



# Mahla'asgum Sawinsk



Buxwlaḡs / February 2024 | Gitlaxt'aamiks Village Government

## *Doxhlgwiismiilukw loona?*

The Gitlaxt'aamiks Ceremonial Dancers are currently lead by Jordan Morven, Tyler Guno, and Jason Scott. They follow in the footsteps of past Directors such as Keith Tait, Lyle Adams, Peter McKay, the late Percy Tait, the late Hubert McMillan, and the late Eli Gosnell. What started as an article detailing the history of the dance group's leadership quickly illuminated the enormity of such a task. In the end, in order to meet a quickly approaching deadline, I settled on two interviews and a story submission.

The hope is that there are others who are willing to share their story and experience in this newsletter and that in the future these stories, interviews, and photos can be compiled into a more complete history of the Gitlaxt'aamiks Ceremonial Dancers.

There is no doubt that there are countless others who are responsible for the revival of the Nisga'a Dance Culture and countless others who have lead dance groups stretching back into time immemorial.

## *Inside this Issue*

Story Submission: Jason  
Scott's Experience with the  
Ceremonial Dancers

Interview: Kathleen Clayton

Interview: Jordan Morven

**Gitlakt'aamiks Ceremonial Dancers** started by the late Eli Gosnell in 1960 at a time when it was made illegal to practice our language and culture. At that time, it was thought by the Canadian Government that complete assimilation was the goal. They wanted us to speak strictly English and never use our native tongue. Saving our language and culture all started by his frequent visits to museums and archives about our Nisga'a people. He managed to remind himself of Songs he heard as a child and wanted to bring back our old ways. This also was when we already converted into Christianity from Old Aiyansh, many were not happy to see this being done and did not support what he was trying to achieve. He found old songs recorded too but most were recreated with many hours sitting at an old organ, many people thought he was going crazy. He would continue doing this by repeating a tune until he got it right. He never stopped until he went from start to finish as he heard them from places like Fishery Bay Canneries and Elders like my Great Grandfather Titus Nisyok. That was just the songs alone, he also went to the museums to see how our carvings were made. How masks were used and headdresses were worn, he also wanted to bring back the heartbeat of our nation but none of these were available for decades. Most were sold or destroyed over a century before he was born, the closest to a drum he found to start with was a powow drum, maracas in place of rattles and anything that resembled fur which was why there are pictures of dusters. He had even resorted to use of band instruments until many attempts of trial and error to make the drums we use today; he started small like making masks of Noxnok dancers and Chieftains headdresses we seen in pictures that our political leaders wore. They worked well together in the battle for land question as well as relearning our history and family songs. At the same time, he was practicing songs and gathering men to use the drums, he was training young men to be able to toss a Cedar hoop with no hands. This was very difficult training that was described as military style. But he also was preparing a Totem pole for the newly formed NESS of School district 92, in celebration of our separation from SD 82. This Totem pole was a huge deal because of the significance of being the first in over a hundred years to be raised and what it



stood for. It was a pole designed to tell the story of the Great Flood and has a figure named Txeemsim on top holding a rainbow. Now that he was near completion of the pole, the songs that were being practiced separately from the drummers were sounding more crisp and clear. The masks were ready and drummers were on time all together. His next step was ready for a public performance to see what the community thought about them. Four years of practice, trial and error and carving many masks and creating other regalia for this big moment they planned a performance. It was at the Community Hall where the first ever performance was held and they did an amazing job, it was at the end when they exited and suddenly the ground shook. There was a minor Earthquake that was felt but didn't do damage, it was actually seen as a good omen to what they had accomplished. Elders in attendance approved of the group and word spread fast, down-river, people were now wanting to take part and began making their own regalia. This was all happening while Eli was near completion of the pole, now the group was ready and November 11th was the date set for the pole raising and opening of our Nisga'a school. Our own Nisga'a kids won't have to be moved down south or to the east for education, knowledge was now brought here to the Valley and we now have a Dance group ready to perform. They entered and from start to finish they blew away the crowd with songs we still sing today, it was so successful they eventually became a mass group of all Four communities. Whenever they did big performances, they had to choose a Director before each performance. They travelled many places and it inspired Gitwinksihlkw to form the Four Crest dancers, that was when we finally performed at the first revival of Hoobiye in Gitwinksihlkw. Eli had a vision of our group to not only perform at the pole raising but to continue to grow and bring the group to a powerful version of what was told of what we were like hundreds of years ago, even thousands of years ago. Back when we were in pre-contact and using the Hoop Dance for the first time as an alternative to single combat, which was actually an alternative to full on War between nations.

