

GROWING OUR OWN: INDIGENOUS RESEARCH, SCHOLARS, AND EDUCATION
Proceedings from the Alaska Native Studies Conference (2015)

Elder Response to the Keynote Speaker: Tlingit elder *Kaalkáawu* Cyril George, *Kak'weidí*, *Kaakáak'w Hít*, *Teikweidí Yádi*

*Kaalkáawu Cyril George*¹

¹*Kaakáak'w Hít*, Angoon, AK

English transcribed by Kathy Ruddy. Tlingit by *X'unei* Lance Twitchell

Introduction

While planning the 2014 Alaska Native Studies Conference, faculty and staff at UAS wanted to elevate our knowledge bearers by having them on the agenda for introductions, responses, and reflections. *Kaalkáawu* Cyril George, Sr. had visited Tlingit language classes, Alaska Native Oratory classes, and Alaska Native Studies courses. The students had forged a strong relationship with him, and he always called the students “my grandchildren.”

Several years ago, he began losing his hearing, and by the time of the March 2014 conference, we knew he would not be able to hear the keynote speech. Kathy Ruddy of Juneau, who is a longtime advocate of Alaska Native Languages and Studies and a dear friend of *Kaalkáawu* Cyril, brought him to the conference and agreed to type as much of the keynote speech as she could so *Kaalkáawu* could give a response.

Kathy said she could almost feel his breath as he sat behind her, reading the words of the keynote presenter, as she transcribed them.

By reading these words and watching what was happening during the conference, he was able to tie the keynote directly to place and Tlingit culture through a sacred story about the place where his clan originates.

The amazing part of this connection is that he agreed to share the story he recorded in the summer of 2013. Weeks before the Alaska Native Studies Conference the students of Intermediate Tlingit listened to, read, and studied this story. It was fresh on their minds, and none of us knew he was going to bring it up during his response. At one point in his speech, while commenting on the way a response to a speech is like a housepost, *Keixwnéi* Nora Dauenhauer turned to her husband *Xwaayeenák* Richard Dauenhauer and exclaimed, “It’s poetry! Pure poetry!”

This was a wonderful moment for the guests and students of UAS. *Kaalkáawu* will be with us forever in the ways he gifted us time, knowledge, love, and devotion. In response to the keynote speech by Dr. Jo-ann Archibald (*Q’um Q’um Xiim*), these were the words that he shared with us.

Kaalkáawu x'éidáx:

Gunalchéesh	Thank you
Gunalchéesh yáade ax jeet yeeysheeyí.	Thank you for taking me here by the hand.
Xat gaygáa.	I feel good.

Thank you for taking my hand and bringing me here. To me, it's an honor when somebody wants to hear my ideas, and it makes an old man feel good.

I heard there's three ears. Two of my ears are gone, but there's one I'm going to hang on to.

I was taught, when there's a speech made by a brother-in-law, it has to be acknowledged. What our people use.

Yoo x'atánk,	Speech,
yoo duxeexí,	when it takes place,
i káani aayí	the things of your clan opposites
a yáat shaxdulgáas'.	props it up like house posts.

When there's a speech made, it's like a roof. When you put it up, it will never go down.

Aadé haa ee at dultoow yé.	This is the way things are taught to us.
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I made little notes on what took place here. We're talking about learning. My father told me we never wrote anything down because we didn't know how to write. So the chief—

he was the teacher. He'd teach the boys how to hunt, how to fish. And then, in the evening, they'd sit around the fire so the chief would start telling their story, our history, teaching our language. Our language.

haa kusteeyí.	our way of life, our culture.
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Some nights the chief would point at one of his nephews. "Okay. Now you tell us." And we would start of telling—it's just a little out of line. His uncle would stop him. He's corrected. The simple way of doing things brought our history through the ages. Never change. I was going to say, don't drop the old people.

At the start of this, we heard a lady tell history. We need the people that can tell, tell us our stories.

When we're talking, the uncle at a party—uncle would be standing up here and talking. One of his brothers-in-law sitting out there—it's not bad manners for him to cut in and say:

i x'éit has wusi.áx,	They are listening to you,
i káani yán.	your tribal in-laws.

They tell him, "Your brothers-in-law are listening." How much we thought of our brothers-in-law.

I was told the girls were taught by their mom. There's a message. The uncle, with his nephews, if they need to be shaken up, he can—that's his sister's boys. But the

daughters come on the other side because of respect. A man never taught his daughters, because one's an Eagle; the other's a Raven. Respect. You don't rough up your daughter.

