs, however, had no formal authority. Their pre-eminence derived from their wealth, wisdom, political abilities and size of following (McNeary 1976:16). Wealth aided membership in secret societies, also open to women, a form of upward mobility, i.e. status raising. Neshaki would have added to her power and status by her links to the new religion and her marriage to Captain William Henry McNeill, of the Hudson's Bay Company.

As already noted, rankings were not fixed, but fluctuated. Chiefs jockeyed for status as wealth, lineage and clan permitted. The fur trade contributed to this social and economic dynamic. Family linkages were very important. Marriages among the chiefly families amounted to alliances. Changes of status and acquisition of titles were marked by elaborate ceremonies and pole raisings whereby changes were validated. Those present "notarized" the event. The third quarter of the nineteenth century was a very active period for status raising activities. Even through the hazy windows of white sources Neshaki's career stands out as singular in Nishga-white contact at this time.

Hundred-Year Old Gossip

Jean Strouse's comments about writing women's biography are equally true for writing about Indians. She says that "the author of an obscure life often has to fashion the narrative.... out of passing

reference, fading memory, hundred-year old gossip.... out of a sense of what was going on around the particular life rather than at its center." (Strouse 1978:113-129). She adds that casual and tantalizing references may be all that is available, often seen through the eyes of men authors, not even from other women. In the case of Neshaki they are male fur traders and missionaries primarily. Strouse finds that women are often described in the context of the men of whom they are the wife, sister, mother, daughter. Some of this applies to the study of Neshaki. On the other hand if she had not been married to a leading fur trade figure, McNeill, much less would be known about this chief.

Neshaki (Neshakigh) became a leading figure in the 1850s and 1860s, through her own energy and personal ties as well as those of her family and clan. She helped to draw the Hudson's Bay Company closer to the Nishga by her marriage to the senior fort official and through other family connections. By doing this she incorporated the company into the family of the Nishga and enhanced her own wealth and prestige as well as that of the Nishga, especially those on the lower Nass River at Ankida, her home village and trading base. She became a figure of first rank at home and in the eyes of the traders and the missionaries by the mid-1860s. Her name and exploits placed her literally and figuratively in the company of the leading Nass chiefs, including Kinzadah, Klaydach, Sakauwan and their most prominent Coast Tsimshian allies, such as Nislaganos.

As with so many of these 19th-century Nishga figures we know much less than we would like to, but enough to see the outlines of her significant contribution to Nishga history and Nishga-white contact history. As with the other chiefs she was a conduit for European influences and material culture. Her marriage greatly assisted in this role and in her larger chiefly role as economic, social, diplomatic and cultural leader of the Nishga. Acting in concert with other chiefs, including her brother, Neskinwaetk, she contributed to the important economic role of the Nishga in the fur trade of the 1850s and 1860s. By converting to Christianity she undoubtedly assisted the spread of the new teachings, easing the way for missionaries to come to the lower Nass in the mid-1860s and thereafter and perhaps helping to create the atmosphere in which, in the late 1870s, several of the leading chiefs of the lower Nass, especially of Ankida, joined the recent, decade-old Christian village of Kincolith. It is not possible to delineate all the contributions of Neshaki to the history of the Nishga, but the existing evidence

provides an intriguing insight and warrants the view that she was a major figure.

Neshaki as a Nishga Chief

The earliest mention of Neshaki appears in the journal of Fort Simpson for 17 May 1855. The context suggests that she was already a well-known and established trader. She was on an expedition to Fort Victoria, with six canoes of locally resident Coast Tsimshian.

Neshaki's family connections became an important part of her influence and at the same time contribute to the preservation of information about her life, both in the oral tradition and in written sources. She became a major trader in the context of a highly ranked family background. Her father is referred to as a high-ranking chief (Meilleur 1980:123 and 117). Who he and Neshaki's mother were is not clear. The mother would have been of the Wolf clan, as was Neshaki herself, since the Nishga were matrilineal in tracing descent; she would also have been of the Gitskansnat sub-clan. The father's affiliation is more difficult to ascertain. Since the Nishga practiced strict clan exogamy, he would not have been of the Wolf clan, thereby eliminating all of the known Wolf clan figures of prominence. From the Hudson's Bay Company records only two other major Nishga chiefs' names are known, Sakauwan and Sispagut, and it might have been one of these. Neshaki was married to a Sakauwan, a high Eagle chief of the lower Nass (referred to as Chief Mountain in English), in the 1850s; since cross-cousin marriage was common among the aristocracy, it is possible that Neshaki was married to her father's sister's son, who was also heir to his uncle's name-title, Sakauwan. The documentary records do not establish this however. Of the high chiefs whose names are known only Sispagut's is left. He was a head chief of the Killer Whale crest (Gispawuwade clan) on the lower Nass. Sispagut is probably the figure mentioned in the Fort Simpson journal as Sessocate and Sispocats. He traded skins and potatoes (that is, provisions) to the Fort (Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA), Reel # 1M142. Fort Simpson Journal, entry for 21 November 1856). He was a sometime rival of Sakauwan and Klaydach. The latter was also of the Wolf clan and sub-clan Gitskansnat, and therefore a kinsman of Neshaki. Sakauwan and Klaydach joined together to raise a pole to overtop Sispagut's pole, hiring the same carver Sispagut had hired, Oyai. This carver, from Gitwinsilth on the upper Nass, has been called by Marius Barbeau the best pole carver on the Nass in those days (1850s and 1860s) at a time

when the Nishga were the best carvers on the coast (Barbeau 1950:12).