*Photo Credit: Andrew Stewart, ProRez Studios*

The early years of the group was originally just the start of something great, he wanted to see the same for the other communities as well. The vision was to inspire others to not only love what they seen but to bring their community to revive their songs and dances.



The knowledge I shared was told to me from the late Dr Joe Gosnell, he spent a lot of time with our group and also shared so much with me when I would visit him. He was happy to share if you were wanting to learn, he was impressed if you remembered to always bring a gift when you visit an elder. He once told me “You’re a carver? Did you know Eli Gosnell and Txeemsim were also

carvers?” but when it came to the story of what Eli did at home or on his journey to uncovering information he needed, that came from his daughter Kathleen Clayton and what she experienced first-hand. She as well as many others that attended WWNI had shared knowledge when we needed it the most and sometimes in the simplest way like going off topic during class. One of my favorite teachers was the Late Rod Robinson who came to guide the dance group and knew my great grandfather.

As for me, when I started directing, no one knew how to throw the hoop in the hoop dance without their hands. In 2012 I was



challenged to the hoop dance and lost. When we went to Vancouver for Hoobiyee 2014, our hoop dancers couldn't toss it like them. My contribution was being given a handful of dancers and drummers, and bringing the hoop dance to where we see it today. Back in 2014 we started from trying to throw an older hoop to the PVC pipe, it was painful to use so I made a hoop

myself to go further and withstand torque used to throw it. In total I taught myself four different ways to toss it and my apprentices showed me three others. Kohl, Bretton, Seth and I just kept practicing, eventually we tossed the hoop higher and further. And also went from teaching side dancers to take on roles I used to do by myself, and seen them teach those when they moved to Naxnok dancers.



To leading the group alongside T'ip Nii T'aa (Jordan Morven) and Daxgadim Goot Ganaaw (Tyler Guno) we recognized how we are bringing in more dancers and teaching Naxnok dancers how to bring their masks to life.

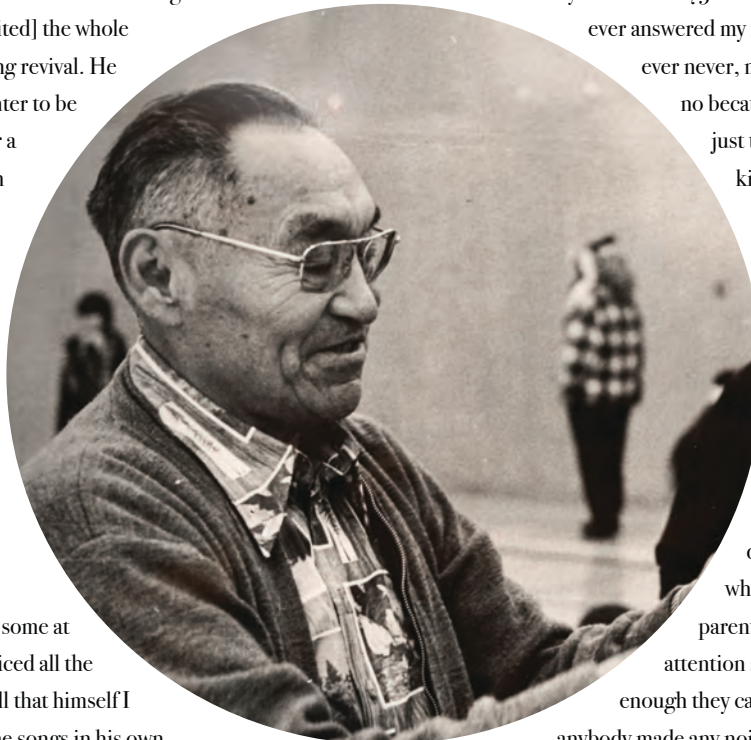
I wanted to show people that's how to train a leader, that's how the past great chiefs taught me that to teach cultural dancing and singing the best we can do is encourage and acknowledge the bravery of those who take part. Our elders and knowledge keepers they were sharing stories and memories they experienced.



That is called the true Nisga'a way of teaching, that is the only way I believe people should learn. For future opportunities for gaining more community participation we will be having regular practices, regalia and drum making workshops and we actively post upcoming events through social media which helps us gain more momentum in the process of rejuvenating the group .

