When I arrived in Masset in the fall of 1979 to carry out fieldwork with Haida elders towards my doctoral dissertation, I had in mind as the final result a structuralist analysis of Haida symbolic classification and mythology. Instead, this book, the revised version of that dissertation, is the result of my fieldwork experience, and it is a far cry from structuralist analysis. It reflects a path many anthropologists have taken, namely, that certain theoretical and methodological approaches only become relevant during field research and others become insufficient.

My topic is the interplay of traditional Haida power relationships and symbols. I will be focusing on the importance of the individual competence over schemes of social and symbolic classification as opposed to the deciphering of their structural logic. This approach presented itself in the course of fieldwork, first as a series of hunches and then as a framework within which all social action and the very nature of the Haidas' classificatory schemes became explicable.

The nature of this work is threefold. First, in presenting new data on the Haida, it is an ethnography. Second, in presenting these data along with previously collected ethnohistorical and ethnographic data within an explanatory framework it translates and interprets the intricate style of the Haida discourse about the social and mythical world. Third, there is some practical significance that goes beyond the academic audience: my data and my analysis of these data witness the ongoing functioning of traditional Haida political life, expressed not so much as formal institutions, but as a style of discourse and symbolic action. The content of this discourse is entitlement to tangible and intangible property. In explaining both the style and content of the discourse of entitlement, I think it
will become evident that one hundred years of white oppression have not erased the Haidas’ concern for ownership of their lands and resources, an issue that has come to the forefront since my chapters were first written.

While my fieldwork experience is not the topic of this book, outlining the context and content of my research in Masset between 1979 and 1981 will put some of my data into perspective. My initial objective in 1979 was to collect data on Haida myth and symbolism for a projected analysis of the texts and myths which John Swanton had collected eighty years earlier (Swanton 1905b, 1908). To facilitate my research and to have the opportunity to learn the Haida language, I wanted to live in the household of a Haida elder. As luck and her generosity would have it, Emma Matthews, the then eighty-six-year-old widow of Willie Matthews, one of the last hereditary chiefs, welcomed me into her household. While officially sanctioned by the Masset Band Council as ethnographer, my practical role among elders and their kin was “the girl who looks after Naani [grandmother] Emma,” a role I gladly accepted. Household chores were interspersed with lengthy sessions at the kitchen table while the bread was rising or the stew was simmering, often interrupted by children and grandchildren, neighbours, and other villagers visiting, dropping off freshly gathered foods, or stopping in for tea.

The Matthews household and the village in general were the scene of bustling ceremonial activity during the fall of 1979. Oliver Adams, Willie Matthews’ successor, died soon after my arrival. This involved the village in funeral preparations, the funeral itself, and a post-funeral feast attended by some 450 people. His death also initiated the process of selecting his successor, which gave me my first glimpse of the subtle rhetoric and action involved in traditional Haida political processes.

During this time, the Matthews household also celebrated the wedding of a granddaughter. I was recruited for the organization and preparations, which involved cooking for some 250 invited guests, baking dozens of cakes and pies and cupcakes to be taken home by the guests after the feast, decorating the hall, polishing the silver, washing dishes, and mobilizing further lineage support. This wedding was soon followed by others in the village, as well as numerous mortuary potlatches, further dinners and feasts, not to mention the weekly Church Army meetings which form part of the network of social obligation and ritual exchange.

Their structure was shaped by moiety reciprocity and intralineage obligation and solidarity, by the traditional notions of “showing respect” and “acknowledging others.” Participating in these events, and even more importantly, in the social interaction surrounding them, gave me an introduction to the pervasiveness of the interminable cycles of formal and informal obligation in which the
villagers are involved. It also brought to light the political nature of “ceremonial” events, as people were constantly evaluating who claimed what, or said what, who spoke in what order, produced what kin terms, or used what names. While claims to rank and position were not made vociferously, the true political competence of elders showed itself in the inventory of subtle rhetoric and gestures which were used on the public stage and interpreted afterwards. It became my subsequent goal to make sense of this discourse of entitlement, and the meanings of its verbal and non-verbal symbols which thrive on ambiguity and allusion.

Most of the genealogical data, kinship terminology, and lineage affiliations of ancestors were recorded during informal sessions with Emma Matthews and visits with numerous other elders, when my information was crosschecked and additional information was received. As well, I obtained instruction in the Haida language and elicited Haida vocabulary. Indian personal names, in particular, provided keys to genealogies and lineage membership, marital alliances, and territorial ownership. Acknowledging the political significance of names, elders were enthusiastic about trying to remember them and their bearers.

In January 1980, I also began work with Adam Bell, then seventy-eight years old and hereditary chief of one of the local lineages. His wife Ruth, now deceased, was usually present, nodding agreement or interjecting bits of information. Adam Bell was regarded as an excellent orator in the Indian language. Except for a very brief period, he never attended Indian residential school, so his Haida was fluent and elaborate. From him, aided by the translation of his son, Lawrence, stems much of the information on speechmaking, proper terms of address, and rank. Adam Bell was also an able narrator of Haida myths and oral history. Much of the information on Haida mythology comes from him. In addition to recording his myths in Haida and translating them, we also worked the reverse way, that is, I read some of Swanton’s texts to him and let him comment on them. This clarified their meaning and often prompted the recollection of other myths and stories. Since 1985, Lawrence Bell has helped with the translation and annotation of stories.

In August and October 1983, I had the opportunity to visit Masset again and check and augment my data. The October visit was especially valuable, as it allowed me to participate in the stone-moving and memorial potlatch for Ruth Bell. I was once again able to visit with many of the “naanis” [grandmothers], “tsinnis” [grandfathers], and “aunties,” prepare for an event, and partake in endless hours of cheerful discussion and laughter at the kitchen table.

Before, during, and after fieldwork, additional data were collected in archives, particularly the Church Missionary Society Archives of the Anglican Church in London, England, and the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives at the Manitoba Provincial Archives in Winnipeg. Further archival and ethnohistorical materials
were generously made available to me by Mary Lee Stearns. During July and August 1984, I recorded further myths and oral histories with Adam Bell in Vancouver.

As Bourdieu (1976), whose analytical framework I shall be employing in this book, noted, it is the role of the anthropologist as outside observer which predisposes him/her to view social action as execution of rules, rather than focusing on the generative qualities of social practices, and on the cultural competence of people reared in a given society. Much of my understanding of Haida cultural competence and the intricate style of discourse expressing it stems from living the experience of fieldwork, from having elders share their knowledge with me, and from learning to make sense of it.

Within the style of discourse of the people I am writing about it is only appropriate that all those who helped in the course of writing this volume, from its initial conception to the finished product, be acknowledged.

For financial support between 1978 and 1982, I thank the Canadian Department of External Affairs for providing me with the Government of Canada Award for Foreign Nationals. The award permitted me to come to Canada and pursue my doctoral studies, and made possible the dissertation work on which this book is based. Simon Fraser University awarded me the President's Research Grant Stipend during the fall of 1979. Thanks are also due to R.C. Brown, Dean of Arts at Simon Fraser University, for helping out with some travel funds during research.

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For his critical reading of my dissertation, I also thank Dr Ian Whitaker, a member of my graduate advisory committee. Any errors of fact or interpretation are, however, my responsibility.

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While the Haida elders and other community members provided me with information about their culture, the following analysis in terms of anthropological models is mine, and so are any errors of interpretation.

Copies of all field notes and tapes collected from Haida elders have been deposited with the Masset Band.

Barriere, BC
August 1988