

TOBACCO CHEWING ON THE  
NORTHWEST COAST

By ROLAND B. DIXON

THE custom of chewing tobacco with lime as reported among the Tlingit and Haida of the Northwest Coast has long attracted the attention and interest of anthropologists. For on the one hand it was one of a number of isolated instances in North America of chewing instead of smoking tobacco, and on the other it involved the use of lime with a masticatory in a fashion recalling the coca-chewing so widely prevalent in South America. By ardent diffusionists it was further cited as evidence of trans-Pacific cultural diffusion, being attributed like coca-chewing to the influence of betel-chewing Malays and Melanesians. Interpretations of this unusual use of tobacco by the Tlingit and Haida and opinions as to the significance of the practice have varied, but apparently there has been little question as to the fact of its use.

Having had occasion recently to re-examine the problem critically, I was more and more struck by two well-known facts. First, except for the Tlingit and Haida, there was at the end of the eighteenth century no evidence of the knowledge or use of tobacco in any form by any of the coastal tribes south to and including those of Puget sound. On the other hand, north and west of the Tlingit, throughout the rest of Alaska, the knowledge of tobacco was everywhere demonstrably post-European. In the vicinity of the Fraser delta and on the east coast of Vancouver island immediately adjacent, archaeological investigations<sup>1</sup> have revealed a few pipes, analogous with those used in historic times by the Interior Salish, but smoking was apparently no longer practiced in the region at the time of the first European contacts. Secondly, Setchell<sup>2</sup> on the authority of Newcomb, had identified the tobacco supposed to have been used by the Haida as *Nicotiana attenuata*. This was the species cultivated and used for smoking by the northern Plains tribes and by the Salish of the interior of British Columbia. The species grown along the Columbia river was on the other hand *N. multivalvis*. Now between the Shuswap and Thompson river tribes, who were the northwesternmost Salish peoples known to have smoked tobacco, and the Haida and Tlingit lay the territory occupied by various Athabascan tribes, none of whom seem to have known or used tobacco in any form before European contact. How then could this *N. attenuata* have reached the Tlingit-Haida? The difficulties in the way were so considerable that I began to wonder whether after all it ever did. Furthermore, the species being

<sup>1</sup> H. I. Smith, Archaeology of the Gulf of Georgia and Puget Sound, AMNH-M 4, pt. 6.

<sup>2</sup> W. A. Setchell, Aboriginal Tobaccos, AA 23: 411.

essentially restricted to a dry and rather warm environment, how could it have been successfully cultivated under the very moist and cool conditions of the Queen Charlotte islands and southern Alaskan coast?

In all of the early accounts of the Tlingit and Haida which I have been able to find, I noted with growing interest that as a matter of fact only one explicitly stated that the plant chewed was *tobacco*. None of the Spanish explorers along the Northwest Coast seem to make any reference to the custom of chewing tobacco or to its use in any form. The earliest mention appears to be by Beresford, the anonymous chronicler of Dixon's voyage in 1787. In speaking of the people at Port Mulgrave (Yakutat bay) he says that they were fond of chewing a plant, "which appears to be a species of tobacco" and adds that they generally mixed it with some lime and sometimes with "the inner rind of the pine tree, together with a resinous substance extracted from it."<sup>3</sup> He does not mention the custom among the Haida. The next reference is by Marchand who, speaking of the Tlingit of Sitka sound in 1791 says:

Their custom, like that of almost all natives of America and Asia, is to chew habitually a species of herb, and as soon as they were acquainted with tobacco leaf, they gave it the preference to that which they before employed to satisfy the same want.<sup>4</sup>

He thus appears to have doubted that the Tlingit had tobacco originally, but identified what he saw them using as tobacco. It is probable that the tribes along the coast had already secured some tobacco from the fur-traders who were frequenting the region, but at this date it is likely that the native plant was still mainly in use. Although Marchand, like Dixon, spent some time among the Haida, he does not refer to the custom there.

