

Dawn Hutchinson-Stevens – Interview Transcript

Individuals Present: Dawn Hutchinson-Stevens (D); Joshua Ream (J)

Interview Date: March 4th, 2012

1. Cultural Background (00:00-03:34)

J: My first question is just do you consider yourself familiar with Tlingit culture and in particular the Kiks.adi clan?

D: Um. I am Kiks.adi yadi. My father is Kiks.adi. I was adopted, if you know anything about the culture, you follow your mother. My mother was Aleut. My mother was transported down here during WWII. And so to practice the Tlingit culture with my father's people, my aunt Marge and all of my relatives here, they adopted me. And I grew up with my grandparents and my aunt, and so I am very close to my culture and the Kiks.adi.

J: Your maiden name was Hutchinson?

D: No it was Bradley.

J: Were you raised in a traditional Tlingit household?

D: We were pretty much assimilating. I was raised in a nice home with my grandparents. It was considered a white home I think. It was not a cultural, like a tribal household. It was just a regular. The house was actually across the street from where city market is. It was where century hardware is.

J: Were you around the language at all? Or dancing or drumming of any kind?

D: Yes I was with my grandparents. They new their culture. Unfortunately the language was used to talk about things they didn't want me to hear. So, they didn't encourage me to learn the language. And we were of course assimilating by then. And that was really sad so, somewhere up here (points to head) I have those sounds but I have tried to learn the language, I can sing the language, I can count, I can do simple phrases but I never did learn the language.

J: I took a Tlingit I elementary class through Sitka last year. You know one semester isn't enough to learn a language but it was very difficult. But I learned a lot. Because a lot of the culture comes through a language. Just hearing things the way that they were once said gave me a sense of traditions that were once held.

D: Yea, even knowing anything about learning a different language I think you appreciate the fact that things are lost in translation which is sad.

J: Now you said it was your mom that was Aleut. What was your dad's clan?

D: Kiks.adi.

J: He was Kiks.adi. Okay so you're Kiks.adi yadi meaning your dad was Kiks.adi.

D: And nanya ayii dash han. My grandfather was James Bradley and so I am a grandchild of the Nanya ayii, nanya ayii dash han.

2. Kiks.adi Frog Crest (03:34-05:14)

J: How can you describe the relationship of the Kiks.adi to their crest, the frog?

D: When people adopted and acquired their crest it was usually done because of some significant occasion or event that happened and the Kiks.adi from Wrangell were traveling on the Stikine River and they were lost in the fog. And they were lost on the river and a frog came and led them to shore. And so they adopted the frog as a crest. And that frog led them to a rock called Kiks. The rock was called Kiks.

J: Is the rock local?

D: On the Stikine.

J: Do you feel that appreciation to that original frog exists today?

D: Yes we pass it on to our children. We give them that story because our culture is oral and we let them know where we got that name from and why the frog is important to us.

3. Frog Wisdom (05:14-06:57)

J: Do you feel that modern frogs continue to help the clan in any way?

D: The significance of the frog I think was in the Tlingit culture before. The frog was revered as a holder of wisdom. They were revered as holding the wisdom of the tribe. And so they were revered by the Kiks.adi people and those that use the frog as their clan symbol were considered holders of the culture.

J: Do you feel that the attributes of the frog wisdom come through the people as well? That people hold wisdom because they have the frog as their crest?

D: I would like to think so. I don't know if it's actually practiced that much anymore. But it is something that we are aware of and try to portray.

J: Do you think that ancestors can speak through animals such as frogs?

D: I think the legends. And the symbols and the animals that are represented in those legends can speak volumes of wisdom to the people.

4. Frog Treatment (06:57-08:57)

J: Do you think that the relationship to the frog tells you how to treat those animals?

D: Yes. But I see that in all of the symbols of clans in the Tlingit culture like the eagle and the raven, give a lot of wisdom and help us educate our young about why. About why we revere the animals and the land and other people. So I don't think it's just one clan that is more important than another.

J: If someone were to harm a frog do you think there would be repercussions?

D: Us Kiks.adi feel that way yes. We are appalled that people eat frog legs (laughing). And we try not to impose our own culture upon other people but refrain from eating frog legs at least. I never developed a taste for them anyway so (laugh) it was no big thing for me to give them up. If you go down to the tribal house, tribal office you can see our frog legs down there. They're up on the shelf. Those are our frog legs (laugh).

5. Frog Encounters (08:57-15:26)

J: When you see a frog depicted on a totem or [brief interruption to meet husband]. When you see a frog depicted on a totem, or regalia or some cultural artifact do you feel the same sense of importance that you would with seeing a frog in the wild on the landscape?

D: I see it differently.

J: Can you explain?