While it is not possible to determine whether Sispagut was Neshaki's father, if he were, her respect for her father's crests and Sispagut's documented rivalry with Sakauwan might help account for her leaving her husband, and explain why with her brother, Neskinwaetk, she entered a sharp contest with Sakauwan to humble him by raising a greater pole than Sakauwan's. This latter event occurred sometime after she had left him. Barbeau relates the incident. The pride of Sakauwan, "sharp teeth," was wounded by her desertion. "The young woman, who was attractive and either ambitious or fickle, had forsaken native rank" to marry Captain William Henry McNeill. Sakauwan gave a feast at which he sang a song to ridicule his ex-wife. The song was also a challenge, including these words:

"Wait and see what a chief can do.

Wait, sweetheart, that you may learn how I
have raised my head again!

Wait, O flighty one, before you send me word
of how you pine once more for my love!

Time is now ripe, woman of the beached Victoria
tribe for you to send me a bottle of Old Tom.²

That is why I now despatch to you this handful
of beaver skins."

Neshaki was apparently not much moved by this attack. Sakauwan had misjudged the young woman and himself in regard to her. On the contrary she gave a retaliatory feast (ibid:10).³ At this feast she and her brother, Neskinwaetk, gave Sakauwan a large Haida canoe, the most prized canoes in the area, with a Grizzly Bear, her emblem, carved on it.⁴ In any case the splendid gift added further shame to her former husband Sakauwan. He had been outdone once again. He held a feast, giving away more property — pelts, coppers, blankets and other goods — and singing another taunting song (Barbeau 1950:11). It was sometime after this that Neshaki raised a pole to honour the memory of Neskinwaetk, since deceased (1863), and to outdo Sakauwan. To do this she secured the services of "the best carver" on the Nass, and he worked on the pole for one year. At its raising she gave a great feast. This event established her as a great chief on the lower Nass, one of the senior Wolf chiefs. The pole was sited in the predominantly Wolf clan village of Ankida, an island village, on the lower Nass River (ibid). Significantly, this event, which takes Neshaki's life into the mid or late 1860s, occurred after she was for several years a baptized Christian (1863) and the wife of

McNeill (1866) in a "church" marriage. Oyai, the great carver, died in 1867; this date further fixes the timing (ibid:267). The pole raised by Neshaki was still standing in 1927. Barbeau saw it and wrote:

"Its heraldic figures carved out of red cedar were weather beaten, yet most expressive and original. It was evident at first sight that Oyai, its carver, deserved his reputation as the best totem carver of his generation on the Nass or anywhere." (ibid:11-12)

The wealth gained from her major fur trading activities had helped to make this prestigious object possible.

At the same time that these rivalries were occurring, and in part because of them, this was a period of high accomplishment in Nishga carving, linked to the accelerating wealth produced by the Nishga in their important role in the fur trade in their area. Great wealth flowed to the Nass in part because of the importance of the Nishga as intermediaries in the fur trade. This trade came from several directions and much of it was channelled to Fort Simpson, whether directly by the Nishga, or through other intermediaries, especially the Coast Tsimshian tribes who had settled at the fort by the late 1830s. European ships also contributed to the trade. Both Hudson's Bay Company ships and the competition visited at the lower Nass.

The coming of the missionaries on a permanent basis in the mid-1860s also was a prestige and status-raising event. These teachers, as they were usually thought of, were intended by the Nishga who invited them to be a liaison with the white newcomers. Ankida, with its sister village Quinwoch, was the centre of these activities. By the mid-1850s the Nishga were a major contributor to the Fort Simpson trade. Their importance continued into the mid-1860s, culminating in the establishment of a company substation at Ankida. Initially this trading post was in Neshaki's house.

Other major traders from Ankida/Quinwoch included many Wolf chiefs, especially Kinzadah and Klaydach, and his brother Kadounaha. Among the Gitwilnaget Wolves were Qwockshow, Nislisyan and Hlabeks. Just upriver from Ankida, at Andeguale was another major Gitskansnat Wolf chief, Negwaon. Both of the Wolf sub-clans, Gitskansnat and Gitwilnaget, had prestigious affiliates on the upper Nass. Skoten, senior Wolf chief of Gitlakdamiks, was of the Gitskansnat, and Giekqu of the Gitwilnaget was also an important chief and trader said to have been a follower at some time of the Carrier prophet Beni and later instrumental in creat-

ing the Nishga Christian community at Aiyansh (Patterson 1983: passim). In the Eagle clan Salmon-Eater sub-clan, of which Sakauwan was a member, there were also upper Nass connections. Menaesk, the most senior Eagle chief at Gitlakdamiks, was of this sub-clan. Neshaki had family and clan links to the highest chiefs along the Nass River, and she was herself active and successful in that community.

