

# Written as I Remember It

Teachings (ʔəms taʔaw)  
from the Life of a Sliammon Elder

ELSIE PAUL

*in collaboration with*

PAIGE RAIBMON and HARMONY JOHNSON



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# Contents

---

List of Illustrations xi

A Note on the Sliammon Language xiii

*Honoré Watanabe*

Acknowledgments xxiii

Introduction: Listening to ʔəms taʔaw 3

*Paige Raibmon*



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## WHERE I COME FROM

---

1

The Territory and People 65

— *Legends* —

A Man Taken by the Seal Family • Twins Are Gifted 81



---

## CHILD

---

2

Life with My Grandparents 87  
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— *Sliammon Narrative* —  
 nohotəm (They Invited Them to a Feast) 139

## 3

Teachings on Learning 148

— *Legends* —

Mink and Cloud • Mink and Salal • Mink and Eagle •  
 Mink and Pitch • Mink and Grizzly 176

## 4

Residential School 184

— *Legend* —

tʔəl (The Wild Man of the Woods) 204




---

**MOTHER**

---

## 5

Teachings for Moms 209

— *Legend* —

The Young Girl and Eleven Puppies 223

## 6

Married Life 227

— *Sliammon Narrative* —

qʷəl čʔε tawθem kʷut tamɬs  
 (They [Spirits] Just Came and Told You Something) 269

## 7

Teachings on Grief 276

## 8

Community Work 305

— *Legends* —

Mink and Whale • Mink and Wolf 337




---

**CHI-CHIA (čičiye?)**


---

9

Naming My Family 345

10

Healing Work 362

— *Sliammon Narrative* —č'ehč'ehΔ čx<sup>w</sup> k<sup>w</sup>Δnetomot

(You Thank the One Who Looks after All of Us) 378

11

Teachings on Spirituality 387

Thoughts about Ma 406

*Cliff Paul*

Additional Readings 408

Index 424

# Introduction:

## *Listening to ʔəms taʔaw*

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Paige Raibmon

“The history written as I remember it,” said Elsie, expressing her sense of this project. It was December 2011, and we were in North Vancouver at her granddaughter Harmony’s house, visiting and working on this book. We were playing around with potential titles, and earlier that day, Harmony and I had suggested “Chi-chia’s Teachings.” “Chi-chia,” which means “grandmother” in the Sliammon<sup>1</sup> language, had seemed a logical word to include in the title: many people call Elsie “Chi-chia,” not just her biological grandchildren; moreover, Elsie’s own Chi-chia has always been important to her. “Teachings” is the word Elsie uses to refer to the ʔaʔamun ways, beliefs, values, and practices that she recounts in this book. But to Elsie’s ears, “Chi-chia’s Teachings” sounded didactic and overemphasized her as an individual. The teachings, she reminded us, do not belong to any individual; they are “ʔəms taʔaw” or “our teachings.” ʔəms taʔaw are, as she later explained, “the very essence of our well-being.” The phrase “the history written as I remember it” was not Elsie’s suggestion for a title but was instead part of her extended explanation of the problems with our proposal. The phrase stayed with me, however, and I jotted it down. I felt slightly clever, as though I had salvaged a fragment of verbal ephemera. Several months later, in need of a working title to submit to the press, I shared my notes with Harmony, and we decided to use “The History Written As I Remember It.” Good thing I wrote that down, I thought, feeling slightly cleverer. A short time later, however, while reviewing

interview transcripts that I had read before, I was surprised to read Elsie's words to a journalist friend in 2006: "I've always wanted to write this – to document the history as I remember it." I realized then that what I had thought of as an off-the-cuff remark was, in fact, Elsie's carefully considered and precisely articulated conceptualization of this project.

I relate this incident here to illustrate two points that are relevant for readers. The first is the consistency, reliability, and authority of Elsie Paul's voice. People familiar with expert storytellers and the practice of oral narrative will not be surprised at this story, yet many people remain skeptical about the reliability of orally narrated memories. In 2006, Chi-chia had not yet begun work on this book, and since that time the project has passed through many hands and multiple iterations. My point is not that she necessarily remembered in 2011 the exact turn of phrase she used in 2006. It is rather that a five-year interruption did so little to alter her sense of what it meant to record *tāu* in book form that she repeated herself nearly verbatim. This is typical of the precision that Chi-chia brings to speech, particularly to storytelling. As Harmony and I studied the transcripts, we discovered depths to her narrative abilities that we had previously not fully appreciated. No matter how often phone calls, visitors, or interlocutors interrupted, Chi-chia never strayed from her train of thought. Unfailingly patient and courteous in her response to the interruption, over and over she returned without missing a beat to where she had left off. When Harmony and I struggled to connect disparate pieces of transcript, our efforts ended, time and again, with the humbling realization that our laboriously reached solution had been there all along, inherent in the logic of Chi-chia's original tellings. Long before she learned to tell stories like this, she learned to listen to them. The care and attention with which Elders taught Elsie to listen as a young girl is an important part of her skill at speaking now that she is an Elder herself.<sup>2</sup> Chi-chia is a serious storyteller, and by this I do not mean there is any shortage of laughter or lightness in her words. She is a serious storyteller because she avoids conjecture, speaks with clear intention, and selects words with care. She does not tell stories to mislead or harm. She takes the power of words seriously, and so tells stories in order to impart helpful, potentially healing, knowledge.