D: The frog that is represented by the clan symbols on blankets and any artifacts have a more cultural value to me then to see a frog in the wild. I would stand aside or I would stop. You know if I was driving a car I would stop and let that frog cross the road or you know, do what I could to keep it from harm. But it's a different frog. There are so many varieties, species of frogs that I think the one that is symbolized by our clan is a bull frog.

J: Ill show you a picture here if you don't mind. But bullfrogs actually, it surprised me when you said that. Im not saying that's wrong I just. Bullfrogs are traditionally from the southern part of the United States, and they've been moved recently to different parts.

D: Oh really?

J: Now when I look at Marge's robe that she has at the museum...

D: I've often wondered which. But someone told me that it was a bullfrog. I might have been misled.

J: See the problem with bullfrogs is that when they move into an area that they're not actually from, they're a very large frog and they're very aggressive so they'll eat the other frogs and their tadpoles will also kill other tadpoles. So then they kill the Native frogs from an area. This here [points to picture] is a Boreal Toad and when I look at a local art that shows frogs I often can see the Boreal Toad. The blanket has this white stripe down the center of its back and that's also seen on the blanket and on the bumps. Its real rough on its back and you can see those bumps on the blanket as well. And on some of the totems as well. But this is a Native frog. There are two others that we have locally, the Wood Frog and the Columbia Spotted Frog.

D: I don't recognize the stripe in the art.

J: I guess, it might just be something to keep an eye out for, to see if you see patterns that look like certain frogs. But it would be interesting. I know that the Tlingit traded pretty widely up and down the coast, they could have seen frogs elsewhere or brought them from elsewhere.

D: According to the legend that is attached to the frog that saved the people in the canoe it was a local frog. It was on the Stikine River so.

J: The very large frog that we have then is that Boreal Toad that lives up there so it might be.

D: Yea it would be hard to trace [laugh].

J: For sure. And I've noticed because I've travelled down. I worked with the Salish in Vancouver and I really want to go to Haida Gwaii too but I was over in Haidaburg and the pictures of the frog change as you go down the coast because they are different frogs that people have seen.

D: And if you look at the frogs that we use, our frog its head is up and some of the other frogs that are used by other clans, their head is down. But our head is up in most of it. At least that's what I was told.

J: That's what I've seen too locally. Now, is it the same in Sitka with the Kiks.adi, do you know?

D: I think their frog is down.

J: Is it a different story of when they acquired the frog?

D: I think it is. I don't know. One of the, I don't know if you could call it a characteristic, but one of the natural traits of Tlingits is that we do not talk about other clans. It's not our place to talk about other clans or what any of their stories so we wouldn't.

J: A lot of the other ladies you know will refer to themselves as the frog women and I've heard stories where, a certain frog has felt that ancestors were speaking through it. Do you feel a close connection with the animal itself?

D: Like I said before, as it pertains to the legend yes. I wouldn't revere just any frog I saw. If it pertains to the legend.

6. Frog Treatment & Conservation (15:26-18:08)

J: And in terms of treating the frogs. A lot of kids will move them, they'll go looking for them, they'll bring them home as pets for a while. Do you see a problem in that or do you think that is okay?

D: It makes me kind of squeamish. Yes. I'm like. They use them in carnivals and stuff. And we are not aware when they're doing it. It's like the Catholic Church or Episcopalian. My relatives will come home and say "I got! Look how many frogs I got!!" I'm like "oh god. Well I hope you take good care of it and don't abuse it." Because any frog I feel respect for but mainly it pertains to the legend, the reverence we have for them I think.

J: Do you think that the local people have a responsibility to care for the frogs that occur locally?

D: Yes! Most certainly but I see that as scientifically significant because from what I've read I know that the health of the frogs in any locale can show the health of the whole environment in that locale. And it is one of the first signs that there could be something wrong so I think that it is important that we pay attention to what is going on with that frog population.

J: Do you think that the Kiks.adi would be impacted culturally if frogs died off or failed to occur nearby?

D: I think we would notice it and yes I think it would impact the Kiks.adi. We would be very leery about what's going on, why is this happening? Because it is our symbol. Yes, I think it would impact our culture. Because of the significance of not only knowing the scientific value of the frog but the cultural value of what that frog symbolizes as a keeper of wisdom.

7. Amphibian Observations (18:08-20:22)

J: You said that you haven't really seen in your lifetime a lot of frogs around. Do you remember a couple of the times that you have and where that was?

D: Closer to Pats Lake, I've seen them on the ground out there. Maybe when I was younger I used to go up the river with my grandparents and I remember picking berries that were called yellow clouds and they grew on the marsh. And we would occasionally see frogs.

J: How long ago did you see them at Pat's Lake?

