



## Ketchikan, early summer 2005

In this vast land of Alaska, we have trekked, driven, sailed and flown. Since Anchorage, when you last had news, the route has been both sunny and wending, with

selves overlooking the Inside Passage in the south east of Alaska, ready to begin a new adventure. From here on no roads, but islands surrounded by salt water.

capital of the state of Alaska, we felt necessary to distance ourselves from the “busy world”. To attempt to find its most isolated corner, on an outspread map our fingers fell on the name of Angoon. On the ferry, people were surprised by our choice: Angoon is the only village on Admiralty Island, where the brown bears outnumber men ten to one. Two white visitors in an Indian village of some 1000 people, does not go unnoticed. After finding the little room made available to us by Andrew the local Salvation Army pastor, it was time to have a look around. No sooner had we started than another deluge began, but the population carried on as if nothing had happened. Not an umbrella or raincoat in sight. Why worry about something that comes from the sky, just as food sprout from the earth. A flash of sodden eyelashes and the spray flies off and disappears as if it never was. With patience, we start discovering the Tlingit culture thanks to the people of Angoon. Just the time to



We we hee ya he.

transport waiting times occasionally frustrating. It has been necessary to hitch hike often enough, so as to find our way to the distant corners leaving behind the mild climes of the coast and gradually diminishing voracious mosquitoes. Whether by luxury car or in the back of a pick up, with our hair blowing in the wind, mostly we have crossed this country with ease and pleasure.

One morning on opening our tent, we found our-

Transport would be only ferry boat, to take us into this new world, at the heart of the tradition of the indigenous people. The Tlingit, who have lived on these coasts for thousands of years, are fed by a rich earth. It rains cats and dogs here, beating all records and producing luxuriant forests of red and yellow cedars, pines, spruces and alders, and with each tree an eagle or raven atop.

After a few days in Juneau, small town and

Amériques : du nord au sud



Baiser d'un corbeau à un ours

*Que l'on soit corbeau, et l'on épousera un aigle. Que l'on soit aigle et l'on épousera un corbeau.*

see our first totem poles and listen to a few stories. Pushed by a northern wind, we leave this village without even seeing a bear, but the songs of the sea lions still in our ears. This time we drift to the southwest, to the little town of Sitka, of the Tlingit Sheet'ka. Facing west to the ocean, Sitka still remains far removed from the paths of the enormous cruise ships, which run the length and breadth of the Inside Passage. Sometimes these floating mammoths pass in threes and fours lashing ten thousand visitors on unsuspecting towns of just over half that number. But as yet it is the beginning of the season so the locals can still breathe, only needing to hide once or twice a week from the onslaught. Although we could not figure out where Herman lived, the old man we telephoned on arrival was very keen to share with us his knowledge about his culture, and so accepted without hesitation to meet us at the

base of the main totem in Totem Square.

It exist two categories of people among the Tlingit: Ravens and Eagles. Who ever is a Raven will only marry an Eagle and vice versa. At the heart of these two main moieties (apparently with a French origin, this word means "half"), is another split into clans, each with a crest representing an aspect of nature, as their particular symbol. At birth the children become part of the clan of their mother. Each Tlingit has genes of both of Raven and Eagle as the mother is from a moiety and the father from the other one. Not only is this rule to keep a 'fresh blood' but it's also an integral part of the society's structure. Each individual Tlingit is a link of the chain, so they constitute a community of beings, where it follows that respect for each other is the law. Goods or lack thereof, is an affair for everyone.

Herman is a Raven from the clan Kayaash Ka Hit, whose crest is the Coho salmon. Guide rather than leader of his clan, it is time for him to pass on the reins because of his age. His proper children are of course not part of this clan so it is to his nephew, the son of one of his sisters, that he will pass on his knowledge as clan guide. Traditionally it is the maternal uncle, who educates the boys as the real father belongs to the opposite moiety. As for the young girls, it is their mother and her sisters who have the task of raising them. At first it seems more complex than our classic parent-child relationships. In fact in this society, relationships are very specific, demonstrated by a well established vocabulary for each family member's position. For example, 'his son's father' is called 'du eesh', 'his paternal aunt', 'du aat', 'his paternal uncle', 'du sani', 'his maternal uncle', 'du kaak' and 'his maternal aunt', 'du talaak'w', etc. After 250 years of contact with westerners, the Tlingit society has evolved a lot, adapting new ideas along with their constraints. Traditionally an introduction consisted of several minutes of a citizen explaining and giving all their names, along with clan titles both maternal and paternal, place of birth, etc. This is because the Tlingit people consider they are of their ancestors. Today's first meeting with Herman was



Mont Top.

*Dans la société Tlingit, ni les enfants ni les personnes âgées ne sont mises à l'écart.*

very straight forward initially, but in a way the most classic one could find. It was not till after several questions we were sure of both his clan name and proper name. Because of our interest he became enthusiastic to talk about himself, but with the habitual

modesty of the Tlingit people. After several hours in our company he finally honoured us with a welcome to the community house of his clan. It is the only one left standing in Sitka, the others having all disappeared with time to storms or just simply modern day restrictiveness. Further

Herman wanted to show us the at.uu of his clan, that is to say the ritual objects owned by the community. As clan guide he is not the owner but the caretaker of these ceremonial objects. So one day we spent the afternoon in discovery of the clan house that his nephew and family took care of. From an old wooden box Herman took out a 300 year old ceremonial hat representing the Coho salmon. After this he unfolded for us the black and red robe of ceremonies with a border of buttons. His nephew's wife, a craftswoman in beads, has installed her small workshop in this big house also. For her eldest son, to whom she would pass the heritages of her clan, she had made a dancing robe embroidered with the clan's crest, a wolf entirely made in beads, a task that had taken her over six months to complete.



En tête à tête avec les esprits

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