My second point, related to the first, is about listening, particularly transformational listening. By this I mean listening in ways and to voices that have the power to unearth sociopolitical assumptions and

intellectual foundations. That afternoon in 2011, I listened carefully enough to catch something important about Chi-chia's meaning, while at the self-same moment I misconstrued my act of listening. Although I had read/heard Chi-chia utter those words before, I had neither taken in their significance initially nor remembered them later. I eventually came to understand that by describing the work as "the history written as I remember it" in response to our questions about whether "Chi-chia's Teachings" was an appropriate title, Elsie revealed her sense of connection between "the teachings" and "the history." The teachings as she learned them from her grandparents *are* history as she remembers it. For Elsie, the teachings and the history are inextricable; a book of teachings *is* a book of history. This realization took time to dawn on me: time to reread the transcripts, time to talk with Harmony and Chi-chia, time to think. Had I not returned to reflect on Chi-chia's words in the transcripts, I likely would have retained my self-satisfied sense that I had recorded a fleeting gem of a phrase and, in so doing, missed the opportunity to deepen my understanding of how Chi-chia positions past, present, culture, and knowledge in relation to one another. This story brings into focus the often hidden barriers to transformational listening. On the face of it, Chi-chia's accounts seem plain enough and not particularly cryptic. Yet much of what she has to say is rooted in a radically different paradigm from that which many readers, including myself, bring to this book. To get a sense of this paradigm, readers must bring to her words a continual openness to learning something new and unknown, rather than the certainty of having "got it" that overconfidence in one's intellectual ability, empathetic ear, or good intentions so easily produces.<sup>3</sup> Listening/reading in this way is very much like the way Chi-chia's Elders taught her to listen to stories as a child. As she describes in Chapter 3, Elders taught her to remain receptive to new meanings and lessons regardless of how many times she had heard a story before, and they frequently asked her to explain what she had learned from a particular telling. In this spirit, Elsie, Harmony, and I invite readers to take in not only the content of her words but the method and intention, as well. This task is not necessarily easy, particularly for those like me who have been steeped in print-based learning rather than in oral traditions.

Transformational listening entails particular difficulties for readers/listeners who want to "unsettle the settler within," to borrow the scholar Paulette Regan's phrase.<sup>4</sup> My own experiences and reflections as a non-Indigenous scholar lead me to believe that those of us working



to be, in Regan's terms, "settler allies" may be most susceptible to the dangers of certainty when we least expect it, when we already believe we have opened our eyes, ears, and minds, extended our empathy, and elicited stories from the dispossessed, disadvantaged, and marginalized.<sup>5</sup> This susceptibility matters a great deal because it has become nearly a platitude that listening to a multiplicity of voices – particularly in the form of first-person testimony – triggers the transformative effects of decolonization and reconciliation. In recent decades, settler states have institutionalized and thus sanctioned the important practice of listening to "other" voices in a number of contexts. The process of giving testimony and bearing witness are cornerstones of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's procedures in Canada, for example, as they were in South Africa.<sup>6</sup> The historian Bain Attwood dubs this the "age of testimony" and is among those who doubt that autobiographical forms usher in reconciliation.<sup>7</sup> While I agree that hearing autobiographical testimony does not inevitably set the settler-witness on a one-way street to reconciliation, I differ with Attwood's conclusion that testimonial or autobiographical narratives are problematic impediments to "true" understanding. Indigenous individuals who share their testimony – whether as formal evidence to a commission or court, or as personal narrative for a public audience – offer listeners an important gift.<sup>8</sup> Whether and how audiences are able to receive and appreciate that gift depends very much on the particular way that they listen.

Attwood's position relies upon the same assumption as the positions he critiques: that listening to testimony erases the distance – or difference – between subject and witness, creating an overidentification (what Attwood, following Freud, calls "transference") between the two. He sees this as a problem because he believes it impedes objective, dispassionate analysis. I suggest instead that first-person narratives do not necessarily eliminate distance at all. On the contrary, first-person accounts can preserve distance – that is, difference – *more* effectively than supposedly objective historical methodologies that shoehorn Indigenous narrators' words into Western paradigms. Elsie's narratives presented here are a case in point. At the same time, first-person narratives, including this one, can easily give the *illusion* of erasing distance or difference between the narrator and the witness. And herein lies the danger of certainty. The anthropologist Julie Cruikshank noted as much more than twenty years ago when she wrote, "one obstacle hampering the analysis of autobiography is

the very real human tendency to make implicit comparisons between the account heard or read and one's own life."<sup>9</sup> Having tuned its ears to diverse autobiographical keys, the challenge for settler society is to strain to continue listening for difference rather than to succumb to a comforting but disproportionate sense of commonality.<sup>10</sup> This effort means, in part, resisting the urge to overidentify with the sympathetic narrator and perhaps forcing oneself to identify with historical ancestors whom one might rather disavow.<sup>11</sup> But it does not mean listening with less emotion or sympathy. The emotions that testimonial accounts evoke are an undeniable part of their power; where the listener goes with the emotional response can be problematic, however. To assume, after hearing or reading a moving testimony of a residential school survivor, for example, that I now know what it was like to be in that narrator's shoes would prematurely close down my understanding, when in fact I ought to listen in the spirit of an ongoing relationship, an open investigation toward further insight. This sort of active, open-ended listening has the potential to bring enduring assumptions out of the taken-for-granted background, to bring into relief otherwise hidden suppositions that undergird twenty-first-century colonial attitudes and power imbalances.<sup>12</sup> Absent this, settler society's sympathetic listening is laden with unjustified certainty: certainty that it is listening for the right reason, at the right time; that it is on the right side; that listening *is* reconciliation. Such certainty precludes facing up to the need to transform not only attitudes but also relations of power. It precludes addressing the material, as opposed to the merely rhetorical, changes that must be part of any meaningful process of reconciliation or decolonization. Such certainty fosters listening that reinforces rather than challenges the status quo of settler colonialism. How and to whom we listen is thus inherently political. As one historian points out, "true citizenship ... involves not only getting to speak (i.e., having 'a say' or 'a voice'), but also being actively and attentively heard."<sup>13</sup> Learning to listen for unsettling differences, however subtle, is a difficult process with serious stakes that requires self-conscious and dialogical responsiveness to the words of people who are not the beneficiaries of settler colonialism.<sup>14</sup>