D: Oh ten years ago maybe. And I'm always inquiring because I'm very interested in the health of these frogs because of the significance to the environment.

J: How about salamanders? Have you seen any of those?

D: No.

J: No newts?

D: No. I'm not very observant (laugh).

J: No, I mean you have to really be looking for them to find them. I worked on the Kenai last summer looking for frogs and we found a lot of frogs, probably thousands.

D: One species?

J: Just one species in that area. But a lot of people said "There's frogs down here? You're looking for frogs? I've never seen frogs." And I said "well I've seen hundreds today." The thing is you have to be looking for them for one and they tend to be around ponds that don't have fish because the fish will eat the tadpoles, they'll eat the eggs and so they lay their eggs in fishless ponds and most people are going to ponds that have fish. So that's part of it. And the more that I've been around people seem to be seeing them more often now because they're starting to look for them. (laughter)

D: Yea, you made us more aware which is good.

8. Cultural Challenges (20:22-22:46)

J: Just a couple more questions. Regarding the Kiks.adi I'm wondering what you think, what some of the modern strengths are locally and what are some of the challenges that you are facing?

D: Well us Kiks.adi women are considered very strong. And good leaders in the community. There's not only the Kiks.adi but the Kaach.adi also are here and they're pretty close to us also. I know Carol she is Kach.adi and then Minny Cockins are Kaach.adi also and they're very close to the Kiks.adi. They were historically high caste the Kiks.adi. My grandfather was Nanya ayii which was a leader of the tribe and my grandmother was Kiks.adi, she was a very high class Raven.

J: Would you say that the Kiks.adi was the highest Raven class traditionally in Wrangell and the Nanya ayii of the Eagle?

D: That's what I was taught.

J: The birds, the moiety symbols, do you feel that the frog is equally important to you as the raven?

D: I have never put a value on them, that one is more important than the other. For identification purposes personally the Kiks.adi would be more important but it's just as important to be a raven.

9. Cultural Identity (22:46-29:12)

J: That's pretty much all of the questions that I have but if there is anything else that you'd like to add or anything that's really important to you as identifying as Kiks.adi yadi I'd love to be able to include it. It's okay if there's not anything else.

D: Well, I think that as a child being raised by my grandparents and who they were, and they were well aware of who they were, when they raised me they gave me a lot of pride in my culture and pride in who I was. And the importance of my clan and consequently it was very important for me to be adopted into the Kiks.adi clan. Unfortunately my mother never returned to Unalaska and she did not share that much about her Aleut culture with us. And none of us have returned to Unalaska, to Dutch Harbor. We knew some of our relatives but the culture was not shared with us which was really really too bad.

J: Are you still interested in perhaps someday visiting Dutch Harbor?

D: Oh yes, we would all like to go visit Dutch Harbor at some point to go see. \

J: I have a friend who is Aleut from Adak and he says I should go out there with him sometime. I'd love to. He is real interesting. I went to the festival of Native Art last year in Fairbanks and the Aleuts put on a really great show. They had these reeds, these plants with seeds inside and when they waived them, they just made clouds of these seeds as they danced. It was a really neat experience. I hope that you get to experience that someday.

D: There's Ethan Peticrue. He works at the cultural center in Anchorage. He is Aleut he's from Adak. He grew up here in Wrangell and he used to dance with us with our dance group and he was very proud

and he was an awesome Tlingit dancer. And then he moved up there and he got married and they had children and they just thoroughly immersed themselves in the Aleut culture and he was very proud of his Aleut culture. He became one of the most renowned dance groups, Aleut dance groups in Alaska. He was awesome (laugh) to watch him. But he still dances with us every once in a while.

J: Will you be at Celebration?

D: Yes. Are you going?

J: Yes, it will be my first time. I worked for Sealaska Heritage for a while so I am going back down to volunteer with them throughout the week.

D: My daughter Dixie Hutchinson, she works for Sealaska.

J: Oh yes, I know Dixie! Cool. Yea I was on the second floor of the Sealaska building one day and she said "You're the frog guy from Wrangell right?" I was like, you're a Wrangellite! So on the elevator from then on we always talked about Wrangell.

D: And then Kathy. Kathy Dye. She's at the Sealaska Heritage Foundation. She does the media. She's married to my nephew.

J: What's his name?

D: Brad Fletch.

J: I'm glad I had the experience of working there. I got to meet so many people. And not just with the heritage but everyone is in the same building. So you can meet everyone. You know a lot of the people that are in the administration there are from Klukwan and are Shengukeidi, so they'd often pick Klukwan first sometimes and a lot of northern tribes got preference so every time I could and they were talking about grants I'd say "You got to include Wrangell, you got to include Wrangell." (laughter)

D: Well thank-you!