Neshaki as a Successful Trader

When in 1834 Fort Simpson was removed from the Nass mouth to its permanent location, the Nishga immediately began to travel to the relocated fort and to trade not only furs but provisions. The main skins were beaver, marten, bear, land otter, mink and lynx. The provisions most often traded were venison, salmon, eulachon, eulachon oil and potatoes.

The relocation of the fort did not break the family connections that had developed from the earlier fort site. Nishga wives and children of fort personnel travelled back to the Nass for visits and kinfolk came to the new fort to visit relatives and friends who were part of the families. Neshaki was to be the most prominent figure in this pattern of Nishga marriage and family ties to fort personnel.

Women's influence, shaped in part by the matrilineal society and opportunities for female leadership roles, remained strong at the fort. This prompted fort commander McNeill to observe that

"the women of this place have some sway to turn men's brains more so than I ever heard in any other part of the world." (HBCA Reel #1M142:10 February 1856)

McNeill perhaps would have included himself within the next few years.

By the mid-1850s much of the trade which formerly came to Fort Simpson had shifted to Fort Victoria. Fleets of canoes headed south regularly for trade and wider contacts with the world of the whites. The Nishga too participated in these visits to some extent. On the other hand the transference of much Tsimshian trade to Fort Victoria increased the importance of the Nishga in the Fort Simpson trade. Meilleur observed that "The fort people could tolerate the rum schooner's trade under the shadow of the stockade better than their trade on the Nass, for down that river travelled the finest furs on the territory. Up to that point [the 1850s] the Nishgas ... had shown a certain loyalty to the company, inspired no doubt by the first Ft. Simpson and by Neshaki...." (Meilleur, *op. cit.*: 117).

On March 13, 1856, Neshaki traded 17 martens, 1 bear and 6 beaver skins for much prized elkskins. In April the Nishga trade was good at the fort and McNeill, commander and keeper of the fort journal, noted that the Nass Indians were "going ahead in fine style." (HBCA, Reel # 1M142, Fort Simpson Journal, 13 March 1856). To supplement the trade which the Nishga carried to the fort and to compete with the opposition, the Company also sent a ship to trade at the Nass mouth. Sometimes McNeill himself captained the ship.

Nishga visitors at the fort maintained many ties with the Coast Tsimshian tribes resident at the fort. Nishga and Coast Tsimshian were culturally very close and had many links of kin and clan. In mid-June 1856, for example, a Nass canoe arrived at the fort to invite the local chiefs to a "house warming." Within a week the local chiefs were on their way and did not return until July 1 (*Ibid* 15 June; 1 July 1856). McNeill's interest in the Nishga and their activities may have been heightened by his interest in the attractive Nishga chief and trader Neshaki.

Not all contact was peaceful, however, and feuds between Nishga and Tsimshian occurred. These conflicts at times were carried to the Nass. One such conflict led to the death of Legaic's brother, Haiash, in October 1856 (*Ibid* 20 October 1856).

Throughout the late winter and spring of 1857, Neshaki was very active in trading at the fort. On 16 February 1857 she started for the Nass to trade, presumably in her role as intermediary with more interior people. Accompanying her were two fort personnel, Dauphine and Desmarais. Dauphine had relatives on the Nass. This example not only shows the existence of family ties between Nishga and fort employees, but that these ties were not only not discouraged, but even aided by the fort commander. The freedom of contact between Neshaki and fort personnel is also illustrated (*Ibid*: 16 February 1857).

Neshaki was able to act as the "eyes and ears" of the company when on the Nass. On March 2nd, 1857, she returned to the fort reporting that all was well at the Nass. She brought some furs and reported that other Nishga traders would be arriving at the fort in a few days (*Ibid*: 2 March 1857). Over the next two weeks several canoes did arrive from the Nass. It is apparent that by spring 1857 Neshaki was spending most of her time at the fort. This suggests that she had already broken with Sakauwan by this time and had developed a liaison with McNeill. However, she was very active in maintaining her rank and status on the Nass, as already indicated by her contact with Sakauwan. In late April 1857,

"Neshaki and a Nass canoe started for Nass house warming party." (*Ibid.*, 29 April 1857). A few days later "all the principal chiefs" of the local Indians, i.e. those residing at Fort Simpson, also left for this event on the Nass given by Neshaki (*Ibid*: 1 May 1857).

In a few days Neshaki returned to the fort, accompanied by fifty canoes or more, presumably Nishga and Tsimshian. She brought about seventy marten skins. She made a particularly "good trade" on one trip in early May — 86 martens, 10 beavers, 10 fishers, 2 silver foxes, 2 cross foxes, 2 bears and 2 lynx skins (*Ibid*: 4 May 1857). On May 15 her brother, Neskinwaetk(?) arrived at the fort. Neshaki returned to the Nass in mid-June to visit her family and to trade. Accompanying her was Dauphine, also going to visit family.⁵ She stayed at the fort through the summer and in the fall of 1857 and spring of 1858 she returned to trading on the Nass.