The degree to which listeners assign authority to particular voices very much affects how listeners hear those voices. Rather than suggesting, as Attwood does, the need to reauthorize professional historians as the only ones capable of upholding the necessary distance for critical thought, knowledge acquisition, and an understanding of

difference, Elsie, Harmony, and I suggest quite the opposite.<sup>15</sup> We invite all listeners to regard this text as a collaboratively authored historical analysis, a secondary source in its own right, and Chi-chia as a ʔamun historian in *her* own right.<sup>16</sup> Both the open-ended listening discussed above and the recognition of the expertise of Indigenous Elders and knowledge keepers are important elements of the Indigenous methodology we have followed in producing this book, and as authors we hope readers will be willing to invest in our approach. Audiences commonly treat first-person life histories as anecdotal, and researchers approach them as primary sources to be mined for evidence. Doing so relegates the narrator to the status of “informant,” however, and reserves interpretive authority for readers, particularly scholarly ones.<sup>17</sup> Attwood advocates this very approach because to do otherwise, he claims, imperils the very nature of historical understanding and inquiry by leading us into a morass of emotion and sentiment.<sup>18</sup> But rather than retreating to a safe “distance,” I suggest that readers take advantage of the close-up view that Chi-chia offers. The voice of this text is obviously different from that in Western secondary sources. But instead of this difference disqualifying the text as authoritative, we hope it helps readers tune in to multiple forms of authority and knowledge. If you listen – that is, read – carefully, you will hear that Chi-chia does more than offer anecdotes from days gone by. She takes what scholars might conceive of as “primary sources” – her own life experiences – and situates them within the interpretive context of the teachings. That is, she uses detailed evidence to present an argument in terms of her own world view. In so doing, she interprets ʔamun history and teachings for a broad audience, one that includes but is not limited to her family and community members. Her status as one of the last mother-tongue speakers of the Sliammon language adds dimension and poignancy to her interpretive act. In the chapters that follow, Chi-chia shares many of the details that are typically presented in an introduction such as this. Therefore I have not provided a mini-biography of where and when she was born, or provided a gloss on the history of colonialism and Indian policy in twentieth-century British Columbia. I hope that you, as readers, will be patient if such information does not appear in the order that you might expect. I provide suggestions for additional context on the many topics that Chi-chia discusses in the “Additional Readings” section at the end of the book.

Before undertaking this project, Chi-chia herself was an “informant” for numerous scholars and knowledge producers. Her involvement in

such work – the sharing of knowledge between peoples and across “distance” – is a family tradition. Her great-grandfather Captain Timothy worked and travelled extensively on a schooner providing navigational assistance to newcomers. He later guided the reserve commissioner Peter O’Reilly throughout the territory.<sup>19</sup> One of Captain Timothy’s sons, tama Timothy or “Chief Tom,” was the primary łaʔamin informant to Homer Barnett, the first ethnographer to enquire about łaʔamin culture. And Chi-chia’s grandmother translated Catholic sermons from Chinook into the Sliammon language when she was a girl. Chi-chia herself has patiently and generously shared the teachings, history, and language with linguists, filmmakers, archaeologists, historians, journalists, and university students who have asked her questions about everything from resource extraction to slavery to prepositions. Her experiences with researchers have usually been very positive, yet Chi-chia wishes, though she would not quite put it this way, that the knowledge she shared crossed disciplinary boundaries more easily. For example, before beginning this book, she collaborated for two decades with the linguist (and now good friend of many years) Honoré Watanabe in his meticulous documentation of the Sliammon language. This technical work, of great value for linguistic analysis and language preservation, by its very nature did not reach a wide audience. When related material was needed for another purpose – for treaty, court, or education, for example – Chi-chia noted, “A year later someone else is asking you the same questions again! So you don’t know where it’s going!” She hopes that this book will make the history and teachings available for all these purposes.

Relatedly and as importantly, she wants to present the teachings and history within her own narrative framework, a framework that treats knowledge holistically rather than a framework that parses it into separate disciplinary boxes. Chi-chia has, at times, been frustrated by the assumptions that frame the questions of even well-intentioned researchers, and she (always politely) resists attempts to shoehorn her answers into someone else’s paradigm.<sup>20</sup> She implicitly understands the need to alter not only the content of the historical record, but its epistemic structure. In this she shares the perspectives of Indigenous scholars who demonstrate that oral history cannot be treated “like any other documentary source” and who critique the intellectual foundations of the academy at large.<sup>21</sup> She also echoes the work of feminist scholars who have long challenged grand, often male-centred, narratives, particularly through their use of biography and autobiography.<sup>22</sup> With this collaboratively authored, told-to project, Chi-chia

recounts the history and teachings “written as she remembers them” rather than as someone else has represented them. Long regarded by many recognized “experts” as a knowledgeable and trustworthy “informant,” she presents her words here under her own authority. In this book, she is an author rather than an informant. Understanding Chi-chia as a historian within her own tradition is a step toward learning to really listen to – rather than merely incorporate or assimilate – multiple voices within the academy and public sphere.

