

House Chiefs & Sub-Chiefs - Roles and Responsibilities

Mills - Pgs. 134-139

The house chiefs govern the fishing sites at Kya Wiget and Tse Kya. With the subchiefs, they govern the outlying territories.

They are responsible for the land, the people, the animals, the fish and the plants on their land.

They direct the people to manage, conserve, and harvest the resources wisely.

Today the head chiefs both give permission for people to use the territory and oversee how people use it.

The head chiefs, with the assistance of their heirs, decide the succession to titles.

Having a head chief's name gives the holder the authority to decide, in consultation with the other chiefs in the clan, who should be given feast names as they become vacant.

Inside and outside the feast hall the chiefs decide disputes and help people through their crises.

The head chiefs have the authority to decide how the law should be applied in individual disputes, both in the feasts, out in the territories, and in the villages.

Having a high chief's name is a great responsibility, requiring the holder to act correctly and with decorum.

Jenness - Pgs. 513-519

The chieftainship of a clan was highly coveted, although the authority conferred by the position was in most cases comparatively slight.

The accession of a new chief was a long and expensive affair, involving in former times no less than six potlatches.

Even with the help of kinsmen he could hardly gather the food and presents necessary for one potlatch alone in less time than a year.

By the end of the nineteenth century, when European settlement had caused the confinement of the Indians to certain reserves, six potlatches to become a chief were far too heavy a burden for any individual to undertake, especially since a chieftainship carried no shred of authority and very little prestige.

It is clear that whether he was the head of a phratry (clan), or of only a clan (house) within a phratry, a chief had to expend much labor and wealth to gain his position. Even after he had established himself firmly in his seat, he had to keep open house, as it were, to all members of his phratry, to relieve the wants of the poor, and to support his people in their relations with other phratries.

A stingy chief who sought only his own profit soon lost his influence; if he were a clan (house) chief, his own clan (house) and the phratry (clan) chief would look to one of his nobles for leadership; and if he were a phratry (clan) chief; one of his clan (house) chiefs might push him into second place.

Only a chief could lead a war expedition.

Harris - Pgs. 130 -136

Children were traditionally designated as chiefs at or before birth and their initial training towards that end would begin at an early age but intensive preparation to become a chief began in adulthood. This is true to a lesser degree today.

It is especially true today that the intensive training of chief's heirs occurs in the young adult years when young people have demonstrated their potential.

The meritorious qualities which have always been required of an heir include wisdom, patience, generosity, self-control, the desire and ability to look after his family's interests, knowledge of the territory, good judgment, fairness and kindness. He should also be a hard worker, know the language and laws well, be a good speaker and have a spouse who supports him in his endeavours.

A chief must expend more time, energy, thought and wealth than all others for the benefit of the people.

One of the most important areas of responsibility for a young person who is a chief's heir is learning to conduct feasts.

In recent years, the burden for young Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en has doubled because today it is expected that young people, especially those of high standing, be competent in two worlds. They must speak two languages, know two cultures and be successful in two economies to be considered a leading citizen, a burden most members of Canadian society are not expected to carry.