T'ooyaksiy' N'iin for this opportunity

When Perry and I got married December 28th 1970 my grandparents Mary and Eli Gosnell presented me with an Indian blanket and an Indian dress in our banquet and my Ye'e made a speech. He said he was Reviving indian singing and dancing. He said it hasn't been revived because back in the day they put a stop to Indian dancing and all that so he said he was going to revive it starting in January. He had already been busy writing the songs we were going to do and end of his speech he said he wanted me to be one of the main singers to lead the singing with the with the women because he liked my voice and he heard me sing. Him and my grandmother presented me with my blanket and my dress and that was the first time anybody really seen an indian blanket or even a dress no one had them before. Anyway, he ended his speech with announcing that Indian dancing practices will start right after Christmas he said January 1971 he [invited] the whole Community to join in on Indian dancing revival. He told everybody "I want my granddaughter to be one of the singers, if she could sing for a rock band she could sing for the indian dancers" I used to sing for the dynamics who became let's boogie after. Oh, I used to sing in a rock band too only because I wanted to go to dances and my parents were so strict with us they wouldn't let us go so, I join the band so when I joined the band I was able to go to dances and sing in the dances and all that, it was just a fun thing to do but my ye'e said he heard me. So we had these practices some down by my house and some at the hall singing practices and we practiced all the songs. He give us papers to he wrote all that himself I still have some of them. He wrote all the songs in his own writing. He didn't have somebody type it up and copied for him, he had it all on his own paper and whatever he had on there were photocopied for him for the dancers so we went through every song with him at his house he had different groups coming in the singers and the dancers. The side dancers were like the side dancers today, they were all the young guys, our husbands like Perry was one, Ed Wright, Cubby Munroe, Philip Azak. He had different groups coming in to do the practice showing the guys how to move and how to dance. You know the Gitsiaks song where you hook up the fish and everybody has a taste, the dancer around there used to be cubby Monroe and my ye'e used to stop the dances "Don't make it look like you're digging clams, you're not digging clams, you're poking at a fish" Then we start all over again and we used to have so much fun with my ye'e and how he taught. He was very strict, strict and firm. He never ever said anything in an angry way to anybody he [was] just strict about discipline, discipline on the floor, he never allowed any of the kids to stand up and walk around all over. He'd tell the ladies "You have your children here look after them, tell them how to



behave here, they're not here to run around all over the place, everybody's got to go to the washroom before we start, no one's allowed to leave this floor everybody has to stay put wherever you are until we're done, there's to be no running around anywhere. I don't want the kids running here and there to get water, to go to the bathroom." So, he disciplined us like that and the behaviour of our children we had to really watch and we knew if our children were getting out of hand and my ye'e had to say something we knew we had to really get it through our kids heads that you cannot do that do not run around or don't answer back when he speaks to you and all that. There's such a difference between way back then with us, [compared] to now with the kids, we were so disciplined, I was so disciplined that I was so old when my mother died my mother was 75 I was 55 and to the day of her death, I never ever answered my mother or raised my tone of voice to her ever never, my dad never did that my grandparents no because we were disciplined today I see it just to be the opposite. I really feel that some kids are not disciplined enough to think that way, they continually get away with answering their parents or their grandparents and that's not right you know and we learn learned that at a young age you know to have respect for our parents and our grandparents and all the adults we weren't allowed to talk to anybody in any way we weren't allowed to be disrespectful to anyone didn't matter who it was and we learned that from our parents. Nowadays I find that the kids attention span is so small lucky they can't sit long enough they cannot sit long enough to listen if anybody made any noise while my grandfather was speaking, he'd just stand there and look right at that person and nobody would say anything. Whoever was talking would realize that he's staring at them and they knew they had to stop. One of the things my ye'e always told us "When you sing a song you make sure you know what it's about because somebody in the crowd's gonna come up to you and say what was that song? You have to know all the answers that's why I tell all these stories before we practice, so when somebody comes to you and asks you why do you guys do it this way why did you guys sing it that way what does it mean you should be able to answer those questions, you should be able to explain it yourself that's why it's important to listen he said I might repeat it a hundred times, but you know what, that's how we teach we repeat it over and over and over again to that person learn and you'll hear that that's what you call an adaawak. You hear those stories over and over and over again they all have meaning" he said "I know it upset some of you to have to sit and listen. I see the ones that already know the stories but it's just the way we have to do it"