Neshaki's traditional ties at this time are indicated by her holding of one or more slaves. In mid-July her slave ran away. The company did sometimes interfere in native customs to free or protect slaves. The fort environment may have aided a slave contemplating freedom. McNeill, a Massachusetts Yankee in origin, must have been ambivalent in this case.

Through 1858 trade with the Nishga continued to be good in furs and provisions. Trade continued strong in 1859 with Neshaki regularly moving back and forth between the fort and the Nass. She and her brothers were a mainstay of the fort's trade. In late June 1859 McNeill, as journal keeper, noted that Neshaki's brothers were at the fort trading a large number of furs "as they always do when they come here." (*Ibid*: 21 June 1859)

A minor interruption in every day affairs occurred in June, 1859 when American goldseekers arrived on their way to the Nass. They spent about two weeks unsuccessfully seeking and returned to the fort in early July. No indication of their activities on the Nass is provided. What use they may have made of Neshaki's connections is unknown. A gap of about three-and-a-half years in the fort journal ends in early January, 1863. As the record resumes, Neshaki and her family are still very active traders. Their importance in the trade had apparently increased. In February, 1859 without her family the fort's intake of furs would have been meagre or none at all (*Ibid*: 23 February 1863).

Competition from ships visiting the Nass would have made the role of Neshaki and her family more crucial to the fort's trade. Her role was increasing. In April, 1863 supplies were sent to her on the Nass.

This proved to be a very successful arrangement. She arrived back at the fort on 21 April with 315 martens, plus bear, beaver, land otter and other furs. Provisions, i.e. salmon, were also brought. The fort journal entry noted that these furs "will make this month look well." (*Ibid*: 21 April 1863) Despite opposition ships, the Nishga contribution, with Neshaki in a leading role, continued to be an important component of the fort's trade throughout 1863.

Neshaki's Confession of Faith

1863 was also the year that Neshaki was baptized as a Christian. She and her sister Shoodahsl were baptized at the same time. Her confession of faith is given by Henry S. Wellcome. This was likely given to Wellcome by William Duncan or McNeill or both. Wellcome referred to her as a chieftainess of the "Nishkaks." Bishop George Hills, from Victoria, heard her remarks.

She said, "I must leave all evil ways. I feel myself a sinner in God's sight. I believe in God the Father almighty, and in Jesus Christ, who died for our sins. God sends down His Spirit to make us good. Jesus is in Heaven, and is writing our names in God's book. We must stand before God and be judged by Him. I feel God's Word is truth. Have been for sometime accustomed regularly to pray." Her confession of faith combines elements of the teaching she was given, its language and symbols, and her assimilation of these teachings (Wellcome 1887:58). Wellcome reported that she had been "investigating" Christianity at least since 1858. In 1861 she was giving Christian instruction to others. "Two years ago [1861] she was found giving Christian instruction to a sick and dying person. Her husband [McNeill] tells me she passed much time in devotion. When she first heard the word of God her sorrow was great, and her penitence more than she could bear. Some five years she has been earnestly seeking God." (*Ibid*: 58).

Shoodahsl's remarks were recorded also. "We must give up all sin. God sees and knows us all through. Jesus died in our stead because we were bad. By the Spirit of Jesus we must learn to walk in the good way. I feel struggle in my mind, but persevere. I pray for pardon. Will do all I can to keep God's way. God's own Word promises that he will hear." (*Ibid*) The statements by both women contain elements of the Anglican confession of faith called the "Apostle's Creed."

Shoodahsl is probably the chief, Sudalth, referred to by Thomas Crosby. She captained the crew that took the Methodist missionary Amos Russ to the

Nass at a later date. Russ's evangelizing resulted in the conversion of Chief Mountain, a senior Eagle chief on the lower Nass in the 1870s. Crosby described Sudalth as "a strong, determined character. In the wars of earlier times she was a person of considerable influence." (Crosby 1914: 384-387) Sudalth contributed liberally to the Methodist Church at Fort Simpson and was unique in that she sat on the Methodist village council there. The two sisters were apparently much alike in character.

Family Business

Autumn of 1863 was especially important in the trade. The company had been regularly sending a ship to the Nass to facilitate trade. The *Petrel*, commanded by McNeill, had traded at the Nass in August. In September, Neshaki and Lucy Moffett, daughter of McNeill and wife of Hamilton Moffett, McNeill's successor as post commander as well as his son-in-law, went to the Nass to trade. They were followed later in September by Moffett in the *Petrel* (HBCA, *op. cit.*: 28 and 30 September 1863). Moffett was by this time commander at the fort. Mrs. Lucy Moffett was the daughter of McNeill's first wife, a Haida noblewoman named Matilda.

Sometime in the late autumn Neshaki's brother, Neskinwaetk, died. That the fort journal recorded his death indicates his importance, both as a trader and as a member of the family which commanded the fort. The family connection of fort and Nishga is apparent.

