

***Koo.eex*: The Tlingit Memorial Party**

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Approximately a year after the death of a clan member, the clan of the deceased sponsors a ceremony, which is more often referred to as a “Party” or the “Pay-off Party.” Elders and clan leaders have urged the Tlingit to refer to these events by their traditional name, the “*Koo.eex*,” which simply translates “To Invite,” but the underlying meaning and significance of these ceremonies is much more complex and expansive than that translation might imply.

The *Koo.eex* is a ceremony in which the deceased member or members and ancestors of a clan are remembered. It is a time for the surviving clan members to push away their sorrow after a year of mourning, to celebrate life, to reaffirm their social and kinship bonds, and to ceremoniously present their clan *at.ooow* (clan regalia, objects, songs and stories). It is a time to honor the members of the opposite side—sometimes referred to as moiety—who comforted the grieving clan and who assisted with the funeral as well as the burial or cremation.

The *Koo.eex* traditionally was conducted over a several day period. It has been considerably shortened, however, because of the demands of modern life. The following schedule outlines the major components of a *Koo.eex* as practiced in the community of Hoonah. The authors realize that each clan and community has its own procedures and that variations occur among the different communities. The following guidelines contain the basic components of a *Koo.eex*, however, and it is offered for our young and for those who have expressed an interest in learning the ways of our ancestors:

I. Host Clan Preparations for the *Koo.eex*

The host clan, including primarily the elders and immediate family of the deceased, meet to discuss and establish the following:

- The date, time and place of the *Koo.eex* (considering ferry and airline schedules and plans to announce the event).
- Selection of a *Naa kani/Naa kani'x* (in-law and in-laws from the opposite side who will generally act on behalf of the host clan, invite guests who are from the opposite side of the host clan, serve as the moderator during the ceremony and provide other services during the event). Other individuals (*Naa kani'x*) from the opposite side who will assist in various tasks should also be identified at this time.
- Identify and gather the host clan *at.oow* (clan ceremonial regalia and objects) and photos of the deceased.
- Plan and schedule the meals to be prepared and served.
- Identify those who will be adopted into the host clan (individuals who have ties to members of the host clan and who have proven themselves worthy) and clan members who will formally receive their names at this time.
- Prepare a list of all members of the opposite side who assisted and participated in the funeral as pall bearers, honorary pall bearers, night watchers who remained with the casket through the night until the first cry of the Raven in the morning, grave diggers, helpers in placing the cement and headstone at the burial site, speakers at the funeral, and others who will be honored and recognized during the *Koo.eex*.
- Prepare and identify the guests who will receive the *Gan ka si x'i* (Fire Bowls which will be filled with miscellaneous food and goods i.e. fruit, juice, Tlingit food, and candy).
- Identify guests who will receive blankets and other special gifts
- Outline the *Welcome, Thank-you, and the End of the Party* segments of the *Koo.eex*.
- Select four members of the grieving family to participate in the *Yash ga shoo* (End of Sorrow)
- Select four sorrow songs (one of which will be for the father of the deceased clan member; select only one song for a small or short version of the *Koo.eex*) and establish the order in which the four sorrow songs will be sung. If someone in the host clan dies before the *Koo.eex*, only half of the last sorrow song will be sung, and it will then be completed in the *Koo.eex* hosted by the

clan.

- Select the *Yeik* (Spirit Songs which will be sung over the gathered money) and the individuals (usually grandchildren of the same moiety of the host clan) who will dance behind a blanket wearing a *Shakee.at* (head frontlet with ermine).

- Select the *Naa yat xi* (Children of the Clan) songs which will be sung. These are commonly referred to as Love Songs.

- Schedule song and dance practices prior to the *Koo.eex*.

II. Schedule of the *Koo.eex*

A. *Welcome* and *Thank-you*

- The host clan begins the *Koo.eex* by welcoming and thanking the guests who are members of the opposite side for attending the event.

- The participants await the arrival of the grieving family members.

- The individuals who have been selected from the opposite side assist the host clan members in donning their ceremonial regalia and giving them the singing staffs.

- The individuals selected from the opposite side assist the host clan members in putting on black scarves as headbands and painting black marks on their faces (near eyes or cheeks) to signify that they are in mourning.

B. *Grieving Songs*

- Four members of the host clan sing four (one if a small *Koo.eex*) grieving songs that were selected in the planning session. Other members of the clan stand solemnly alongside the four persons and sing with them. Words of encouragement by the opposite side may be offered by the guests, but no dancing or speeches occur during this portion of the ceremony. Only half of the last song is sung if a member of the host clan dies prior to the *Koo.eex*.

- Upon completion of the four grieving songs, four members of the grieving family perform the *Yash ga shoo* (End of Sorrow). They stand in front of their clan members. The End of Sorrow is not performed if only one grieving song has been sung. They are positioned facing each other, standing as if they were on the four points of a compass—north, south, east, and west—holding

their singing staffs. The four dancers then pound their singing staffs on the floor four times and loudly cry out: “*Yash ga shoo---Hoo!*” At the end of this exclamation, they raise and point their singing staff towards their center. They then rotate moving clockwise to the next position and repeat the same exercise until each dancer has stood at each of the four positions.

- The guest clan members then respond after the host clan has completed the grieving songs and *Yash ga shoo* by offering words of support and encouragement and singing their songs.

- Members of the host clan acknowledge the response given by the opposite side with one of their arms upheld and hands open and facing the guests. The words and songs by the guest clans and the outstretched arms and open hands signify of the host clan response: “They are warming our hands.”

