

1. Description

1.1 Name of society, language, and language family: Tahltan

1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com): tht

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude): The traditional territory is near the upper reaches of the Stikine River in what is now northwestern British Columbia.¹

1.4 Brief history: The Tahltan occupied the territory near the Stikine River for “time immemorial.” They had a brisk business in trading with their neighbors, often acting as middlemen between tribes to the north and the south thanks to the presence of the river. They first made contact with Europeans in 1838 when Robert Campbell traveled up the Hudson Bay. The population soon took a huge hit from foreign diseases, numbering only 300 at its lowest point. Government action forced them away from their villages to a more central position along the river.¹

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors: The presence of Europeans devastated the Tahltan population with disease even as it provided a new role as an important trading partner. The government later forced the remaining Tahltan to move to a new location where they played host to a slew of traveling gold prospectors when gold was found in the Yukon.¹ There is also a significant possibility that the Tahltan have borrowed several rituals and customs from neighboring tribes such as the Tlingit.³

1.6 Ecology: The land consists of the river valley, the mountain, and the coast. One sees forests of spruce, fir, cedar and hemlock while the river valley has cottonwoods. The climate is cold, with snow and ice making a significant presence in winter. Summers, however, can too get quite hot, often reaching 100 degrees C.³

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density: Sources estimate the population to have been about 2000 in the late eighteenth century. An average winter village had 50-200 people.⁵ The population is registered at 1,668 in the modern day.⁴

2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s): Berries, inner bark of black pine, roots.³

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources: Fish, caribou, moose, marmot, groundhog, rabbit, mountain sheep, migratory water fowl.³

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?: Bow and arrow, spear, knife³

2.4 Food storage: Food is stored in log cribs built on posts. The food then sits well above ground and can only be reached with notched tree trunks (ladders, essentially.) They also had salmon caches in case of an invasion or other emergency. These were covered with branches and logs so as to remain hidden.³

2.5 Sexual division of production: The men hunt, trap, fish, builds houses, constructs camp and makes the household utensils along with his own hunting tools. Women care for the children, prepare and cook food, tan skin and make them into clothing, care for the home/tent, and provide water and firewood. There does not seem to be an issue with men and women helping each other with certain tasks as conditions demand. Women also seem to act as the family’s treasurer often times.³

2.6 Land tenure: The land is divided among families, then subdivided among households and individuals. One could travel through another’s land and even kill animals there, but the pelt had to be given to the landowner.³

2.7 Ceramics: None

2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns: One shared food with family, and it was considered awful manners to keep and hoard food one could not eat by oneself.³

