

Nisga'a

## 1. Description

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

Nisga'a, Their language, Nass-Gitksan (with three surviving forms: Nisga'a, Eastern and Western GITKSAN), is related within the Tsimshian language family to Coast TSIMSHIAN. The Nisga'a are also held to be distantly related to the Penutian peoples of Oregon and California.

Nass-Gitksan language

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

NCG

### 1.3 Location (latitude/longitude):

They live in the [Nass River](#) valley of northwestern [British Columbia](#).

**1.4 Brief history:** "The Nisga'a people live in the Nass River Valley of northwestern British Columbia, a river and its watershed — from glacial headwaters to Pacific estuary — provided the food, fur, tools, plants, medicine, timber, and fuel that enabled us to develop one of the most sophisticated cultures in North America."

### 1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors:

Christian missionaries wanted the Nisga'a to become Christians like them. They tried to stop the Nisga'a from practising their traditions and ceremonies. Many Nisga'a people resisted the missionaries at first, and did not adopt Christianity. After a few years, however, some Nisga'a did become Christians, and then others followed.

**1.6 Ecology:** "The Nass supports all five species of Pacific salmon, the most important currency we have ever known. Rich salmon runs were harvested in a manner that allowed us to build our villages and developed a far-flung trading empire that reached deep into the Interior and ranged up and down the coast."

### 1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density

~6,000 total

## 2. Economy

**2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s):** In addition to their large protein sources they would choose wild vegetables and root plants as their carbohydrate staples.

### 2.2 Main protein-lipid sources:

"Beach food": razor clams, mussels, oysters, limpets, scallops, abalone, fish, seaweed and other seafood that could be harvested from the shore.

### 2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?:

They wielded spears, clubs, harpoons, bows and slings. Wicker shields were common.

**2.4 Food storage:** "Once fish were caught a small amount were eaten fresh but the largest proportion would be cleaned by the women and hung out to dry in smokehouses to preserve them for use during the winter months."

### 2.5 Sexual division of production:

Men went out in ocean going canoes to hunt seals, whales, fish and sea otters.

**2.6 Land tenure:** "The landscape was divided into territories controlled by elders of each of the houses, the *wilps*."

**2.7 Ceramics:** All women learned to weave cedar and spruce-root baskets, but those who were especially adept were excused from household chores to practise their craft. Used for storing and transporting goods, baskets came in various sizes, both decorated and plain. Men carried fishing, hunting, and woodworking tools in baskets. Women used them for gathering wild fruits, berries, and other materials such as moss, shellfish, and seaweed.

**2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns:** "Throughout Nasga'a history, from the beginning of time, one of the most important principles in Nisga'a society has been that of sharing and coexistence. Both concepts are embodied in Nisga'a tribal law and

traditions such as *amniwwootkw*, the *yukw*, *hagwinyuwo'oskw* and a Nisga'a edict which declares the sharing of 'common bowl'."

**2.9 Food taboos:** "Cultural taboos centered around women and men eating improper foods during and after childbirth. Marriage was an extremely formal affair, involving several prolonged and sequential ceremonies."

**2.10 Canoes/watercraft?"**The ocean-going war and trading canoes, made of giant red-cedar logs, were a testament to the woodworking skills of the Tsimshian."

### **3. Anthropometry**

**3.1 Mean adult height (m and f):** not found

**3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f):** not found

### **4. Life History, mating, marriage**

**4.1 Age at menarche (f):**"Customs attendant upon the arrival of girls at puberty were basically uniform...the principles involved are two. First, it is believed that at such a time a girl is unclean, and must be segregated from the rest of the family. For the same reason there are certain things she must not eat, lest the supply of those particular foods fail. Secondly, it is thought that the conduct of the maiden at this period determines the moral character and to a large extent the physical wellbeing of the mature women. Still girls, therefore, as soon as they become pubescent, were placed apart during the catamenial period; but only in the case if a maiden of rank did the observance become a festival."

**4.2 Age at first birth (m and f):** not found

**4.3 Completed family size (m and f):** The average size of Nisga'a families are 3.3 people

**4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f):** none found

**4.5 Age first marriage (m and f):** no specific information recorded, but it appears that women were married off usually after they were considered adult women.

