

Tahltan Governance:

The traditional Tahltan system of government was mostly a system of consensus; all decisions were made through discussion and could only be finalized if all the parties involved agreed. Every Tahltan was allowed to express their views on the affairs being discussed, which representatives would take to meetings and councils where the decisions would be made.

In traditional times, Tahltan society had several levels of governance: family, clan, and tribal. Each family was responsible for handling all affairs within it. Family councils could be attended by a large audience, and met to discuss more general affairs. However, when involved in matters larger than the family level, a family would act together as one unit. In councils or meetings concerning not just one family, each family was represented by its leader and clans were represented by chiefs.

The chief was a very important, honourable position in Tahltan government, as the chiefs were required to represent the family and solve many problems. Tahltan society was divided into two moieties, Raven (*cheskie*) and Wolf (*chiyone*), which were divided into three clans each (however, in the 18th century, a fourth clan - the result of marriage between the Tahltan and Tlingit peoples - was added). Each of these clans were made up of several families, who shared a common ancestor, and was led by a chief. The chief's status was inherited from his uncle, although on occasion, a more distant relative might become chief due to their more prominent status or wealth. Women, according to ethnographers James Teit and George Emmons, could not become chiefs.

When decisions had to be made, or affairs had to be discussed, it was the chief who represented his clan in terms of opinions and possible actions. He also governed the hunting and use of hunting grounds within his clan, and helped decide where each family would hunt before the Tahltans left the major villages in the fall. When disputes happened within a clan or family, it was the chief who would help settle them.

At meetings and discussions, the chief would be the one to represent his people, along with several of the older men. At these meetings, after each party involved had met and discussed a course of action, the chief of one party would step outside the lodge and declare the views of his people in a loud voice, speaking to nobody in particular. Then, the other party would declare their own views, and they would argue back and forth like this until the two groups finally reached a consensus. After the situation was resolved, the decision would be announced at a potlatch. This was the process followed to make all important decisions and solve all major disputes in the Tahltan nation.

As for policies, the Tahltan nation wasn't governed by *laws* so much as a collection of taboos and spiritual beliefs. Starvation, death, bad luck, and a decline in resource abundance were among the many believed consequences of breaking these various taboos and rules. Based on the factors necessary for the survival of the Tahltan people, these taboos may have actually come about as a way to ensure the Tahltan people followed the strategies needed to survive.

There were many taboos on the use and consumption of carnivores, amphibians, small-bodied mammals, and small birds. These types of animals were generally difficult to catch (or at least, difficult to catch many at a time of) or provided very little meat or raw materials, so these taboos might have been created in order to prevent the Tahltans from wasting time on relatively unproductive food sources.

Menstruating women and pubescent children were also subject to quite a few restrictions and taboos. Menstruating women were isolated in huts for several days each month; this may have been a strategy to make sure the women cooperated (which was necessary in order for the Tahltan people to process a large amount of food) in order to temporarily take over the menstruating woman's responsibilities. Menstruating women and pubescent children also couldn't eat any fresh meat or fish; if the rule was broken, it was believed that they would have bad luck. This rule made sure that the Tahltans always had a supply of dried food at hand, in case fresh food wasn't readily available.

Another one of the main patterns that governed the Tahltan nation was a deep respect for and conservation of the land which they lived on. It was a strong rule among the Tahltans to not bother or mistreat animals, or kill animals who were tending to their offspring. An especially important was the rule to only kill the animals that one needed - no more. It was believed that anyone who mocked an animal with a spirit or killed an animal (especially bear or mink) who was caring for its young would develop "idiocy". Based on the fact that the Tahltans depended solely on the environment for everything in their lives, this rule might have really been a strategy to conserve the land and its resources for later years, and for future generations.