A further step in this direction is bringing awareness to *how* and *when* and *why* we listen. I listen to Chi-chia as a settler-ally of Indigenous people living in a colonial nation-state. I believe it is important to align with agendas set by Indigenous people for decolonization and healing. When Indigenous individuals seek input from collaborators in order to share their knowledge and histories in written forms, I believe it is both intellectually justified and ethically imperative to employ scholarly platforms to amplify their voices. I also listen as a historian who has long been inspired by histories of individuals. From my earliest research projects as an undergraduate to my ongoing work today, I have felt drawn to explore broad historical patterns and meanings through the stories of individuals.<sup>23</sup> Undoubtedly, this interest also drew me to working with Chi-chia on this book. In her narratives, I see dozens of points of engagement with various scholarly conversations, a few of which I detail below. More personally, I listen to Chi-chia as a mother. I began working with her words at a time when I was particularly in need of hearing them. After the loss of my first child in 2006, I struggled to find motivation to do much of anything. Yet when Elsie invited me to help, I agreed without hesitation. I had known that she wanted to produce such a work for many years and I had always been enthusiastic about its potential significance. It was difficult but ultimately profound to spend so much time with her teachings around grief and her stories about the loss of two daughters. Each of the many hours I spent working with Chi-chia’s words was rewarding. Although I was present to hear her tell only a small portion of the stories reproduced here, I read and reread – usually and most enjoyably in Harmony’s company – the entirety of the transcripts again and again. I always looked forward to sitting down and immersing myself in Chi-chia’s knowledge, line by line, word by word. Every time I did so, I learned something new. Today, her words accompany me in my daily life. It is a gift to have participated in this book’s production.

BOOKS, LIKE INDIVIDUALS, have life histories. What follows in the rest of this introduction is the life history of this project written as I remember it. Since I have betrayed above that I do not always pay attention as well as I would like, readers can be reassured that I have benefited from the notes and assistance of other collaborators. I have also relied extensively on Chi-chia's own words in order to explain her motivation for writing this book. I recount this textual life history in acknowledgement of scholars' calls for attention to process in the production of told-to narratives. Recently, the literary scholar Sophie McCall identified collaborative texts, broadly defined, as models for other forms of collaboration in settler societies working out the meanings of reconciliation.<sup>24</sup> In order for told-to narratives to realize this potential, however, there are a number of prerequisites. One is the self-critical and open-ended listening by audiences discussed above. Prior to that, however, is the matter of ensuring that the collaborative process is conducted with integrity. No told-to narrative, regardless of how positive in intention, innovative in structure, or original in content, can meaningfully model or contribute to reconciliation if this condition is absent. Accordingly, historians, anthropologists, and literary critics alike have argued that the *process* of collaboration is as important as the final multi-authored result.<sup>25</sup>

In recent decades, scholars have raised important questions about power and ethics in collaborative writing processes. As McCall notes, "Historically, non-Aboriginal recorders and editors have maintained tight control over structuring, editing, introducing, interpreting, and publishing versions of Aboriginal oral expression under their own name."<sup>26</sup> As a result, told-to narratives have been critiqued as colonial appropriations of Indigenous voice.<sup>27</sup> Scholarly collaborators themselves have engaged in extensive self-reflection, revealing details of their methodologies, exploring non-conventional layouts, and incorporating multiple voices.<sup>28</sup> Yet many of these self-critical efforts toward developing ethical collaborative practices address concerns raised by scholars rather than the concerns of narrators or their communities. In part, this is because significant amounts of time and distance intervene between the so-called fieldwork of recording the narratives and their eventual publication. In the interim, the scholar often assumes control over the shape of the final product and, in a sense, comes to treat the transcribed words as primary sources distanced from the narrator.<sup>29</sup> Although this approach does not necessarily entail an intent to appropriate the narrator's words, it can easily result

in appropriation because it tends to obscure the fact that narrators bring their own ethical frameworks and agendas to told-to projects – frameworks and agendas that are distinct from those of their scholarly collaborators.<sup>30</sup> We still know surprisingly little about the wishes of many narrators with regard to the final published form of their words.<sup>31</sup> For example, after decades of wrestling with ethical qualms regarding representation and voice, the anthropologist Kathleen Mullen Sands settled on an experimental format for presenting the life of the Tohono O’odham man Theodore Rios. The published volume appeared only after Rios’ death, and so we cannot know whether her innovative format achieved his goals.<sup>32</sup> Even when the narrator is still alive, collaborators and critics often do not place her wishes at the centre of their work. In thousands of pages devoted to the controversy surrounding the life history of Rigoberta Menchú, for example, one is hard-pressed to find someone who prioritizes Menchú’s self-expressed view of the situation.<sup>33</sup> When scholars fail to explicitly address and incorporate the narrator’s views, they imply that the narrator’s perspectives are unsophisticated, underdeveloped, or simply not worth considering. They thus cast into doubt their own claims to ethical practice. We cannot engage in an ethical collaboration with someone if we do not respect their capacity and judgment. Scholars and readers who do not attend to the points of view of Indigenous narrators remain caged (however unwittingly) within a nineteenth-century, salvage mentality that once again freezes idealized Indigenous voices, albeit now in twenty-first-century postmodern poses.<sup>34</sup> This tendency to undermine narrators’ authority is inadvertently reproduced in the policies of some university behavioural ethics review boards in Canada that routinely ask researchers to acquire a band council resolution before conducting research on-reserve. This requirement implies that the individual in question is naive and unable to give informed consent. Although informed consent may occasionally be impossible,<sup>35</sup> such policies assume a generalized lack of capacity among Indigenous people and thus reproduce the Indian Act’s historical positioning of Indians as minors vis-à-vis the Canadian state. For Elsie, a grown woman and respected Elder, it is insulting to be treated as a ward of the band council who needs protection from her own judgment. In the wake of decades of scholarly, activist, and artistic criticism of colonial appropriations of Indigenous voices, would-be allies today must do better than self-correcting in whatever way they *assume* is in the best interests of Indigenous speakers. They must instead listen to what Indigenous voices say, and then take up ethical models that align with and respect



Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies. Admittedly, as I discussed above, this endeavour is trickier than it might seem on its face, because it requires engaging in active self-criticism of not only *what* is heard, but *how* to listen.

Harmony and I worked from our certainty that Chi-chia capably and reliably articulates her wishes and concerns. Accordingly, we took those wishes seriously. Consequently our methodology favoured a pragmatics of process rather than an abstract end – of narrative purity or dialogical representation, for example. Our central concern as co-authors has not been to produce something that critics might approve in postmodern jargon as a multivocal, culturally pluralist synecdoche for remediated colonial power imbalances. Instead, we sought above all to ensure that both our means and end aligned with Chi-chia's vision. This approach required us to revisit our plans frequently and to consult with Chi-chia regularly. That said, we played decisive roles in composing this text, and we do not shirk our responsibility as co-authors for what follows.

#### CONCEPTION: THE IDEA

We produced this book through a multi-authored, collaborative process. A number of people worked with Chi-chia at various points in time, and multiple draft manuscripts were produced in the process. Chi-chia's desire to make ʔaʔamin history and teachings accessible in written form has been a constant feature. Accessibility is a key goal for Chi-chia, and I return to it repeatedly in my discussion below. She was not motivated by a salvage mentality to document the history and teachings for the archives. She instead wanted to produce an account of ʔaʔamin ways that future generations could draw upon, learn from, and heal through.<sup>36</sup> In this desire, she is much like Elders before her, who taught that ʔams tʔaw are not a set of abstract ideas but principles for living that should be practised and passed on. The teachings have provided her with a sophisticated context for living. They have been and remain a practical means for addressing all stages and aspects of life, including but in no way limited to the material and psychological impacts of settler colonialism. Chi-chia expressed these points eloquently in a conversation she had with a friend, the journalist Janet May, in 2006. Harmony, Chi-chia, and I originally discussed presenting the transcript of that conversation as Chi-chia's own introduction to this book, but Chi-chia felt that a stand-alone introduction



by her was unnecessary. Instead, I engage below in a kind of dialogue with that transcript in order to highlight the constellation of language, teachings, history, and colonialism that lies at the heart of this book.<sup>37</sup>

For Chi-chia, the multiple instances of silencing imposed upon Indigenous people by colonialism are a crucial context for the act of sharing łaʔamun history and teachings. Reflecting on the passing of her lifelong friend Sue Pielle, who devoted herself to teaching łaʔamun culture, legends, and language in the public schools, she said to Janet, “You know, she was from a generation that lived a part of that life and is able to bring it forward to the young people. ‘Cause a lot of people, like, my age, her age, have gone on. And the older people that we have today are not able to bring that forward. They have a lot of memories, even a generation older than I have a lot of those memories. But they were brought up in a time when it was not appropriate for us as a people, or it was not expected, to share those kinds of things, to bring awareness of the way we are as a people, to talk about our history. Our history was being smothered. It was like, ‘Don’t talk about that!’ So a lot of the older people found it really difficult to share their memories, their history, to non-Native people. So that’s been a real hurdle for us as a people.”<sup>38</sup>

As Chi-chia continued, she equated language with history: the prohibition of the Sliammon language simultaneously silenced people from recounting łaʔamun history. “‘Cause you’re told, ‘You forget about being Indian! You forget about your culture! Forget about the language!’ So we were forbidden. Our people were forbidden to speak the language. So a lot of the young people today don’t know the language at all. They’re struggling to learn it. It’s difficult. It’s a difficult language to learn. You have to have been speaking it from the time you were a child. That was your language. And when the families were separated, the children were all taken out of the homes and brought somewhere else for school. You didn’t see them for ten months out of a year. And they’re told when you’re there, ‘This is the language you’re now going to speak. You cannot use the language you’ve been growing up with.’ So they were restricted. So that generation grew up being taught that their language was not acceptable? You will only learn English. So we have a lot of people in that generation now who lost their language, who were *robbed* of the language. And the culture! Because we came from a rich culture. We *come* from a rich culture.”