In December 1863 or early January 1864 chief Nislaganos (Neeslakanoose) died at Metlakatla. He had clan ties to Neshaki and her kin. He was the senior Wolf chief and senior chief of the Gitlan tribe of Coast Tsimshian. He was also of the Gitskansnat sub-clan and therefore also linked to Klaydach. He was Klaydach's brother-in-law (MacDonald and Cove 1987:218)⁶. Late in life, he had converted to Christianity after moving to Metlakatla among the first settlers there. He was baptized as Simeon Gitlan (Anglican Church of Canada Archives (ACCA):#24-28).

On January 7, 1864 William Duncan, at Metlakatla, sent a "letter of invitation" to the chiefs at Fort Simpson to go to Metlakatla to attend the distribution of Nislaganos' property (HBCA: 7 January 1864). This event, if not attended by Neshaki, would have been of interest and reported on to her.

Further examples of family activity in fur trade are evident in 1863 and 1864. These references may be related to family connection as well as the removal

of major traders such as Legaic and Nislaganos from the scene at Fort Simpson to Metlakatla.

Both Shoodahsl and her husband Clah (Clakh, Clagh) were very active. In early 1864 Clah brought marten and beaver skins from the Nass. He became a major trader in the 1860s. Clah was a kinsman by adoption of William Henry Pierce, who later became a Methodist missionary among the Nishga and Tsimshian. Clah was also related to the Tsimshian-Scots anthropologist William Beynon, who worked with Marius Barbeau in the first half of the twentieth century. Clah was Beynon's maternal grandfather and took the name Arthur Wellington Clah (See Halpin 1978: 141-156). He was a chief of the Gitando tribe of the Coast Tsimshian and of the Killer Whale crest. Through his marriage to Shoodahsl he became brother-in-law to W.H. McNeill. It was Clah who had befriended William Duncan and saved his life when the missionary was threatened by Chief Legaic. He let it be known that he would avenge any attack on Duncan and was known to carry a revolver "on occasion." (Halcombe 1877: 45) Clah is also credited with being Duncan's main instructor in the Tsimshian language.

Unlike other converts, Clah did not move to Metlakatla, but remained at Fort Simpson where he was a prominent trader in the mid-1860s. His brother was said to have refused conversion on the grounds that it would make him a nobody (Wellcome 1887: 53). Clah remained on good terms with both Duncan and Legaic and himself did some evangelizing at Fort Simpson. He and Legaic (who had become a convert) added their own testimonies and public comments to Duncan's sermons (Halcombe 1877: 172).

Clah's position as trader at Fort Simpson may have surpassed that of Legaic in the mid-1860s (HBCA Reel # 1M142, Fort Simpson, Journal: 20 March 1864; 25 March 1864; 17 February 1865; 7 August 1865; 20 November 1865; 10 February 1866; 13 February 1866; 17 February 1866; 9 and 10 April 1866). Undoubtedly the high level of his family connections, among Indians and whites, influenced his decision to remain at the fort and profit from his connections. Clah was still living at Fort Simpson in 1908 when Arctander met him there (Arctander 1909: 65).

Clah's wife Shoodahsl was also active though her name appears less frequently than her husband's. Her slave⁷ was caught after breaking into Legaic's house at Metlakatla. He was brought back to Metlakatla, flogged and released to Shoodahsl (HBCA

Reel # 1M142, Fort Simpson Journal: 3, 6, 13 March 1866).

Neshaki also continued to be active. In mid-August, 1865 she returned from a trip to Victoria with several Tsimshian canoes. The fort journal accused the Tsimshian of transporting "liquor." (*Ibid*: 18 August 1865). Whether Neshaki was involved or this linking of her name with the liquor traffic of the Tsimshian is meant to imply collusion is not clear.

In the Winter and Spring of 1866 Neshaki was at Ankida with McNeill. From there she sent furs down to Fort Simpson. She also travelled to the fort bringing a large quantity of furs and acting as courier of mail from the Anglican Church Missionary Agent at Ankida/Quinwoch, the Reverend R.R.A. Doolan (*Ibid*: 19 and 23 March 1866). She also forwarded furs through others travelling to the fort. Her furs were not always the best but the fort accepted them because of the competition and perhaps also because of her family connections.

Not all drinking events led to unruly behaviour and in the spring of 1866 Shoodahsl (Shudalth) gave a whisky feast which was carried out without any problems to the fort. The feast was an illustration of her wealth and status to fellow chiefs and was decorous enough for her in-laws in command of the fort (*Ibid*: 1 April 1866).

Trading Post Returned to the Nass

About this same time, April 1866, the fort commander proposed to one or more Nishga chiefs trading at the fort that a trading post be established on the lower Nass in exchange for a Nishga promise to send a major share of their furs to the company. This proposal was quickly accepted and implemented. When a sub-station was made at Ankida, it was located initially in Neshaki's own house.