- The grieving clan members raise both arms shouting “*Shtootx keiw du wa hook!*” (The end of sorrow!).

C. *Happy Times*

- The host clan requests the guest clan members to remove the black scarves and black facial marks. This represents the washing and wiping away, the cleansing, of grief and mourning.

- The host clan sings the *Naa yat xi* (Children of the Clan or Love Songs).

- Other special dances may be presented at this time.

C. *Gan ka si x'i* (Fire Bowl)

The origin of this ancient cultural tradition is said to have begun when a deceased clan member returned to the living. The one who returned reported that he and other deceased clan members had gathered to participate in a memorial ceremony because they were hungry and anxious to hear their names called. Thus, the Tlingit now prepare these fire bowls and call out the name of their ancestors. We believe that the ancestors participate in these activities when their names are called. The food is transferred to the spirit world when it is burned. What follows is *Gan ka si x'I* protocol.

- Two individuals serving as the *Naa kani* assist the host clan by holding up the *Gan ka si x'i*.

The host clan first states the name of the deceased in whose honor the ceremony is being held, and the name is then repeated by the *Naa kani*. The Fire Bowl is then given to a pre-selected

guest. This process is repeated with the names of other clan ancestors.

- The *Naa kaani* then takes a *Gan ka si x'i* to the beach or to a wood stove where it is burned.

D. Photograph of the Deceased Clan Member

- A picture of the deceased clan member is placed on a table at the head of the room with the host clan *at.oov*.

- An individual who was selected from the opposite side takes the photograph of the deceased and shows it to each of the guests.

E. First Meal

- The names of clan members who are hosting the meal are announced.

- The *Naa kaani* takes a plate of food to a beach or to a wood stove where it is burned and it transfers to the spirit of the deceased.

- Members of the host clan serve the guests.

- Members of the guest clan may sing or dance to show their thanks.

F. Distribution of Goods and Fruit Bowls (*Du xwaax'u teen*)

- The host clan distributes case lots of goods (pop, candy, fruit, etc.) to the guests.

- The *Naa kaani*, holding a bowl filled with fruit, calls the name of a guest who has been selected by the host clan. The individual who had been called responds: "*Haa dei!*" (Here!).

- A member of the host clan brings the fruit bowls to the named guests and they, along with other guests sitting beside them, (*Du xwaax'u teen*, which means "their friends") rush to take fruit out of the bowl. Upon emptying the bowl, they shout: "*Hoo!*"

- If a second meal is to be served, it may be distributed at this time.

- The guests may sing and dance during this time to show their thanks.

G. Distribution of Berries

- The host clan enters carrying a large container filled with berries.

- The host clan distributes bowls of fruit to the guests.

H. Distribution of Dry Goods

- The host clan calls out the names of deceased clan members and distributes dry goods (pillows,

crocheted items, towels, etc.) to guests.

- If another meal is to be served it may occur at this time.
- The guests may sing and dance at this time to show their thanks.

I. *Money Bowl*

Prior to the introduction of the cash economy, payments to guests were made with food and blankets. Now, the process begins with members of the guest clan donating money to individual members of the host clan. The amount donated varies between \$1.00 and \$20.00. Spouses and immediate family members who are of the opposite side from the host clan member may give larger sums. They discreetly give the host clan members money immediately prior to the ceremony and throughout the event.

- Individual members of the opposite clan from the host clan are selected to serve as the money collectors and counters. They sit at a table placed at the head of the room with large money bowls in front of them.
- Members of the same moiety but of different clans than the host clan give their support to the host clan (*Kaa jin naa adi*: “warriors who come first.”) They are the first to come forward with their own money, and they cite the names of those from the opposite side who donated money to them.
- Members of the host clan and the immediate family are the last to come forward to donate their own money and funds given to them by the opposite clan.
- The *Naa kami* receives the money and announces the amount of money given by each individual.
- When all the money has been received, spirit songs are sung over it while a grandchild of the same moiety of the host clan dances behind the blanket wearing a *Shakee.at*. The hat song may also be sung. The Spirit Song is assumed to have killed the donated money and the assumption is that the money no longer belongs to the individuals who donated it.

J. Adoption and Giving of Names

- This event occurs after all of the food and goods have been distributed.

- The *Naa kani* holds the money on the forehead of the individual who is to be adopted. He calls out the name that the individual will be given, and the guests repeat the name. This process is repeated three times.
- The *Naa kani* then presents the money to a pre-selected guest.
- The *Shaadeihani* (Clan Leader) may also bring out individuals to formally introduce them to the host clan and moiety and to the guest. Newborn children of the host clan who have been given names by their mother or grandmother may also be brought out and their names acknowledged.

K. Payment and Blanket Distribution

The host clan honors and pays those who supported them in their time of loss and mourning.

- The *Naa kani* calls out the Tlingit names of the deceased family members of the host clan.
- The host clan then distributes blankets and other special items to the pre-selected individuals from the opposite side.
- The host clan distributes money to the guests.

L. Response of the Guests and Closing

After all the blankets and money have been distributed, guests who are members of the opposite moiety respond to the hosts by thanking them. They may include a closing song. The *Koo.eex* ends with the host clan raising both their hands and doing an exit song.

M. Raven Spirit Song or Eagle Spirit Song (*Kee waax oo chaax*)

If it appears that the party will continue through daybreak, the event may be interrupted by the guest clans, who will sing their spirit song (Raven or Eagle Spirit Song) to preclude any harm or bad luck affecting members of the host clan.

Source: Celebration 2000, Restoring Balance Through Culture. Copyright 2000, Sealaska Heritage Institute.