**4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce:** "The chief's wife is as important as the chief himself, and marriages were for a long time carefully arranged to ensure the well-being of the entire community."

**4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously:**

**4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?:** "The Nisga'a chief then gave as a wedding dowry to the Gitwinhlkul the privilege of using portions of his hunting grounds for the benefit of his children."

**4.9 Inheritance patterns:**"The husband is granted access to the territories of his wife's family-permission lasting for the life of their marriage."

**4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict:**

**4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals:** Information not found

**4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy):** - "They had "household groups consisting of extended families with a core or lineage of people linked through male or female lines of descent. Marriage with blood kin was not permitted; thus spouses usually came from different villages and networks of kinship linked people throughout Central Coast Salish territory."

**4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these "other fathers" recognized?**

**4.14 What is the belief of the mother's role in procreation exactly? (e.g., "receptacle in which fetus grows")** In some groups it is "believed that the powers associated with sexuality and procreation were incompatible with the powers associated with warfare and medical practices and both men and women governed themselves accordingly. Women separated

themselves during menstruation and childbirth and avoided anything having to do with warfare.” Also “mothers had special diet and behavior to ensure good health.”

**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**

Because marriage was such a formal affair, rape did not occur very often.

**4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin)** It was not allowed to marry anyone who is within the same tribe, and it was preferred to marry within one of the other three tribes.

**4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?**

After marriage, no. Before, yes.

**4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring**

**4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children?**

Mother's family and her husband

**4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females**

**4.22 Evidence for couvades**

None

**4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older)**

**4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?**

**4.24 Joking relationships?**

**4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations**

Every Nisga'a belongs to a descent group, or phratry, an aspect of individual identity which, like the rights to names, songs and dances, is inherited through the maternal line.

Matrilineal descent pattern.

**4.26 Incest avoidance rules**

Can marry within your group in the Nisga'a tribe but cannot perform incest.

**4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?**

The marriage ceremony was an extremely formal affair, involving several prolonged and sequential ceremonies.

**4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name?**

Names are not usually changed because “Names link members of a Tsimshian lineage to the past and to the land upon which that past unfolded. A Tsimshian name holder shares his or her name with a succession of matrilineally related predecessors, stretching back to the ancient historical events that describe the origins of the name and the house lineage and the lineage's rights to territories and resources.”

**4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?)**

Marriage was prohibited within ones own tribe. If someone wanted to marry they needed to find somebody from one of the other three tribes.

**4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)?**

Influence from family, but not set in stone.

**4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who:**

No evidence found

**Warfare/homicide**

**4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare:**

**4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death:**

Ingroup: war; outgroup: not found

#### **4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing:**

#### **4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations):**

competed with the [Tlingit](#), Haida, the [Athapaskan](#) groups in the north and east, and the [Wakashan](#) groups in the south

#### **4.18 Cannibalism?**

None

### **5. Socio-Political organization and interaction**

**5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size:** "Generally, each house could hold 20-50 individuals with a village size between 300-500 people."

**5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality):** The Nisga'a were stationary for the most part, due to their superb location next to the Ness river. They would only have big relocations in cases of flooding.

**5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes):** "Northwest Coast aboriginal society was based on a strict hierarchy of rank, descending from nobles at the top through commoners and down to slaves. In all families the older highest ranking members who could claim most direct descent from the highest ranking ancestor was usually the Chief. It was the Chief's responsibility to ensure that all members of his lineage were adequately provided for. Within the lineage, rank was judged in descending order according to one's relationship to the Chief."

**5.4 Post marital residence:** Usually the couple would live with the family of the husband, and be considered part of their extended family.

**5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense):** "Examples of the Nisga'a coming together as a single entity may be found in wars between a Nisga'a

**5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex):** Usually the men and women had different social obligations the men, "performed a variety of essential activities, including fishing, hunting and woodworking. Most of the tools necessary to accomplish these tasks were handmade." while the women, "Women contributed to the welfare of the family in many ways: raising children, tending the fire, cooking, making clothing, and weaving baskets. They collected shellfish, and dried wild fruits and vegetables as well as plants used for dyes and medicines. Processing and drying fish for winter meals was a major activity."

#### **5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships:**

Absolutely.

**5.8 Village and house organization:**"House Groups, or houses, are extended matrilineal family groups which each belong to one of the four clans."