Thomas Hankins was sent to the Nass to manage the new post. This proved to be a successful adaptation. Reports for April show that the furs coming in were numerous. In early May a second person, Jolibois, was sent to assist Hankins (*Ibid*: 4 May 1860). A carpenter, Graham, was also sent to construct a suitable facility for handling the business at Ankida (*Ibid*: 2 May 1866).

Shoodahsl's canoe provided transportation for the post commander to travel to the Nass to inspect the new arrangements, presumably, and to bring back the furs accumulated (*Ibid*: 16 May 1866). Manson returned a few days later with the furs of 329 martens, 37 minks, 3 fishers, 12 beavers, 10 bears, 1 bear cat, 1 lynx, 8 wolverines, 1 land otter and 3

musquash. Manson found that Hankins was on good terms with the local Nishga, confirming the evidence of the trade's volume (*Ibid*: 21 May 1866).

The fur trade link at Ankida was further strengthened in the summer of 1866, when Robert Cunningham took employment with the Company. Cunningham was a young lay missionary of the Church Missionary Society at Ankida and an aide to Doolan. He had arrived on the North coast in 1862 and was later married, in September, 1866, to a Tsimshian, Elizabeth Ryan, of the Gitlan tribe, possibly a relative of Chief Nislaganos and others of that tribe who had ties to the lower Nass Nishga (ACCA:#24-28).

Through his wife, Cunningham had access to community information not so readily available to Doolan. Doolan and Duncan had already had concerns about Cunningham's attraction to the fur trade rather than to evangelizing. In June 1866 he joined the Company and resigned as a missionary. The two missionaries were relieved at his decision. Cunningham became a prosperous merchant in the Nass-Skeena area. He continued to be a patron of the Anglican Church until he died in 1905. His Tsimshian wife had died some years before by drowning.

Cunningham's engagement by the Company led to expanded Company facilities at Ankida. Jolibois was again sent there, this time to construct a building for Company use, Cunningham's store (HBCA: 3 August 1866; See also Meilleur, 1980: 123). Hankins was sent to the upper Skeena.

Thus Neshaki and the other traders had made Ankida a major centre in the fur trade, building on earlier contacts. The fort which had been removed in 1834 was in a degree returned to the Nass and to a considerable extent this was the accomplishment of Neshaki, her family and clan. The interest of the Nishga and the Company, reinforced by personal linkages, complemented each other in building a trading post at Ankida.

Neshaki's Marriage to McNeill

Neshaki's continuous presence in the village was not crucial to the new arrangement however. On 15 June, 1866, she married McNeill in a church wedding, although she was already referred to in the Hudson's Bay Company records and in the journals of Doolan as McNeill's wife. McNeill, "widower" and "gentleman," was 62. Neshaki/Martha, "spinster," was 30 years of age. The ceremony was performed at Metlakatla by the recently arrived Reverend Frank B. Gribbell. Acting as witnesses were

William Duncan and Mary Rudland of Metlakatla (ACCA: # 24-28).

McNeill, as already noted, had several children by his Kaigani Haida wife. These included Mrs. Hamilton Moffett (Lucy), Fanny and William Henry, Jr. (Harry). McNeill was a Bostonian by birth. A former competitor, he had joined the Company in 1839. He commanded several forts before coming to Fort Simpson in 1851. He remained in charge of Fort Simpson until 1859, when he was succeeded by Moffett (1859-61). In 1861 McNeill returned to Fort Simpson and remained until he retired in 1863. After his retirement he settled at his farm at Victoria, where he died in 1875 at the age of 72.⁸ He took several assignments in his retirement years and in 1869 signed a petition to President U.S. Grant to annex British Columbia to the United States. A biographer, commenting on his conduct with Indians, accurately, but laconically, stated that "as master of a trading post he managed to establish with the Indians the relationship necessary for profitable trading." (Newell 1976: 484-485); See also Walbran 1971: 391-393).

Neshaki was active in business and social activities at Ankida and on the Nass in the mid-1860s. Although a Christian and known to the missionary by her European name Martha, she carried out her obligations outside of the control of the resident missionary. Perhaps influenced by the example of Europeans at Fort Simpson as much as by the traditions of her people, she met her Sunday obligation of church attendance, but did not neglect her trading responsibilities, despite the violation of the sabbatarian Sunday urged by the missionary. In October, 1865, Doolan wrote, "Much grieved at the conduct of a baptized Indian named Martha McNeil [sic] [Neshaki was not married in the church until 1866] she waited till service was concluded and then embarked in a canoe to go up the river. She told me the chief who she accompanied would not wait a day. The example to the young men here, trying to reform is very bad..." (Church Missionary Society Records (CMS), Reel # A105: 30 October 1865).

Two weeks later Neshaki was accused, in Doolan's journal, of supplying alcoholic drinks to a "bright prospect" of Doolan. When a whisky ship visited the Nass mouth a feast followed at which drinking occurred. Neshaki was said to be among those partaking. "Mrs Martha McNeil [sic] has been drinking with the Indians and joining them in their heathen customs. The example is very bad as much harm, humanly speaking, is done to God's work by

such conduct in one professing Christianity." (*Ibid*: 18 November 1865.).