2.9 Food taboos: Certain ones undertaken by young women when going through the ritual during puberty.⁵

2.10 Canoes/watercraft?: Canoes present and used.³

3. Anthropometry

3.1 Mean adult height (m and f): Unknown

3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f): Unknown

4. Life History, mating, marriage

4.1 Age at menarche (f): Unknown

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f): Unknown

4.3 Completed family size (m and f): 5-7. Two parents and 3-5 children.³

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f): Unknown

- 4.5 Age first marriage (m and f): Marriages generally occur shortly after the woman can bear children and the man has matured.³
- 4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce: Divorce was not said to be common.³
- 4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously: Polygamy is permitted and practiced, but only makes up a small percentage of marriages.³
- 4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?: Men must offer a bride price to the woman's family. In addition, if the wife proves suitable, the husband honors the father-in-law with gifts throughout his life. The husband may also live with his wife's family and so provide valuable help.³ Men also often work for their father-in-law before marrying.⁵
- 4.9 Inheritance patterns: Legal inheritance is matrilineal, in terms of names and one's clan. When a man marries a woman, he gets access to certain hunting grounds and trading rights belonging to her family. When a man dies, his wife cannot inherit anything.³
- 4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict: Young men are often sent to be reared by their uncles. They tend to have almost no interaction with their parents after marriage.³
- 4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals: Unknown
- 4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy): It was often beneficial to marry outside of one's clan because these marriages allowed one to build valuable ties with neighboring people, not to mention the fact that a man would gain access to hunting grounds and trading rights through his wife. It would be prudent to expand a bit into other clans.³ There was a requirement to marry someone in the opposite phratrie. There were two phratries, Wolf and Raven.⁴
- 4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these "other fathers" recognized?: Unknown
- 4.14 What is the belief of the mother's role in procreation exactly? (e.g., "receptacle in which fetus grows"): Unknown
- 4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)?: No
- 4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape: Unknown
- 4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin): The spouse must be in the opposite phratrie.⁵
- 4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?: Not generally. For women, marriage is a matter of sale. They have little to no voice in who they marry.³
- 4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring: None
- 4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children?: Unknown
- 4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females: Unknown
- 4.22 Evidence for couvades: None
- 4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older): None
- 4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?: During the marriage ceremony, it's etiquette that the groom and his mother-in-law not interact at all. Also, a man is reared by his uncle much of the time, and must respect him. There's an old tradition that if a man's uncle dies, he must marry his dead uncle's widow, so he can properly take care of her in honor of his uncle.³
- 4.24 Joking relationships?: None found
- 4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations: The society is matrilineal in how ancestry is passed down. This is in terms of names, land and title.³
- 4.26 Incest avoidance rules: There were six clans total, split between the two matrilineal phratries Raven and Wolf. A Wolf had to marry a Raven.⁴
- 4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?: If the wife is that of a chief, or an important man, there was a feast for the two families. The bride sat in a corner of the house covered in a caribou blanket and with her back to the guests. She stayed there for the entire feast and when it was finished, her mother took her to the groom's house, or his parents if he didn't have one.³
- 4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name?: Babies were given basic names after birth that simply identified them. Anywhere between eight or fifteen, the children received a second name. This name was given by a maternal uncle if the child was a boy or maternal aunt if a girl. A third name was taken by the individuals themselves when they inherited the estate of a relative.³
- 4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?): Preferred to be with someone outside of the community.⁵

- 4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)?: When he wants to marry a woman, the man goes to his mother, sisters, or aunts, who then go to the mother of the girl and ask her consent while also negotiating the bride price. The man's brothers or cousins then carried the gifts to the father to be accepted, wherein he announced the union official.³
- 4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who: The bride may not necessarily wish to marry the groom, and her parents may have some conflict with the potential groom and refuse to do any dealings with him.³

Warfare/homicide

- 4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare: Unknown
- 4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death: Unknown
- 4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing:
- 4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations): The relationship of the Tahltan with their neighbors has mainly been about trade rather than warfare.⁵
- 4.18 Cannibalism?: Reports of an old custom that warriors would roast and eat a mouthful of a dead enemy.³

5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

- 5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size: Villages are on average 50-200 people.⁵
- 5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality): The Tahltan live in permanent residences from September until April. Once the spring comes, they leave the permanent homes behind in favor of traveling with tents. June means moving into the fishing villages for the salmon run, where they stay for the duration of the summer before returning to the permanent locations in the fall.³
- 5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes): The political structure was traditionally centered on the clan system and a series of council meetings where individuals could introduce concerns.¹ Chiefs of clans had to represent the family, arbitrate disputes, and take precedence in ceremonies. Chiefs inherited their titles through their mothers and remained in her totemic family. However, the chief was elected upon by the entire family, and did not have to be immediately related to the former chief. Councils were held by chiefs and older men. These could be on a tribal scale or familial.³
- 5.4 Post marital residence: The new bride and groom most often go to live with the bride's parents. The groom's own home, or his parents' home, is also an option.³
- 5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense): There were defined lands that belonged to each clan, though there were no wars over maintaining them, they still had to be recognized.³
- 5.6 Social interaction divisions? (age and sex): Children are expected to respect their elders.³
- 5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships: Unknown
- 5.8 Village and house organization: Villages were usually temporary things. The more permanent ones had structures up to 100 feet long to house the clan's central families and served as a ceremonial hall.⁵
- 5.9 Specialized village structures (mens' houses): Living and club houses for the young, unmarried men.⁵
- 5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?: Sleeping mats.⁵
- 5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc: Everything is based on the clans and which family one is part of. Villages would be based on these clans.¹ There were two major moieties, Wolf and Raven, with three clans within each. ⁴
- 5.12 Trade: The Tahltan were very active traders with their neighbors and later with Europeans. Items traded included furs, obsidian, and fish.¹
- 5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?: There are aristocratic families among the Tahltan, though a family of poverty is not necessarily stuck in its position. Slaves were prisoners of war, but only from specific tribes.³ One was either a slave, commoner or noble, slaves had little chance of mobility as commoners did.⁵