**5.9 Specialized village structures (mens' houses):** It appears that all members of the extended family lived in the same house group.

#### **5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?**

Houses of the Nisga'a were rectangular shaped and made of cedar planks. The doors faced the water. The doors were usually decorated with the family crest. Inside, there was a sunken floor which held the hearth and beds and boxes of possessions around the walls. Around 3 to 4 families lived one house. Masks and blankets decorated the walls.

#### **5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc:**

Nisga'a society is organized into four Tribes:

[Ganada](#) ([Raven](#))

[Gisk'aast](#) ([Killer Whale](#))

[Laxgibuu](#) ([Wolf](#))

[Laxsgiik](#) ([Eagle](#))

Each Tribe is further sub-divided into House Groups - extended families with same origins. Some houses are grouped together into Clans - grouping of Houses with same ancestors.

The social organization is founded upon matriarchy, and is dependent upon the existence of

four exogamous parties, distinguished by their crests, who intermarry and who supplement one another on all occasions of ceremony. These parties are subdivided into families who are represented by minor crests but who still retain the party emblem.

#### **5.12 Trade:**

The blubber from seals, sea otters and whales were often traded with other tribes as well as fish oil. Dried fish, seal oil, fish oil, blubber and cedar were traded with inland tribes.

#### **5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?**

"There is no doubt that the Common Bowl concept was integral to Nisga'a culture, but in fact that the Nisga'a- as their neighbors- had, and still have, a hereditary chief system in place, means that there were clear distinctions in the areas allotted to and claimed by the chiefs."

### **6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)**

#### **6 Time allocation to RCR:**

Life didn't center around religious rituals, but it was still an important part of the culture and lifestyle

**6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine):** "When someone became sick, that person sent for the *Halayt* or Medicine Man. The people believed that the *Halayt* could cure an illness by restoring the soul's balance. By singing special songs and using a rattle, the *Halayt* put a sick person's soul back in balance. The person would then get well."

#### **6.2 Stimulants:**

#### **6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal):**

Potlatches: Wealth in the form of utilitarian goods such as blankets, carved cedar boxes, food and fish or canoes, and prestige items such as slaves and COPPERS were accumulated to be bestowed on others or even destroyed with great ceremony. Potlatches were held to celebrate initiation, to mourn the dead, or to mark the investiture of chiefs in a continuing series of often competitive exchanges between CLANS, lineages and rival groups. In addition to the material exchange, the potlatch also maintained community and societal hierarchy, cultural rituals and social harmony within and between individual Bands and Nations.

Religion centered around the "Lord of Heaven", who aided people in times of need by sending supernatural servants to earth to aid them.

#### **6.4 Other rituals:**

Calendar: The Nisga'a calendar revolves around harvesting of foods & goods used. The original year followed the various moons throughout the year.

Hoobiyee - Like a Spoon (February/March)

This is the traditional time to celebrate the New Year, also known as Hoobiyee (variations of spelling include: Hobiye, Hobiye, Hoobiyee)

Xsaak - To Eat Oolichans (March)

The oolichans return to the Nass River the end of February/beginning of March

The oolichans are the first food harvested after the winter, which marks the beginning of the harvesting year.

Mmaal - To Use Canoes Again (April)

The ice begins to break on the river, allowing for canoes to be used again

Yansa'alt - Leaves Are Blooming (May)

The leaves begin to flourish once again

Miso'o - Sockeye Salmon (June)

Sockeye salmon are harvested

Xmaay - To Eat Berries (July)

various berries are harvested

Wii Hoon - Great Salmon (August)

Great amounts of salmon are harvested

Genuugwiikw - Trail of the Marmot (September)

Small game such as marmots are hunted

Xlaaxw - To Eat Trout (October)

Trout are the main staple for this month

Gwilatkw - To Blanket (November)

The earth is "Blanketed" with snow

Luut'aa - To Sit (December)

The sun is sitting in one spot

K'aliyee - To Walk North (January)

This time of year, the sun begins to go North (K'alii) again

Buxwlaks - To Blow Around (February)

Blow Around refers to the amount of wind during this time of year

**6.5 Myths (Creation):** "According to Nisga'a tradition, all four Nisga'a clans were established by K'amligihahlhaahl in a primordial village on the upper Nass river. The Nisga'a believe that the land was given to them by the Creator and that they have inhabited their territory since 'time immemorial.'"