J: Well I hope that works out.

D: We could always use some extra help for boosting our Wrangell.

J: And there's a new program. They got an Alaska Native Education Program grant for SYSTEMS with the Crossings Program where they bring in Native youth from around southeast to Wrangell in the summertime so we are starting a service learning program with them. They'll get to document frogs on the landscape, take pictures of them and submit them to the database. The person that submits the most complete vouchers will get to go to a scientific conference with me in New Mexico. So its pretty neat. We are working with Wrangell, Klawock, Craig, Hydaburg and Metlakatla.

D: Wow. Awesome!

J: I'm trying to promote more frog people (laughter).

D: Well thank-you very much we can use all the help we can get.

J: Thank you so much, I do appreciate it.

(BRIEF BREAK WITH MICROPHONE TURNED OFF. TURNED BACK ON WHEN CONVERSATION STARTED AGAIN. PROPOSED MINING ON THE STIKINE IS THE NEW TOPIC).

10. Stikine River Mining Activity (29:12-32:10)

J: How long have they been trying to do the mining up there?

D: It has been for a long time.

J: For a decade or more?

D: Oh yea. They were mining at least ten years ago for gold.

J: Oh they were already doing it?

D: mmhmm.

J: How close are they to getting the proper permits to do it again do you know?

D: I don't know. It's more on the Canadian side but whatever happened son the Canadian side is going to come down that river and its going to affect us.

J: How often were you able to travel up the river?

D: I remember being all the way up to Telegraph once within the last five or eight years.

J: Do you feel a connection with your ancestors on your father's side when you travel on the river?

D: Yea I do. Because I remember when I was growing up and going up the river with my grandparents. We would go up there to do their fish camps and their harvesting vegetables ya know. Berries.

J: How is the WCA working with or against the mining? Do you know?

D: Not much yet. Not much going on. We have been in contact with the. See I can't remember if it was Fish and Game or if it was the Forest Service in Petersburg that was really targeting what's going on with mining. And then there's the Tahltans up in, up the river that come down and let us know what is going on with the mining up the river. Because it would affect us so they really feel that we should be more involved in what's going on with the mining. And they have been in contact with us. I'm hoping they keep that open.

J: Is it gold mostly that they're trying to get out of there?

D: There's more than gold. I think there's.. I'm not sure, I'm not really sure what but I know there's mining. There are at least a hundred sites that they have targeted so. And it's not all just one entity that's doing it and so they couldn't...

11. Land Claims (32:10-37:00)

J: Do you know if the Stikine Kwaan is working toward land claims still?

D: Oh yea. We are still. We have selected land that we would like to have as our village corporation land but um, it's such a slow process and then Sealaska Corporation is also trying to get land back from 1971 the 40 acres that they were denied to begin with. So the fact that there are two, the village sites, the five villages that were denied. It's just appalling that Wrangell was denied as a village because they said we had to be at least a quarter of the population and we had to file certain paperwork within the designated time and it wasn't done. So, I don't want to point fingers at why it wasn't done.

J: So its Haines, Wrangell, Tenakee Springs, Petersburg and Ketchikan. Is it the Murkowski legislation that is trying to add land for the villages?

D: Well they are working with Sealaska a lot. The village one is kind of on the back burner.

J: Would you be able to select land up the river in the Tongass?

D: Well we can ask for just about anything we want. Whether we get it or not is just a totally different story. Ya know we found, selected land, 23,000 acres is what we are supposed to be getting.

J: Is some of that along the river?

D: No, only Wrangell. Not just on the river. There's Burnet and out by Coffman. The traditional ya know, Tlingits didn't just live on Wrangell Island. WE had summer camps. And we had places where hardly any people lived. At one time we were one of the biggest tribes in Alaska. And we got so big that we had to break up. Some people from our tribe went to Kake and some people went to some of the outlying areas around here. But we were too big to all be in one group so land couldn't sustain that many people at once. So it had to break up and that was when we were out by Thoms, Thoms' Lake out that way.

J: Old Wrangell?

D: No. That was one of the places we settled after. In Old Town. And then from there we came here. We were too big at one point that we had to break up. But we, we settled all over, not just on Wrangell Island.

J: I remember looking at some of the old maps of William Paul's - Tihittan. And there were a lot of village sites it seemed on Etolin Island at one point.

D: mmhmm. And up the river all up and down the river. To Etolin island, to Burnet, not just right here.

J: Neat. Well thank-you again. I really do learn so much every time I talk to people here. And like I told Chrissy yesterday, it's really important for the work that I'm doing with frogs but I've just grown as a

person understanding the land and the culture and people and how I think about the world ya know? I thank-you.

D: You're welcome.