

### Interpretive Contexts for Traditional and Current Coast Tsimshian Feasts

Margaret Seguin

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Since 1978, when she answered their call for a linguist, Margaret Seguin has spent more than two years in residence with the Gitga'ata people of Hartley Bay. This monograph presents her developing interpretation of Southern Tsimshian "personness, death and reincarnation, fathers, animals and supernaturals and the *yaokw* (potlatch)" (p. 60). Using accounts in the literatures, and her own observations of contemporary feasts (a 1980 feast is reported in full detail), she develops a symbolic exegesis of Tsimshian feasting that challenges the oral/anal interpretations of Walens, Dundas, Snyder, Fleisher et al.

Seguin's analysis is grounded in the minutiae of observable behaviour. For example, she describes a pattern of Tsimshian discourse organization that structures conversations and, she argues, traditional feast behaviour as well. In Sm'algyax conversations, silence as a response is a form of disagreement, while in English it is a form of agreement. Her micro/macro formulation is that "just as a response of silence is a challenge to a speaker, non-attendance at a feast is a challenge to a feast giver" (p. 22).

Her interpretation of the potlatch centres on the "emptying" of *pteex* (local clan segment) after the death of a high-ranking name holder, and the "filling" of the name by a successor. Rather than psychoanalytic processes, she looks to a Tsimshian cycle of reincarnation which, although generally neglected in the literature, is quite evident in myths and can be elicited in a fragmented form from contemporary people.

Also of theoretical interest is her discussion of the local processes by which the Gitga'ata define "otherness and us-ness" to maintain their distinction as a people. The Hartley Bays freely borrow from others, subjecting borrowed elements to a local process of reinterpretation. "If the other group understood it differently, that was the natural consequence of their foreignness" (p. 1). Such a formulation is an especially promising approach to the boundary transformations postulated by Lévi-Strauss for art and myth.

This volume optimally exemplifies the possibilities of the Mercury Series—rapidly presenting field documentation within the context of an evolving theoretical interpretation. And we can look forward to more work from this active scholar and fieldworker in the near future. Seguin has a monograph on Tsimshian basketry in press with the Mercury Series, and spent a 1984-85 sabbatical year in Hartley Bay, reviewing more archival material and attending more feasts. She is also achieving fluency in the language.