

**RICH FOODS AND REAL PEOPLE
A PROBLEM WITH TSIMSHIAN FOOD CATEGORIES IN BOAS'
TSIMSHIAN MYTHOLOGY**

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For the traditional Tsimshian, all foods were considered gifts from other worlds of sentient beings, and were treated with respect. A large number of the early texts recorded from Tsimshian people include references to the evil consequences of not respecting food and food animals. Foods were, however, according to Boas, apparently categorized as either 'rich or poor'. Boas (1916) mentions in his description of Tsimshian categories that

Very commonly an enumeration occurs of what is called rich food. For instance, whale, sea lion, seal, halibut, and other kinds of fish (184); fresh spring salmon, berries, mountain-goat meat and fat, and grizzly-bear fat (182); meat and tallow of all kinds of animals (244); dried salmon and berries mixed with grease, elderberries, currents; and others of similar kind. Hemlock sap (193) and salmon backs (N 189) were considered poor food. (406)

In this paper I will present evidence that Boas came to the conclusion that there were 'poor' foods with insufficient evidence; there are two apparent types of error. In one case he confused two categories of the same food item that were conceptually distinct when harvested in different seasons. In the second case he simply categorized a food as 'poor' on the basis of a text that is too vague or ambiguous to support his conclusion. After I have presented the evidence of mis-classification I will suggest alternative categories which fit the evidence and resonate with other aspects of Tsimshian culture.

The numbers in the texts quoted here refer to pages in the sets of texts from which data was extracted by Boas; in this case the plain numbers are Coast Tsimshian texts from *Tsimshian Mythology*, (Boas 1916) while those marked N before the number are from the *Tsimshian Texts* (Boas 1902) collected on the Nass River.

As I suggested above, it is necessary to correct Boas' list of 'rich and poor foods' in at least one respect; he refers to page 193 in indicating that 'hemlock sap' was a 'poor' food. That text is "the Story of the Prince Who Was Taken Away by the Spring Salmon"; I have added emphases in the relevant sections for the discussion here:

Toward the end of winter the people had spent all their provisions. There was a famine, and the people were in want of food. At that time a famine was among the people almost every winter. (192)

One day his parents went up into the woods to get the bark of trees, which the people used to eat in those days in winter. Late in the evening his parents came home, bringing much fresh bark which they had gathered. (193)

Boas had apparently confused the fresh bark collected as a survival food during winter famine with the 'hemlock sap' gathered in large quantities during the spring, which was a great delicacy. It involved intensive labour in harvesting, and was served with other prestigious foods at great feasts.

The other 'poor' food Boas mentioned as evidence is salmon backs; the reference is to a Nass River story called "She-Who-Has-A-Labret-On-One-Side" (Boas 1902). Boas' interpretation is not unambiguously supported by the details of the text, which recounts the story of a little slave girl who was seen by one of the friends of the son of a chief

coming down the street. She entered the last house of the town. There she sat down near the fire. Then the wife of the owner rose, took the back of a salmon, and gave it to the little slave girl, but she did not accept it. The little slave girl rose and left the house. She entered another house, and again sat down near the fire. The wife of the owner rose and gave her the backs of salmon to eat, but she did not accept them. She left the house. She did so in every house.

The friend of the chief's son who had gone out re-entered and said to the prince, 'A little slave girl is coming along the street.' Then his friends spoke: "Why don't you marry her when she comes in here?" When she came near the chief's house, they took a mat and spread it in the rear of the house. The prince sat down on it. (188ff)

The little slave girl turns out to be She-Who-Has-A-Labret-On-One-Side, the daughter of Evening Sky, a supernatural being. The son of the chief does marry her, and the girl's mother gives her daughter's husband much wealth, and he becomes a very great chief.

Since in the text as recorded, the girl did not accept offers of any other food either, it is not entirely clear that salmon backs were 'poor' food. She seems to have been looking for a husband rather than a meal. This is the only reference cited by Boas to support the categorization, and it should probably be treated as questionable, though it certainly raises the interesting question of just exactly why the food in the story was salmon backs rather than another item, or several items.

Boas is usually referred to as a descriptive, rather than an interpretive, ethnographer; every description is, however, also an interpretation. We simply don't usually notice the 'interpreter' unless the material comes into factual question. The necessity for re-interpretations of Boas' descriptions does not diminish the incredible contributions made by Boas and his two Tsimshian collaborators, Tate and Beynon; the most problematic aspect of the material is the potential for incorrect generalizations and confusion of categories apparent in such instances as the 'salmon back' and 'hemlock sap' examples mentioned here.

Boas fieldwork among the Tsimshian was relatively brief, and it is apparent that some of the interpretations he drew from the texts would have required further substantiation. He drew on the massive collections of texts received from Tate for evidence as well, of course, but his interpretations of the texts may occasionally have been 'closed' prematurely.

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