In the same or the following year, however, Ingraham<sup>5</sup> states that the Haida chew a plant "which appeared to possess some of the properties of tobacco," and Hoskins<sup>6</sup> speaking about the region of Rose harbour in the Queen Charlottes declares that the people there "chew tobacco in a green

---

<sup>3</sup> Captains Portlock and Dixon. A Voyage round the World but more particularly to the Northwest Coast of America, performed in 1785-8 in the "King George" and "Queen Charlotte," p. 175. London, 1789.

<sup>4</sup> E. Marchand, Voyage autour du monde pendant les années 1790-92. Vol. I, p. 254. Paris, 1798-1800.

<sup>5</sup> J. Ingraham, Journal of the Voyage of the Brigantine "Hope" . . . 1790-92. MS. in the Library of Congress. Quoted by Newcomb, in "Menziés' Journal of Vancouver's Voyage." Archives of British Columbia, Memoirs, vol. V, p. 141.

<sup>6</sup> J. Hoskins, Narrative of a Voyage to the N. W. Coast of America . . . 1790-93. MS. in Library of the Massachusetts Historical Society, pp. 52-59. Quoted by Newcomb, *loc. cit.*

state, with which they mix a substance resembling lime," adding that he found this plant "growing with wild celery in a meadow." This suggests that the plant was growing wild. I am told by botanists that *Nicotiana attenuata* would not be likely to grow in such surroundings. Vancouver is the next, so far as I know, to report on the question. He states<sup>7</sup> that Whidbey, who in July 1794 had been surveying in the vicinity of Admiralty island, saw on its western coast "square patches of ground in a state of cultivation, producing a plant which appeared to be a species of tobacco." Vancouver then adds "which we understand is by no means uncommon amongst the inhabitants of the Queen Charlotte Islands, who cultivate much of the plant." This latter information he must have secured from Alexander Menzies, a member of the expedition, who had been among the Haida with Colnett in 1787. The Queen Charlotte islands would thus appear to have been known as a center for the plant, and when, nearly a century later, we get our next significant information about the Haida, this is confirmed. For Dawson,<sup>8</sup> writing in 1878, says that the Haida formerly grew tobacco not only for themselves, but for trade with the neighboring tribes. At this date, however, its cultivation had been entirely abandoned except by one old woman at Cumshewa. Dawson, however, doubted that the plant called tobacco was really such. For the plant used by the Tlingit on the other hand, a statement made by Tikhmenev seems possibly significant. He says:

In and around Sitka there was a plant the size of whose stalk was not more than that of the ordinary tobacco plant, small-leaved, which the natives mixed with lime burned from shell, and which they use for smoking or putting under their lips. When burning it gave out a pleasant odor. This mixture has no strength. The natives had quite a lucrative trade in this.<sup>9</sup>

Here again the plant is compared with tobacco but not identified with it.

Although Dawson had stated that the cultivation of the supposed tobacco had been given up among the Haida, I wondered whether the plant might not have been likely to survive in the wild state, since tobaccos, grown in the flower garden at least, seed themselves readily and sometimes become almost a pest. Expert botanical opinion however seemed to differ

<sup>7</sup> G. Vancouver, *Voyage to the North Pacific Ocean . . . 1790-95*. Vol. III, p. 256. London, 1798.

<sup>8</sup> G. Dawson, *On the Haida Indians of the Queen Charlotte Islands*. Appendix A. Report on the Q.C. Islands, 1878. Geological Survey of Canada, pp. 114-15.

<sup>9</sup> P. Tikhmenev, *Istoricheskoe obozryenie obrazovania rossiisko-amerikanskoi kompania i dyeistvii eyu do nastoyastshago vremeni*, p. 122. St. Petersburg, 1861-63. I am indebted to Mr. A. P. Kashevaroff of the Juneau Museum for calling my attention to this reference.