In Chi-chia’s framing, history, language, and culture are so deeply intertwined as to be inseparable. Consequently, the ramifications of language loss are immense: “And it makes such a difference when

you're telling stories and legends, if it's told in the language. It's got more depth, it's got more meaning. And it's much more interesting to the listener if they understand the language. But if you tell the story in English, it's so different! 'Cause a lot of it, when told in the language, is gestures, the tone of your voice, just the whole presentation is so interesting – it was made so interesting. Because you understood the language! So it captured your interest. But when it's told in English, like when I tell a story in English, I struggle in the presentation. And to find the right word to use in telling the story. So it's quite a challenge! [*chuckles*]" Chi-chia's characteristic humility is apparent here; to my eyes and ears, the struggle she describes is imperceptible. Yet for her, the experience of narrating in English entails a palpable sense of loss and difficulty. As she explains it, narrating ʔaʔamin history in English, the language of the colonizers, is nearly a contradiction in terms. Yet she has chosen to do just that in an instance of what literary scholar Sophie McCall terms "impossible necessity."<sup>39</sup> Colonialism's assault on Indigenous language is at the heart of why "a lot of the older people found it really difficult to share their memories, their history, to non-Native people." It is why "that's been a real hurdle for us as a people." Yet Chi-chia undertook long ago to clear that hurdle. She began sharing ʔaʔamin history with audiences many years before she started this project. And she did so in English. She did not contemplate producing this book in Sliammon and for reasons of accessibility was initially reluctant even to include Sliammon-language sections.

Elsie's overriding concern with accessibility mirrors that of other Indigenous Elders, such as Harry Robinson, Angela Sidney, Annie Ned, and Kitty Smith – all fluent speakers of their Indigenous languages who chose to narrate told-to histories in English. Each of these Elders came to their decision in the wake of the near-annihilation of their mother tongue at the hands of residential schools and other colonial policies. They knew they would reach a much smaller audience if they presented their stories in a linguistic orthography with literal translations than if they were to, as Julie Cruikshank put it, "provide their own English translations."<sup>40</sup> It is a tragedy that any Elder willing to share valuable knowledge must choose between reaching an audience and communicating in her mother tongue. And it is important to respect whatever decision the Elder reaches as a result of this difficult, even painful, cost-benefit analysis. To second-guess their decision reproduces the long-standing pattern that I referred to above, in which settlers perennially discount Indigenous people's capacity to know

**End of excerpt 1**

## Where I Come From

# 1

## *The Territory and People*

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When we talk about territory in today's world, it's quite different than our lands and our territory from when I was a child. ʔəms giʔe, ʔəms naʔ giʔe – this is our land, this is our territory. Wherever people lived. And when I say “our” people, I include Klahoose and Homalco. Klahoose being the toʔq<sup>w</sup> qaymix<sup>w</sup>, and Homalco being ʔoʔp qaymix<sup>w</sup>. “toʔq<sup>w</sup>” being Squirrel Cove, “ʔoʔp” being Church House. The Church House people are the Homalco people. “tuwa št ʔoʔp” – “We’re from Church House.” “ʔoʔp qaymix<sup>w</sup>” – “We’re Church House people.” And the same as Klahoose – “We’re toʔq<sup>w</sup> qaymix<sup>w</sup>.” So those are the terms, the language that was used for describing people that lived in those areas. So. And prior to that, I would think that was just the name of the territory, and because our people were placed there after contact, they took on the name and it stuck, that we’re the ʔoʔp or the toʔq<sup>w</sup> qaymix<sup>w</sup>. Or we’re the ʔaʔamin qaymix<sup>w</sup>. And “ʔaʔamin” being Sliammon. But that’s the name of the place, ʔaʔamin, that’s where I live now. In English, it’s “Sliammon” because they couldn’t write or pronounce “ʔaʔamin.” When I write my address down it’s “Sliammon,” otherwise I won’t get my mail, right? So those are the changes that were made. But I think prior to that, from my understanding and from my own memories, that people travelled a lot, even after we were identified as three different people. But I’ve always felt that we are one people. paʔa št qaymix<sup>w</sup> – we’re one people with Klahoose, Homalco, and the Church House people. Prior to that, the old people used to talk about how they worked together very effectively, the three communities. They were one people. They

spoke the same dialect. They understood one another. So when we're looking at overlapping territories, you know, I find that difficult – of course it's overlapping! Because we've shared the land. We shared the territory. 'Cause we're one people.\*

So it caused a lot of problems when the government decided to separate the people: “Okay, put boundaries here. That's where you people will live, and this is where you people will live.” It's caused a lot of problems – it still does today. You know, we disagree on who owns what land and what territory. And I think that's what the treaty is about, to come to terms with that in their treaty work and their agreement with all three Bands, or all three groupings of people that shared the land at one time.† That we can still share the land. And we still are in close contact with the two other groups of people. There's a lot of intermarriages and so we became more of one group of people. And the same as Sechelt. Although we do not speak the same dialect as Sechelt, it's similar. It's close to ours, but a lot of their words I don't understand. Quite a few people came from Sechelt and transferred to Sliammon, I think way before Indian Affairs was in place. They were from Sechelt, and there's a lot of descendants today identifying those people were from Sechelt – nišɛʔɬ. That's what we call Sechelt: “nišɛʔɬ.” That's their title in our language, the Sechelt people. And Squamish people that transferred to, or married into Sliammon – qʷvχʷoʔmiš. That's what we call Squamish: “qʷvχʷoʔmiš.” So a lot of changes happen that way and people transferred, legally transferred through Indian Affairs to move – transfer to Sliammon or to Klahoose, or wherever they desire to transfer to, for whatever reason. So there were transfers that happened. But they were quite a few that transferred from, from Homalco to Sliammon, and some from Klahoose. If it was through marriage, then they had to legally transfer. If I was to marry a Homalco member, then I would automatically become Homalco in the early days. I don't know if it's still like that now. But if a man married a woman from another community, he had to legally transfer to her community if that's where they wanted to live.

