

# Gitxsan Wellness Model

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## Background

The concept of wellness is deeply embedded as who we are as Gitxsan. Ama Didils, means living in a good way. Within Gitxsan society this means that there is a balance in one's life between the personal, political, social and spiritual. One walks slowly and softly and is in balance in the core Gitxsan social structures. Historically the Gitxsan halayt specialized in healing the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual health.

As part of our engagement work through the community safety planning process we put a request out for people to submit photographs that represented Gitxsan Wellness for a mural. Upon receiving hundreds of submissions we recognized four themes of: wilnaatahl (Matrilineal rights and responsibilities), wilxsawitxw (father's matrilineal rights and responsibilities), lax Yip (relationship to the land) and ots'in (spirit that permeates everything). Each of these themes is interconnected and we represented this with an image of intersecting circles on top of the pictures.

We brought these observations to the community at a tea and bannock event February 24<sup>th</sup> 2015. Two main additions were made to our understanding of Gitxsan wellness from this conversation. The first was to add the border of a button blanket to frame the mural. These traditional blankets are worn to this day in the feast hall and for ceremonies by hereditary chiefs. The border of the blanket symbolizes the earth, walls, roof and smoke hole of the Gitxsan Wilp. The Wilp, or matrilineal family unit, is the basic social structure of the Gitxsan. Everybody has a place in Gitxsan society in their Wilnaatahl and Wilxsawitxw.

The second addition to our work from this event is the central importance of breath. In particular the importance of Gitsanimax and Simaglyax (Gitxsan language), the rhythms of speech, the songs, our unbroken connection to the first Gitxsan breath of our ancestors, and the continued gift of breath to our children and those yet to come. Gitxsan society is recognized as sui generis by the Supreme Court of Canada, which is a Latin phrase that describes something entirely unique and of its own kind. Gitxsan society is maintained through oral traditions and the central place of breath is both fitting, and a good reminder to you as a reader that the English language and the written word are both recent adoptions of Gitxsan people.

In order to further explore and validate these developing articulations about Gitxsan wellness, the safety planning team organized a day long Gitxsan Elders' Wellness gathering. This document reflects the information developed through to this point of cultural dialogue.

Before we look at each part of this developing articulation of Gitxsan wellness, the consensus from the gathering is that the four areas depicted in this model are so deeply interconnected with each and situated in social realities lived in place and time. This model reflects a dynamic, living, oral tradition and must be used as a starting point to engage in the Gitxsan cultural paradigm. Gitxsan society is a

contemporary, evolving and alive culture and the exploration and presentation of Gitksan wellness in writing here is not intended to claim authority over the subject, but present a partial view into a dynamic, living way of being in the world.

## **Wil n'aa t'ahl**

The wilnaatahl is one's matrilineal family. This matrilineal social unit is also known as a Wilp, or house group, that has a particular history, lax yip, and clan relationship. The wilnaatahl is described as being necessarily intergenerational where the responsibilities to teach and transfer knowledge happen between all ages, especially from elders to the young people. Great stress is placed on the reciprocal nature of relationships within Gitksan society. "We're born with responsibilities" said an elder, "its part of who we are as Gitksan. We take care of our family... because the elders took care of the children and it's the children's responsibility to carry on what needs to be done".

Another elder recounts lying in bed with her grandma when she was young listening to stories about respect. In this system every child is connected to, and cared for by many mothers, aunts and uncles. Within this loving environment, children, youth, and young adults are groomed to be strong Gitksan.

Intergenerational knowledge transfer within the wilnaatahl is intimately tied to the specific lax yip of the Wilp. The importance of being on the land is described as critical for teaching the language, the ayookw, the laws and histories. Dim lip gyat (self-sufficiency) is a result of the people in the wilnaatahl using their knowledge and skills in their lax yip and maintaining strong relationship with neighboring wilps and nations. This includes sustenance as well as medicines. A key word that captures these intersecting dynamics is gwalxyye'enst (intergenerational teachings).

It is important to note the difficulty in direct translation from Gitsanimax into English. It is not our goal to simplify and translate, but rather accepts the complexity and the culturally embedded differences of the languages.

## **Wilxsi'witxw**

Each Gitksan child has a Wilxsawitxw. The father clan has particular roles and responsibilities in Gitksan society. Understanding the wilsawitxw relationship is very important, especially when it comes to the privilege of access your wilxsawitxw lax yip (amnagwootxw). Members of the wilxsilaks (plural of wilxsawitxw) have social responsibility throughout the life of the child.

## **Lax Yip**

Lax yip means of that land. Lax yip describes both physical space as well as the nature of one's relationship with that space. The physical territory of the lax yip is managed through the wilnaatahl. The lax yip is reaffirmed through the feast system where business is ratified and witnessed and history is remembered and maintained. Gitksan names, used in the feast hall, are attached to the land and history of the wilp. "Without our land we do not have names as Gitksan people" an elder clearly states.

All members of the wilnaatahl are expected to learn and know the history of their Wilp and lax yip. Those being groomed to be leaders have higher expectations.

The social and physical realities of the Gitksan are interconnected. Lax yip is also important as a source of strength and healing. People describe being replenished and strengthened. The therapeutic nature of being on the land includes the traditional ways people would meet all of their needs for sustenance, medicine, building materials and clothing. Similar to the reciprocal relations between people, there is a responsibility to maintain and enhance the bounty of the lax yip. There is an acknowledged reciprocity having received abundance from the land, that the Gitksan are stewards of this abundance.

## **Otsin**

Everything in the world has life energy. Otsin is a key concept of Gitksan spirituality described as one's spirit. One's otsin can be harmed, depleted, or scared away by trauma. Indian Residential Schools (IRS) are considered a societal harm in the Gitksan perspective as not a single wilnaatahl or wilxsilaks escaped the trauma of having children taken from the family. The adults left behind were harmed individually and collectively by this process and feelings of guilt depleted otsin. Subsequent effects of this original harm continue to be felt through the social discord that is the topic of this safety plan. The loss of innocence from sexual abuse, parental neglect, disconnection from lax yip or living in poverty affects one's otsin.

Trauma and bad medicine that affects a person can be remedied by a Halayt (healing person). There are numerous forms of healing that include ceremonies, medicines, prayer, sweat lodge, humour, fasting and cleansing. Gitksan spirituality permeates life and relationships and is not contained within a building or special time of the week. There is a strong connection between one's otsin and their Lax yip.

Otsin is strengthened from within and is a result of being around others that are healthy. There is a vibrant network that is beyond ourselves that connects people at this spiritual level and when we take care of our own otsin we help others on their path to healing as well.