Obviously the missionary's view of Christian separateness from the community was not the response of all Christian converts. To avoid community events and refuse to participate was contrary to custom and ran counter to obligations and responsibilities even if there was a desire to do so.

In March 1866, though preparing to move to Victoria, Neshaki was giving instruction to some young woman in proper behaviour. "I hear Mrs. McNeil [sic] has invited the young girls of the camp [village] to her house to speak to them on their evil ways, but as she has not been consistent during her stay here her words will have little weight. One Indian lad told two girls not to go as she did not practice what she preached." (*Ibid*: 11 March 1866).

Neshaki, as a chief and leader in the community as well as a Christian and linked to the highest level of the white world's local leadership, was in a position to give instruction to others. Additionally she may have been interpreting the new religion to others. She had observed the varieties of European behaviour on Sundays and otherwise for perhaps a decade or more. Despite Doolan's negative view of her influence, she was using that influence to be a conduit of the new teachings to the Nishga, some girls in this case. Her prestige gave her words authority in her community and exemplified that authority as well. Doolan regarded Neshaki as an important representative of the convert to Christianity and noted her doings regularly while he was on the Nass (intermittently Fall 1864 - Summer 1867). When Thomas Hankins came to Ankida, Doolan held church services there at Hankins' request. Some of the services may have been held in the house Neshaki provided for the Hudson's Bay Company trading post (*Ibid*: 14 April 1867; See also Meilleur 1980: 123-124).

Kincolith

In 1881 the federal census recorded Neshaki/Martha McNeill living in Kincolith. She was a widow living with a six year old child, Fanny. Neshaki was said to be 56 years old.⁹ Living in the same household was George (Eli?) Neeskinwahk, a young widower of 31 years, and Leal, a boy aged 9 years, and Lucy, a woman of 62 years (Canada 1881: 12394). Neeskinwahk is perhaps Neshaki's nephew, the son of her brother Neeskinwaetk. Another possible explanation is that George Neeskinwahk was the son of Neshaki and heir to the dead brother and therefore had taken his uncle's title as a surname. Was Lucy

the daughter of William Henry McNeill, Mrs. Hamilton Moffatt, who had travelled with Neshaki when they were young and were apparently friends?

Neshaki/Martha McNeill lived the rest of her life at Kincolith, it seems. She died October 4, 1883 and was buried in Kincolith's cemetery, with a small obelisk as her grave marker (British Columbia; see Favrholt)¹⁰. She would have been about 58 years old. An important question is that of her participation in the public life there prior to her death. The evidence is lacking for any picture of her role, but she would not have lost all her claims to prestige and status. As she was an important chief, her presence at Kincolith would have contributed to the stability and prestige of that village.

When in the late 1870s several prominent lower Nass chiefs, including Kinzadah, Klaydach and Qwockshow established themselves in the new community, their move represented a new phase in Nishga acceptance of Christianity and adaptation to Euro-Canadian influences. The same must have been true for Neshaki's settling there. She had been a Christian for a much longer time than the other chiefs, of course. Through her marriage to McNeill she had been more deeply immersed in European culture. Nevertheless at Kincolith her contribution is not at all clear.

Conclusion

In drawing a picture of Neshaki's life from the written documentary sources I have indeed had to "fashion the narrative ... out of passing reference, fading memory, hundred-year old gossip" as Strouse commented is often the case for women's biography (1978:113-129). And, as she also noted, the references that are available are all seen through the eyes of men; in Neshaki's case the records all come from non-Nishgas, and, in fact, non-Natives. The written record is only partially certain — and certainly partial! Despite the limitations of the sources and their perspectives however, it is noteworthy that the picture that can be seen of her life and career gives valuable insights to the experience of Indian women in their various roles, including the role of wife of a white man. Because she was of high rank in traditional society and married to someone of high rank among the whites, Neshaki figures prominently in both oral tradition and written records. There were many other wives of fort personnel about whom we know little or nothing. Neshaki's story sheds light on the role of Indian women as conduits for the transmission of European culture to the Nishga and as liaison for the Nishga to the whites.

Had she been any other chief trading at Fort Simpson less information would have been preserved from the fort records. As the wife of the post commander she was often referred to. She appears in the journal when the Fort Simpson trade was declining. Through her trade and that of her fellow chiefs, many of her clan and village, and her (and their) links to the more remote Indians of the interior, she played an important role in keeping the furs coming for several years into the mid-1860s. This is exemplified by the placing of the substation at Ankida. Until the mid-1860s she continued to operate as a Nishga chief, borrowing and adapting and providing leadership in the increasingly intense contact situation in which she chose to live.

Although the new culture seems to have allowed less scope for her contribution to public life than had been possible in the traditional culture, Neshaki was able to act as an interpreter of each culture to the other. In the mid-19th century she was one of the most important, or perhaps the most important, of Nishga traders, for her links to McNeill and for the volume of trade she provided. This remarkable woman, a leader in her own culture through strength of personality as well as through membership in the nobility, became, even in the more restrictive white culture to which she became allied through marriage and trade, a significant person in economic and social affairs. She was a notable figure in the history of her people during a time of major transition.