**6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games):** "Red and black are the dominant pigments in North Coast art. They are derived from iron oxide and charcoal, then mixed with fish oils to produce a durable paint. The iron oxide for red pigment was imported from the interior. Copper oxide from the Queen Charlotte Islands was used for green pigment."

**6.7 Sex differences in RCR:** Men and women participated in ceremonies, but men usually held the majority and more important roles.

**6.8 Missionary effect:** "The response on the part of the natives was mixed. In the Nass, some Nisga'a adopted Christianity immediately; for others, it took much longer to move to the 'model Christian villages' which it was the missionaries' pattern to create with their first group of converts. William Duncan's Metlakatla, built by the Tsimshian in 1861, became the prototype for settlements in the Nass. The Nisga'a neither denied nor disproved it; they adapted it. As their theologians explain it today, the arrival of Christianity was yet another gift from the God whom they called K'amligihahlhaahl ('Kindest Chief in Heaven'), an 'Enlightenment,' similar to the daylight their mythical hero Txseemsin had brought them thousands of years before."

**6.9 RCR revival:**

**6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs:**

Belief in afterlife- how to get there: charity and purification of the body

Death ritual: At death, bodies of high rank were placed in coffin boxes; others were cremated.

**6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?**

No information

**6.12 Is there teknonymy?** see 8.1

**6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.)**

"Totem Poles were usually carved with human, bird, animal and mythical figures that displayed family crests and myths of ancestral achievements. The same figures were repeated on clothing and on household items. "

**7. Adornment**

**7.1 Body paint:** Red and black are the dominant pigments in North Coast art. They are derived from iron oxide and charcoal, then mixed with fish oils to produce a durable paint. The iron oxide for red pigment was imported from the interior. Copper oxide from the Queen Charlotte Islands was used for green pigment.

**7.2 Piercings:** "Girls had their lips pierced at puberty and wore slender pieces of bone or walrus ivory. The size of the labret was increased as a girl matured, until it was the size of an egg."

**7.3 Haircut:** men usually wore their hair short, while women would keep theirs longer and use different adornments to tie back their hair.

**7.4 Scarification:** None

**7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.):**

Shell and bone necklaces and bracelets were worn by both sexes.

**7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment:** "Nobles wore elaborate headdresses and helmets with crest images carved or painted on them. Their ceremonial clothing included woven Chilkat blankets, aprons and leggings. Following the introduction of European woollen cloth, a new type of clothing was made from blue trade blankets, decorated with red-flannel crest designs and pearl buttons."

**7.7 Sex differences in adornment:** Before European cloth became readily available in the 1820s, everyday clothing was woven from cedar bark. Women removed only a small amount of bark from each tree. A bark shredder and pounder made the inner bark pliable (the outer bark was discarded). Cedar clothing was warm and waterproof, ideal wear for a damp climate." Men would wear no clothes when the weather was hotter.

**7.8 Missionary effect:**

Christian missionaries wanted the Nisga'a to become Christians like them. They tried to stop the Nisga'a from practising their traditions and ceremonies. Many Nisga'a people resisted the missionaries at first, and did not adopt Christianity. After a few years, however, some Nisga'a did become Christians, and then others followed.

**7.9 Cultural revival in adornment:** see 7.6

**8. Kinship systems**

**8.1 Sibling classification system:** In the Nisga'a kinship system, the word "mother" means the birth mother and all of her sisters, the same situation happens with the father. Also this transfers over into naming brothers and sisters, this includes all of the children of your parents, and their siblings.

**8.2 Sororate, levirate:** There was no significant data expressing these actions

**8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.):** " It was not allowed to marry within one's own tribe, but it was highly preferred to marry into one of the other three tribes that made up the Nisga'a people

**9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):**

Clothing: Men wore nothing in the summer and it was normally the best time to hunt and fish. However women wore softened cedar bark skirts and went topless. During the colder season, men wore cedar bark skirts (shaped more like a loincloth), a cape of cedar and a basket hat outside in the rain but wore nothing inside the house. Women wore basket hat and cedar blankets indoors and outdoors. During war, men wore red cedar armor, a cedar helmet and cedar loincloths.

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