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

- 6 Time allocation to RCR: Unknown
- 6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine): Shamans were in charge of treating sicknesses, which were believed to be caused by evil spirits. Anyone who
- 6.2 Stimulants: Fasting.⁵
- 6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal): When a baby is born, its umbilical cord is cut off, dried, and sewed into a sack to be given to the baby when it matures. The umbilical cord's safety is believed to be tied to

the child's healthy growth. When a girl reaches catamenia, she is taken to the woods to live in a hut for several days, where she has a specialized diet. After her hermit stint, the girl is given a sweat bath, new clothes, and given a neck ring.³

6.4 Other rituals: The Tahltan had a tradition of carving totem poles. Families had different totems to represent them. Figures representing ancestors allowed the Tahltan to remember and honor those who had died, as well as give them a sense of familial identity. The totem poles could also tell stories of past events.²

6.5 Myths (Creation): Big Raven was believed to create the world.³

6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games): There are totemic dances that help to unify the people.³

6.7 Sex differences in RCR: Unknown

6.8 Missionary effect: Many if not all of the traditional ceremonies have been wiped out under the influence of the missionaries.³

6.9 RCR revival: Unknown

6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs: It was believed that the dead spirits went to live in the heart of the earth. They were not confined there, and could visit the living or even become reborn in the same totem. When someone died, the village had to sing a song to help guide them to their destination.³

6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?: None

6.12 Is there teknonymy?: None

6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.): The Tahltan believed in several spirits such as Big Raven. They also held a belief in a spirit called Young Otter that only lived in women. These spirits were beneficial to those they possessed, and left to find another woman when theirs died. Otters were treated with great respect by the Tahltan.³ They recognized a sun god and sky god, and the presence and influence of animal spirits.⁵

7. Adornment

7.1 Body paint: There was some simple tattooing of geometric figures, lines and dots done with powdered charcoal.³

7.2 Piercings: Shortly after birth, both girls and boys have their earlobes and nose septums pierced and a cord of sinew inserted. Men may have the helix of their ears perforated. These holes are used for ornaments of bone, shells, or silver.³

7.3 Haircut: Men wore their hair straight with bangs. For ceremonies, they may decorate them with swan down. Women had their hair plaited in a braid.³

7.4 Scarification: None noted

7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.): Beads, porcupine quills, shells, and the like were used to ornament clothing. Red ochre was used to color cloth. One also saw jewelry using silver, beads, and glass.³

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment: Ceremonial dress consists of skins decorated with porcupine quill, bird skin and feathers and colored with red ochre. The arrival of Europeans introduced decoration with bags, belts and knife cases. There are also headdresses, blankets, and masks are also used.³

7.7 Sex differences in adornment: Women were more covered than men.³

7.8 Missionary effect: None

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment: None

8. Kinship systems

8.1 Sibling classification system: Unknown

8.2 Sororate, levirate: Both sororate and levirate were practiced. When a man's wife died, he could marry her sister without having to pay a bride price, as it was his right. It was not uncommon for a woman to marry her late husband's brother, but only if he wished. Men were often expected to marry their late uncles' widows, in order to provide for her.³

8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.): Nonw

9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

1. Young men are often sent to live with their cousins and uncle in order to be reared. They may keep living with their parents, but connection with them practically ceases after marriage.³

Numbered references

1. <http://www.tahltan.org/s/Home.asp>
2. Totem Poles by Ruth Schiffmann
3. The Tahltan Indians by G.T. Emmons
4. http://www.uv.es/EBRIT/micro/micro_578_99.html
5. A Native American Encyclopedia: History, Culture, and People by Barry Pritzker