

Traditional Governance

Becoming a Hereditary Chief

Before nonnative contact, a Wet'suwet'en heir began their journey to becoming a hereditary chief while still inside the mother's womb. Elders, Shaman's and Chiefs would often feel the womb of an expectant mother and determine if the baby was destined to be a future Chief or Shaman.

From the time of birth the child would be groomed or tutored to be a wise, strong and responsible leader. The child would start off with the following succession of feast names:

1. Birth name
2. Baby name
3. Child's name
4. Adolescent name
5. Adult name
6. Sub Chief name
7. Wing Chief
8. Head Chief name

Before a person received a high-ranking chief name, they would have to travel into the wilderness to live with the animals for an extended period of time. They would learn the ways of the animal world before returning to the community to assume a Chief name. When they returned, they would have to demonstrate what they have learned. This exercise exposed the prospecting chief to the human world as well as the animal world. Thus ensuring he or she had the utmost respect for both.

Laws of the Land

Trespassing

Trespassing was permitted to certain individuals. People married into or directly related to a clans were permitted to travel into their territories. There were common trails that meandered through some territories. Everyone was permitted to use these trails but were only allowed to snare or hunt small game (rabbit & grouse) on the common trail. If you wandered off the common trail, or decided to snare or hunt larger game, it was then considered trespassing. Trespassers were given one warning if they were caught off of common trails or hunting in another clans' territory. The warning came in the form of an eagle feather. If the person was caught trespassing again, it was punishable by death.

Abusive Individuals

If there were individuals in the Wet'suwet'en community accused of sexual abuse, they were often given only one warning to stop what they are doing. If the person refused to discontinue their abusive actions, the chief would instruct the hunting party to take the abuser on a hunting trip and not return with that person.

Marriage

An important Wet'suwet'en law was to never marry into your own clan. The reasons were simple, if you marry into your clan you and your children would become poor because your family would only be able to hunt in one territory. You would also lose the importance of a Father clan when it is needed.

Father Clan

The Father Clan is the clan group of the birth father of the parties. This was different from the Mother Clan because you were never to marry into your clan. The Father Clans of both parties would assume the role as the support and counsellor for the individuals responsible for a shaming. The Father Clans would meet with the parties and discuss an appropriate method to reach a compromise. The parties had to follow with the Father Clans recommendation.

Complying with the Laws

The laws were very rarely broken. Most of the time the laws were adhered to because of the severe consequences a person had to face if the laws were broken.

The Feast and the Functions of the System Today

The feast is at the core of Wet'suwet'en society. Despite the concerted past efforts of missionaries and government agents to displace the feast from the life of the people the feast system remains central to Wet'suwet'en government, law, social structure and world view. Therefore we begin with a synopsis of the Wet'suwet'en feast. It is in the feast that people are given their titles, their robes and their crests and the authority over the territory associated with those titles. This succession is witnessed by the Wet'suwet'en and the neighboring peoples, the Babine, Nutseni and Gitksan. At the same time that the feasts make the jurisdiction is based on a deep appreciation of the spiritual qualities of the land, the animals and the holder of the titles.

The Chiefs use this authority invested in them in the feast hall to settle disputes and breaches of Wet'suwet'en law within the forum of the feast as well as outside the feast hall. The feast therefore validates authority according to Wet'suwet'en law and provides a format for the exercise of that authority.

The Wet'suwet'en word for feast, "denii ne'aas" means "people coming together," although they also use the word Potlatch, the Chinook or trade language term, when speaking English or Wet'suwet'en.

A funeral feast takes place every time a Wet'suwet'en dies to mark this passing on and to repay the people who have helped bury the dead. If the deceased held a chiefly title the successor is commonly announced at the funeral feast. Approximately a year later the deceased's clan holds a headstone feast to erect a memorial to the deceased at the gravesite. If the deceased has a title, the title is officially conferred on the successor at the head stone feast.

After the death of a Wet'suwet'en the "mother's side," that is the person's clan, holds a meeting or a "smoke party" which is attended by the deceased's clan, the father's clan and the immediate relatives of the deceased. At this gathering a light meal is often served and people hired from the deceased's father clan to help dig the grave, sit up with the body, be pallbearers and pay for the funeral expenses. Plans for who will bring soup and bread and other goods to the funeral potlatch are made at such a gathering or smoke party and a strong network of support for the bereaved family put into motion.

Shame feast "wipe away the blood" within the tradition of feasts are held to settle disputes and/or offer compensation.

It is in a feast that ownership and jurisdiction of territory is spoken about, passed on, witnessed and validated.

Following procedure for all Wet'suwet'en Feasts:

- The guest are seated
- They are welcomed
- They are fed
- Business is conducted (Once all Chiefs have arrived)

- There will be statements made by the host and responses by the guest Chiefs
- There will be gifts given and thanks rendered
- All feasts are conducted with due deliberation.
- It ends with a prayer

Settings and Seating

In the past, feasts were held outside the summer village house of the hosting clan. Today feasts are held in the community hall. All the people who come to a feast are recognized by the Wet'suwet'en, and seated, whether they hold chiefly titles or not. At most feasts, the hosting clan hires someone to do the seating. Sometimes two people assist each other, one calling out the person's title at the door to the feast hall, and another taking the person to his or her seat where he taps the staff in front of the chair the person is to occupy. Within each side of the hall, the chiefs are seated with the head chiefs of the clan in the middle of the back row. The heirs to these chiefs sit in front of them, and the lesser chiefs are ranged to the right and to the left on either side.

Types of Wet'suwet'en Feasts

The Wet'suwet'en conduct a variety of feasts which are as followed;

- Smoke feast
- Funeral feast
- Headstone Feast
- Name feast
- Shame feast (Also used in the WUAJ process – Reconciliation & Reparation)
- Adoption feast
- Pay back feast
- Public acknowledgment e.g. Graduation, sobriety and heroism
- Marriage/Divorce feast

For more information regarding the Wet'suwet'en laws, Feasts and Land Claims read the book called ***Eagle Down is Our Law***, by Antonia Mills. Available in all book stores.