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\* For lists, meanings, and maps of some Homalco, Klahoose, ɬaʔamun, and Island Comox place names, see Dorothy Kennedy and Randy Bouchard, *Sliammon Life, Sliammon Lands* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1983), 149-70. They explain their orthography, which differs from the one employed in this book, on pages 147-48.

† In August 2012, the Sliammon First Nation voted to approve a Final Agreement with Canada and British Columbia. The Klahoose and Homalco Indian Bands are each engaged in treaty negotiations of their own.

So all these things are governed by the Department of Indian Affairs, our membership. And, you know, speaking of membership, that's all so messed up! Because of the name changes – a lot of people had just one name when they were baptized as a young child, or as a young person. So it's really hard sometimes to trace a person's heritage, or their family line, because of the mess that the Department of Indian Affairs made through membership. Because a lot of children were not baptized until they were probably a teenager, but there was no record of their actual birthdate. And so the names got mixed up too, because "Oh, my dad's name was Joe, so now I'm Elsie Joe!" or whatever. That's an example. And "What was your dad's last name?" "I don't know." So when people went to apply for old age pension, in my time in social work, I kind of helped people through that, researching: "What was your dad's name?" "Well, he only had the one name." So that was really difficult. It's getting a little better now, because things are changing but – so there's not just the overlapping territories and the who owns what, it's who am I? Who am I as a person? It seems like you've got no identity. A true identity of who you are. Am I Klahoose? Am I Homalco? Am I from Comox? Or where did my dad come from? Those things were never questioned before the government stepped in to take over our lives. Everything was recognized. Everything was orderly. Everything was shared and controlled by our own leadership in the day. Our wačman,\* our hawhegus. "hawhegus" is our advisers in the community, the senior people in the community, like the Elders. Until Indian Affairs stepped in and we went from a hereditary Chief to elected Chief. And things really started to change from then on. Forgetting the old ways of doing things and going to your hegus in the community to – going to Indian Affairs now is giving us direction. Where to go and how to live and what to eat and what language to speak. So there's a lot of change in that, and not always for the good. And people were helpless to – they couldn't fight against the system. 'Cause it was total control of the government and the resources they put in place to help the government to change our lifestyle and where we live.

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\* Translation: watchmen. The position of watchman originated in the 1860s with the Roman Catholic Durieu system. According to Kennedy and Bouchard, Elsie's great-uncle maksema (Sandy Timothy) was one of the last watchmen in the community, and her great-grandfather Captain Timothy was the last church captain. Kennedy and Bouchard, *Sliammon Life*, 122. See also the "Additional Readings" at the end of this book.

Yeah, so when we talk about territories, I think it's really important to remember that, for me anyway, that I'm from the coast – I'm a Coast Salish person. But all Coast Salish people are not all the same. We're different. We all have our unique language, our dialect, from other Coast Salish people, like the West Coast people or the people from Saanich or the people from North Island or way up north, Kingcome Inlet and all of these other groupings of people. They all have their own dialect. Along the coast here, like, Campbell River people have a different dialect from us. So we're not all Coast Salish in how some people see us to be. I'm Coast Salish. But I'm a *łaʔamin* person. And it's unique that we are three groupings of people, Klahoose and Homalco, that speak the same dialect. And I think that's really important to know – 'cause I think to a person that doesn't know, or is a non-Native person, or is a visitor from elsewhere – that we do not all speak the same dialect 'cause we're brown! You know, "Oh yeah, that's an Indian person. They must be like this or like that, or they must speak this language." And we're not. We have different traditional practices, styles of practices. We use different tools in how we practise our traditional ways. Our spiritual kinds of ceremonies are different in how we do it where I come from, through the teachings of my ancestors, my grandparents especially. That we practise differently than other tribes or bands of people. Theirs is different, different style. But unique to them. And it's important to remember to respect all of the other practices and how they do it, the tools they use. The longhouse.\* We don't have that in Sliammon. We never have. We never did. Ours was more the cleansing, the self-care, the taking care of yourself and getting your power, your spirit, by going off and living on your own off the land for as long as it takes. Might be six months you go off to prove yourself. And you do it alone. You bathe in the lake or in the river daily and you just live off the land. And you will eventually find your spirit – your spirit will come to you. You will get your strength, your power to be who you are. And that was very important. The women didn't do that. It was just the men that did that. Women have different rituals, different way of becoming a woman. When you became a woman, there were different ways or practices that acknowledged that you are now a woman. And you are taught by your Elders

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\* By "longhouse," Elsie means practices historically referred to by scholars as "spirit dances" or "winter dances." She is not saying that Sliammon people did not build or live in longhouses or big houses.



how to take care of yourself. That's your life-changing time. You're becoming a woman. You are an adult. You are now responsible in a bigger sense. By being clean. You're given duties to do, like house-keeping and different chores to do, because you're being taught now to be responsible. 'Cause women married very young in my grandmother's time. My grandmother was I think about twelve when this marriage was arranged for her. Because she's now a woman. And they were together for about seventy years. Yeah, they were quite old when they died. So that was how the different sexes were guided by their parents, their grandparents, of their destiny in life and how to be a good person. It's like training to be an athlete. So we didn't go through the longhouse process. I know very little of how their practice is. But we don't do that. Ours is different from that territory, from those groups of people. The same for Homalco and Klahoose people – we were the different grouping of people in the way we practise. Yeah.