NOTES

1. In this paper I have followed a form of spelling of names which can be found frequently in the sources, and have added other forms in parentheses for the sake of clarity.

2. "Old Tom" is whiskey.

3. McNeary (1976:188) says that by doing this she was beyond the power of Sakauwan "to shame her further".

4. This may be the same canoe she used in travelling to Victoria in mid-May 1855. The canoe was described as a "very large canoe," the kind made by the Haida (HBCA Reel #1M142:17 May 1855). Crest representations such as Neshaki's grizzly bear emblem on this canoe are quite specific; crest representations are owned by each house, and are used for specific purposes only, so that a grizzly bear in one form or another is a crest of not only some Wolf clan houses, but also of some Eagle and Blackfish houses.

5. That they travelled together may suggest that Neshaki and Dauphine's relatives were related to each other (*ibid*: 17 June 1857).

6. Since both Nislaganos and Klaydach were members of the Gitskansnat sub-clan of the Wolf clan, the relationship was presumably that of *sela'yuu* (spelled here in Coast Tsimshian), men who are married to sisters.

7. a young man(?)

8. McNeill married Neshaki in Fort Simpson in 1866, after his retirement; Neshaki moved to Victoria with him in 1866.

9. Note that her age at her wedding to McNeill in 1866 was recorded as 30, which would imply an age of 46 in 1881, rather than 56.

10. Another Martha McNeill is reported dying in 1931. See Anglican Archives of Canada, Diocese of Caledonia, Reel #1, pt. 12, Kincolith: Register of Burials.

REFERENCES

ACCA

n.d. Anglican Church of Canada Archives (ACCA), Diocese of Caledonia, Parish Records #24-28, Metlakatla.

ARCTANDER, John W.

1909 *The Apostle of Alaska*, NY: Fleming H. Revell.

BARBEAU, Marius

1950 *Totem Poles*, Bulletin 119 (Ottawa: National Museum of Canada), vol. 1.

BRITISH COLUMBIA

n.d. Provincial Archives of British Columbia, Victoria; see Ken Favrholt, "Fort Simpson, B.C.: an investigation of the original Hudson's Bay Company Location on the Nass River, 1831-34."

CANADA

1881 Census Returns. Coast of Mainland, New Westminster, B.C., c. 12394, Kincolith.

CHURCH Missionary Society Records (CMS)

1865 Reel # A105. Doolan's Journal, 30 October 1865.

CROSBY, Thomas

1914 *Up and Down the North Pacific Coast*, Toronto: The Missionary Society of the Methodist Church.

GARFIELD, Viola

1939 *Tsimshian Clan and Society*, Seattle, Wn.: University of Washington Press.

HALCOMBE, J.J.

1877 *Stranger Than Fiction*, London: SPCK.

HALPIN, Marjorie

1973 *The Tsimshian Crest System: A Study Based on Museum Specimens and the Marius Barbeau and William Beynon Field Notes*, PH.D. dissertation, University of British Columbia.

- 1978 "William Beynon, Tsimshian 1888-1958," in Margot Liberty (ed.), *American Indian Intellectuals*, St. Paul, MN.: West Publishing Co., 1978, pp. 141-156.
- 1984 "The Structure of Tsimshian Totemism," in Jay Miller and Carol M. Eastman, *The Tsimshian and Their Neighbors* (Seattle, Wn.: University of Washington Press).
- HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY ARCHIVES (HBCA)
- 1855 Reel # 1M142, Fort Simpson Journal, various entries as cited.
- MACDONALD, George F., and John J. Cove (eds.)
- 1987 *Tsimshian Narratives 2: Trade and Warfare*. Mercury Series, Directorate Paper No. 3, Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization.
- MCNEARY, Stephen A.
- 1976 *Where Fire Came Down*. Ph.D. Thesis, Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, Pa.
- MEILLEUR, Helen
- 1980 *A Pour of Rain*, Vancouver, B.C.: Sono Nis Press, 1980.
- NEWELL, G.R.
- 1976 "William Henry McNeill," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Marc La Terreur, editor, vol. X, 1971-1880, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 484-485.
- PATTERSON, E.P.
- 1983 "Early Nishga-European Contact," *Anthropologica*, n.s. vol. XXV, #2, 1983, pp. 193-219.
- SEGUIN, Margaret
- 1984 "Lest There Be No Salmon," in Margaret Seguin (ed.), *The Tsimshian* (Vancouver, B.C.: University of British Columbia Press, 1984).
- STROUSE, Jean
- 1978 "Semiprivate Lives," in Daniel Aaron (ed.), *Studies in Biography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), pp. 113-129.
- WALBRAN, John T.
- 1971 *British Columbia Coast Names, 1591-1906*, Vancouver: J.J. Douglas Ltd. (original publication 1909).
- WELLCOME, Henry S.
- 1887 *The Story of Metlakatla*, London: Saxon and Co.