on this. Some felt that some species might thus tend to perpetuate themselves, others believed that *N. attenuata* at least would not—at any rate under the environmental conditions of the Northwest Coast. However, a search was made of published data and of the collections in the Gray Herbarium of Harvard University, which showed that not only had no specimen of *any* species of *Nicotiana* been collected in the region, but that none had apparently ever been reported anywhere on the Alaskan or British Columbian coast—with one apparent exception. Alexander Menzies who, it will be remembered, had been in the Queen Charlottes with Colnett in 1878 and had accompanied Vancouver on his survey of the whole Northwest Coast, sent back to England a considerable botanical collection. Among the plants was one first described by Lindley<sup>10</sup> in 1824 as *Nicotiana nana* and listed by Hooker in his “*Flora Boreali Americana*”<sup>11</sup> with the note that it had been collected by Menzies “on the Northwest coast of America.” Later, however, this plant was shown not to be a *Nicotiana* at all, but apparently *Hesperochiron*, a genus the known range of which at no point reaches the Pacific coast. Menzies therefore could not have collected the plant on the coast anywhere, and anyway it was not a *Nicotiana* after all. It is obvious that some mistake had been made.

That the plant cultivated and used for chewing by the Tlingit and Haida was thus probably not tobacco seems further indicated by two Haida myths. Dawson in 1878 gives<sup>12</sup> an abstract of the Haida account of the origin of tobacco, according to which long ago the Indians had no tobacco, only one plant being known which was growing somewhere far inland in the Stickeen country. It had been caused to grow by a divinity and was tall like a tree. A man shot an arrow at the summit of the tree and at last brought down *one or two seeds*. These he brought home and sowed, and all the tobacco that the Haida afterwards cultivated came from the plants so grown. An analogous incident occurs at the end of a tale collected by Swanton.<sup>13</sup> In this He-who-was-born-from-his-mother’s-side comes to a people who are shooting leaves off a tall tree and eating the leaves which fall. The hero shoots an arrow at the tree itself, causing it to fall, and then collects the “eggs” of the tree, which are later planted and from which all tobacco is derived. The reputed place of origin of the mysterious plant given by Dawson—far up the Stickeen—most certainly suggests some other plant than a *Nicotiana*. More significant, however, is the statement I have itali-

<sup>10</sup> Bot. Reg. X, tab. 833.

<sup>11</sup> Vol. II, p. 91.

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 152.

<sup>13</sup> J. R. Swanton, Haida Texts and Myths. BAE-B 29: 233.

cized in Dawson's account, i.e., that the man brought down with his arrow *one or two* seeds. For the seeds of tobacco are extremely minute, almost dust-like, so that this statement could not possibly apply and would seem to refer to some other plant whose seeds are at least of moderate size. That the seeds of the plant actually cultivated by the Haida were in fact of some size would seem to be shown by another myth given by Swanton.<sup>14</sup> In this a gambler divides some tobacco seeds equally between two men who sit beside him, so that because of the sweetness of the seeds they may not reveal him as a cheat. Pretty obviously here seeds of respectable size, not dust-like particles, would seem to be implied. A statement made by Krause<sup>15</sup> may possibly be significant in this connection, for he notes that the Tlingit formerly chewed the root of a species of Lupin which had narcotic qualities. Certainly the seeds of such a plant would far better fit the mythical references than do those of any *Nicotiana*. The Tlingit ascribe the origin of their tobacco to the Raven, who showed the Chilkat the first seeds of it and taught them how to use it, chewing it with burned shells.<sup>16</sup>

In the face of the facts here presented, it seems to me probable that the plant cultivated and chewed by the Tlingit and Haida was something other than tobacco. The difficulty of accounting for the presence on the Alaskan and northern British Columbian coast of the supposed *N. attenuata* thus disappears; the significance of the use of an unknown masticatory with lime, of course, still remains. In view of the interest of the question, perhaps some botanist familiar with the flora of the region will suggest what this unknown plant mistaken for tobacco might be. It is possible, also, that it might be the point for botanists visiting the region to make particular search for the possible survival of some species of *Nicotiana* there.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY  
CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

---

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>15</sup> A. Krause, *Die Tlinkit Indianer*, p. 158, Jena, 1885. Boas (BAE-R 35: 199) reports the same of the Kwakiutl, but there is no mention of the use of any lime.

<sup>16</sup> J. R. Swanton, *Tlingit Myths and Texts*. BAE-B 39: 89.