It was all shared. It was never, *ever* competition. But there were certain areas, by certain groups of people that stayed mainly in one particular area, or travelled in one particular area. Whereas, like for an example, Campbell River people or further up north, they didn't always come down this way. But the Sliammon people, Sechelt, Squirrel Cove, Klahoose people, and Homalco, they travelled more on the coast. But it was never in a disrespectful way. They would always go and talk to whomever the leadership in the community, or the "hays qaymix<sup>w</sup>"\* as we call it, you know, whoever is in charge. They didn't call them "Chief" back then. But it was like there was always someone that oversaw the other people in each community. And it was disrespectful to just go and help yourself to whatever is available there. Like if we went to Sechelt area, we'd have to go and get permission: "Oh yeah, that's okay." They would give you that okay: "Go ahead." 'Cause there was a lot of resources! And it wasn't restricted.

Well it was the hereditary system, right? That was our leadership. That was who oversaw the people, the community. It wasn't just one person lookin' after the community. It was the Elders, we called them "associates," [*laughs*] the hegus. hegus always had other people that helped them, or they consulted with, in how the community is run. If you didn't have a hays qaymix<sup>w</sup> in your household, you always

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\* Translation: respected/knowledgeable person.

went to another household that has a hays qaymix<sup>w</sup> or knowledgeable person, or experienced person in whatever it is you're dealing with. Or a spiritual person. Those could be called "hegus" too because they assist the people – they help the people. So when we talk about hegus today, we see hegus as somebody with lots of money, they're wealthy. You're hegus, you're rich. Different kind of richness in our ancestors' way of thinking. hegus was you've got lots of knowledge and you share that knowledge – you pass on that knowledge. So before Indian Affairs, it wasn't overpowering the people, but it was sharing the knowledge, sharing the wisdom, and be there as a support person to their family and their communities. So every community had those people around. That was very important to the people to have that person.

And all that changed when the election system came in. Chief Tom – my great-uncle – he was the last hereditary Chief. And he had a large family. And his father, his dad, who was my great-grandfather, had a large family. So it didn't go anywhere else. It just stopped there when Indian Affairs came in. And Charlie was the first elected Chief in our community. Charlie Peters Williams was the first elected. He was a very young man. And I don't remember the details of how that happened or how many Council members there were at that particular election. But because we were smaller membership then, we had less elected Councillors. I think there was only three, two or three, and the Chief. So that has really changed and it's not always for the better. As the population grew then the elected leaders grew as well, so now we're at nine elected leaders. And it's done in a real kind of a – it's not constructive sometimes in how the election system is done. Anybody could run, whether you know what you're doing or not. It depends on who you know. So it's so different – the system just abruptly changed! From that time on. That made this huge change in our community – and as it grew, now it's really big. We're about a thousand people now, with about six hundred, six hundred and fifty maybe, living in our community. A lot have gone away from the community and living elsewhere, whether for jobs or school or they've transferred out or whatever. So we still have the nine elected leadership. Although there's only over six hundred on reserve. So there's a breakdown there too, because our people who are living away from the community don't seem to have much of a say in what goes on with our government of the day. And they quite often feel left out of the loop because they don't have an input. But they can vote come election, although they're not really involved in the running of the community. And I don't think that's fair. I don't think that's fair to

people living away from home. They still come for a visit and that's still their home. That's where they were born. Their roots are there, their ancestors are there, and their parents or grandparents are there – relatives are there. But they're now sort of in a different category that they're kind of out on left field, you know, and I know they feel they're not included with decision making.

So I don't know if that's all going to change come treaty, when treaty's finalized. I'm not sure about that, what'll happen when we are now self-government – we're gonna have our self-government one day – and whether that's going to make things better. A lot of people are afraid of it. A lot of people are afraid of that change. It's so complex. The whole process is so complex. I'm sure the people that are working in treaty know in their discussions what's happening. But for people on the perimeters, or the people off-reserve or you're not involved daily in the process, it's really hard to understand. I know it is for me. You know, I'd have to hear and see daily what's happening. So – and I'm sure they're trying their very best – and when we come together for a meeting, for me anyway, I still find it hard to grasp where we're at. 'Cause it's just so much content in this whole process. And the whole argument about our territories and where we belong and where were we situated before land claims or treaty, you know? How can we prove we lived there? How can we prove that was part of your land? You know? And then they're asking questions: "Oh, go to the Elders." Talk to the Elders about – "How do you say 'constitution' in your language?" "How do you say—" um, what are all these big high words or strawberry words that the government uses? So in a way that's to define or to prove that we actually lived on this land and we have to translate – or people come to us for translation of big words like "constitution" and "governance" and "traditional territories." What does that mean? Why you asking me that? The Elders used to get really upset, you know, and they don't understand. We've always lived here. "Oh yeah, I lived there. I lived over there. My grandparents had a property over there. They had a house there." And on and on it goes. And then a year later someone else is asking you the same questions again! So you don't know where it's going! *[laughs]* Yeah.

I remember spending some time in Theodosia, at the very mouth of Theodosia where there used to be, I think, the last big house. It was a shared kind of an accommodation, and there was one over there at Harwood too, where the clam bed is, where we've gone digging cockles over there. There's a sandy beach there. So just above that, in the woods there, in the trees. There was one there that I remember.

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