I went down to Vancouver with them Yan just to go and watch and she said Mom you should dance with us she said just one more time Mom so I said yeah I guess so I said take my blanket and my stuff down so I wanted took all my stuff down only to be stolen and Prince George and never found. I had to make do for with whatever. I just feel sick over my stuff being lost. I just wonder person that took it what is he going to do with it? Where do you use somebody's regalia without it being recognized? I figured all the stuff in my suitcase is up to about \$10,000 of value everything there. A lot of people are reassuring me, one of my friends said did you know my brother lost all his regalia and two years later it came back, absolutely nothing wrong with them in the same bag that it was in and all that two years it took to come back she said. so, just have hope she said

It felt good to dance in Vancouver I hadn't been back for a long time. I felt at peace there. I just lost my sister before that. I was feeling really, really alone, but I felt at home, I felt my parents, oh my grandparents, my sisters, I guess that's why I had to go, because I knew they'd be there. I didn't know anybody. I don't know why I just felt like I'd needed to be there. My kids asked me all the time mom when you gonna join, mum when you going to join? I never was active after most of my family members passed on. My grandparents, my parents. I felt totally alone with the dancers 'cause my family wasn't there. My ye'e used to say you're gonna dance you make sure your whole family dances with you. Right from mother and father to children to grandchildren, it's not going to mean much if you do it on your own, teach your children all this they could carry it on he said one day I'll be gone you're going have to carry it on too.

I got my first blanket in January 1971. My ye'e was director and there were families there. He said "It's really important when you're indian dancing you don't dance by yourself you make sure your family is there with you. he wanted to the leaders of the community to be in the dance group to show the world that they're there as leaders, it shows that they believe in our culture and in singing and dancing too and it's important for those leaders to have their families right behind them people will see who all these families are." and so that that's what happened I know our whole family was there, Joe's whole family was there, George's whole family was there, Benny's whole

family was there. A lot of them were just little kids and I was 20 years old when I started with the group.

Every single dancer wore a blanket right down to the little ones, nowadays it's not that way and I, I feel bad for that because to me the blanket, it's your identity it shows who you are. That blanket song, that tells about who you are, where you come from because each house has a different crest whether you're wolf, eagle or whatever. There's many different crests, you don't just pick whatever crest you want you have to pick your own family's crest. That [crest] belongs to your family you cannot go to another house and use their crest because since they're a little different and so you have to be careful that way because you can't just use any kind of crest it's got to be your own family crest. Your blanket tells everybody who you are and where you come from and the blanket song when they sing that and they turn around and the public sees your crest "Oh she's from the wolf tribe." That's what that song means we turn around and you show the world your crest and who you're where you come from.

You know the blanket was my security, I could not sing without my blanket, I couldn't dance I couldn't move. As soon as I get it on, I could feel it, feel the spirit just feel the spirit. My ye'e used to tell us "Take your blanket, take your blanket with you, it's hard to dance without your blanket, it's hard to sing without your blanket." I knew what he meant right away when because that's the way I am. My blanket is a security and it just brings you right out of yourself that's what I felt.



Jordan Morven was selected as Head Director of the Gitlaxt'aamiks Ceremonial Dancers on November 26<sup>th</sup> 2023. He now leads the dance group that numbers around 200 members.

*Can you tell me a little about your history with dancing and culture?*

“I started when I was a young boy, we used to be scared of the masks when we were young children. My mother brought me back when we were about 8 or 7, ever since we’ve never stopped dancing right up until however old I am now. My first time directing was when I was 16, with the school NESS group and when there was a vacant director position. Wahlin Simoogit Hleek (Dr. Joseph Gosnell) selected three in training directors; myself (Jordan Morven), Tyler Guno, and Jason Scott. We’ve been directing together since 2013, just recently they selected me to be the head director. We’ve been doing this for a little over 10 years now? Now my kids are following in my footsteps their love of dance is just as strong as mine.”



*Tyler Guno and Jordan Morven at the final dance practice before Hoobiye 2024 in Gingolx.*

*You mentioned being scared of the masks as a youth, I feel that there’s people who have fear holding them back from cultural dancing, what sort of encouragement would you give to anyone who might have any sort of anxiety about engaging in their culture?*

“Just lose [yourself] in the drums, the box drums, all the noises they’re making and just start moving your legs, and let them flow with the beat, it’ll naturally come once you start getting out of your head and start feeling the drums beating inside you.

It gets easier once you start moving around. I find a lot of kids who started dancing while they’re infants, tend to be less scared than children who haven’t participated before.

With Hoobiye, I got the whole day and I don’t miss any group who performs and that’s where my love of dance comes from, to hear all different songs and dance from different groups and nations and how they tell their story with their songs.”