Ax toowú,	My feelings,
ax toowú k'éí nooch,	I always feel wonderful,
ax dachxánx'i yán	to look among the faces of my
yá xoo anxalgéinin,	grandchildren,
yaa at naskwéin.	the learners.
Haa has du ee at latóowx'u.	Our teachers who are teaching them.

It makes me feel good to see young people going after. I was born in 1922. When I was born in a cannery, my mom's uncle, William Peters, came all the way from Sitka to Hood Bay. He came to my mom.

Káak'w ákwé?	Is that a boy?
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"Is that a boy?"

She said, "Yes."

"I came so I can give him my name: Kaalkáawu."

This is the part, and what he said

Ch'a aan kaa waksheeyi kei naxdaháanch, ax saayí.	With it, he can always stand up before people's eyes, my namesake.
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"I want him to have that name so he can stand up in front of people with my name." He was our chief from Basket Bay.

I'm from Angoon. My family was mostly a family—we settled in Basket Bay. We call ourselves Kak'weidi (Basket Bay People).

There's a story about a beaver that turned a community upside down. This story that is told—the community is upside down because a little beaver dropped a bomb there because of the mistake that our chief made.

We're taught everything has a spirit. We have a spirit. We're taught that the fish in the water have a spirit. The animals in the woods have spirit, and they're like people. Be careful not to hurt their feelings.

Of course, being human, we've made mistakes. Our chief is one of these. He had a little beaver that he had for a pet. The little beaver was handy with his hands. He was always making something, making things for the chief.

So the chief, he just loved his little pet. The nephews started to get jealous. So as soon as they get in hearing distance, "He thinks he's a pet. He's nothing but a slave."

So he starts to work on his mind. One day he came to the chief. “I’ve been working on something for you. I made something for you.” He was making this little spear.

Some of the parts of my story is kind of hard to believe, but George Dalton from Hoonah told me that, when he was asking around about that little spear, people from Metlakatla, Hydaburg, and the Tlingits, he asked them, “Who invented that little spear? When you hit a seal with it, it comes apart.” It had a strap. When the point comes out, that seal always twirls. So what had happened, the seal was tying himself up, and they could get him.

George Dalton told me, “We’re building a canoe in Hoonah for the Forest Service. We were told that Cyril George, the head of Basket Bay—what we want is permission to have one of those little spears and one canoe that we’re going to give to the Forest Service.”

What makes me believe the story, George Dalton and the Kaagwaantaan paid my way to Hoonah when their presentation to five men that came from Washington, D.C., to take that big canoe. He told me the Tsimshians used it, the Haidas used it, the Tlingits used it, and the Eskimos still use it.

And they all told me that that little beaver—that one day, when the beaver came home, he told the chief, “I want you to come up by that river. There’s a salmon creek. I worked on something there for a year. I want you to come up tomorrow night when the sun is setting,” and our teachings—our men were taught behavior of animals.

The chief talked to some of his men. He said, “The beaver told me he made something for me. He wants me to come up by that river tomorrow night. He’ll give it to me. Why didn’t he bring it here to me? And why when the sun is setting?”

So some men went up with him. As they were going up, they saw this little beaver sitting against a tree. That little spear that he made is standing there. He was singing a spirit song.

When they came to him, the little beaver stood up, took that little spear. “This is what I made for you.” Our chief looked at it, that little spear. The point was made out of metal, but the point would come off. The chief said, “Oh, this is nice. How do you use it?”

The little beaver backed off, hit our chief in the chest. Alongside every fish stream there’s a pond or a pool. Every fish stream has it. Nature put it there. That’s where the fish rest when they come off the ocean, when they’re going up to spawn. They mill around.

But that’s where he was sitting. When he hit the chief, the chief yelled:

Gaysháat!	You all grab him!
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“Grab him!” He was too fast. Jumped in that pond. A beaver always slaps his tail when he’s going to dive. He slapped his tail and turned the whole community upside down. Basket Bay.

Unbelievable as it may sound, if you go there today, you'll see. Things are still upside down. Some of the rocks there are solid rock, like an arch. We call our house the

Kakáak'w Hít.	Arch House.
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One of the prices we paid for making a mistake, hurting spirits.

Again, I'd like to say thank you for inviting me.

Thank you.