

Nuxalk House of Smayusta



Interview with Sximana

From the book by Professor Taiaiake Alfred,
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Sximana is one of those Onkwehonwe women whose love shines brightly through the circumstances of her life. She embodies the theme of commitment I am advancing in this chapter of the book. Her life is an example of the different ways that the concept of commitment manifests as persistence in one's personal struggle to decolonize, dedication to the unity of one's community, and an unstoppable assertiveness in defending the principles and rights of one's people. She is untiring and unbeatable in her struggle to awaken and unify her Nuxalk people, even when faced with daunting pressure to conform to the culture of cynical politics of co-optation. She is a living example of the strong spirit of women who are courageous in staying true to their beliefs in themselves and the potential of their people, although they receive little reward for their hard work and the love they manifest in their dedication to their nations. I talked to Sximana in the building used by the Nuxalk Nation's indigenous government. We began by discussing how and why she became involved in the resurgence of the "traditional" Nuxalk movement.

TA: What's the story of how this place and this movement came to be?

S: This is the House of Smayusta, "the house of stories". Our history comes through stories, and this is where a lot of the stories are told when we come together as a people. This is the traditional government of the Nuxalk Nation. I was one who asked for this place. Our head hereditary chief, Laurence Pootlass, was the one who actually set it up, about 14 years ago. I had come back here from going to school down south, and I started working for the band council. At the band office, I heard a lot of negativity about Laurence and what he was doing. So I went home and told my mother what was going on over there. She told me that I better go and learn what truth and honesty really is by talking to Laurence. She told me, "He's our hereditary chief, and we need to respect him." She told me to go volunteer with him so I could find out what the Nuxalk people were really about. So, not very willingly, I went to see him.

This was at a point where nobody was really helping him; the fight in him was gone; he and his wife were doing a lot of crying. They were praying and crying, because there was no movement among the people at all. Every time he would try to do something for the nation, non-traditional people were fighting against him. Nothing was happening. The elders kept pushing him to carry on, but he had not support. So I went to him and simply asked him if he needed help. When I came to them and said that, they believed I was a blessing.

TA: So what kind of things did you do to help?

S: I would write letters and things like that. Laurence would tell me to write a letter to all the chiefs and elders and to go deliver those letters. I would write up the letter and then go deliver it to every family and every house that had a chief or elder. You know, when I go around at people's houses, the people say, "This is what the head hereditary chief used to do before." That chief, he would go to every house and stop in to tell the news – there was no writing back then. The only thing is that back then there were only 40 or 50 houses on the reserve, but it's even more difficult now with over 350 houses!

TA: Could you tell me how you hold onto your role here in the House of Smayusta while you're also elected to the band council?

S: I asked the people, in a meeting here in this House, if I should run for the band council. Some people actually came and told me that I have no right to run for the band council, because my position here is stronger and that it would be weakened by being on the band council. But the reason I decided to go there because I want to be a leader for my people. I stand traditionally until the day I die. But I really believe 100 per cent that I need to be over there right now too, working with the ones who don't understand tradition and who don't have the feeling for the land that I have. I had a dream, and in it, all of my people were "possessed" – they were like little baby children all sitting there blinking at the same time, sitting around a table. I realized that the people around the table in my vision were the ones who are in the band council. They don't understand. The idea behind me running for elected councillor is so that I can get there and learn what they're teaching them in that office that makes them that way and then help to educate them to see things the way they really are instead.

TA: You have a lot of confidence in your ability to change people.

S: I do have faith in my people. Even with the ones who are the most angry, I realize that their anger is coming from somewhere.

TA: There are about 800 Nuxalk people living here in Bella Coola. How many of them support the traditional government? And what do non-traditional people who don't support it think of the House of Smayusta?

S: There are a lot of people who support us but who are not open about it or who are not active. But if it came down to supporting a struggle or a fight, they would donate food, quietly. I would say more than half of our people are like that. But here in this community, the House of Smayusta is a name that is used negatively. People doing it don't even know why! I've been labelled, "House of Smayusta," but I tell people that it's not a bad name. People don't know why they have to hate the House of Smayusta, they just do because the bandwagon is going that way.

TA: With most people, there's still fear of the traditional ways. We could be talking about any Native community. In my experience, the people decide to work in the band council system for practical reasons, because that is where the action is – the money and the power. But when it comes to their opposing the

traditional government, I think too that the word “fear” is appropriate to describe people’s feelings. We don’t truly understand those ways, and we get the sense that we ourselves are not really Native because of that. I believe that’s where the anger, jealousy, and resentment comes from towards people who are involved in rebuilding the traditional system.

S: We have to think of ourselves as nations and act as nations. We really need to develop our own governments. When the churches came in and the potlatching had to stop, it took a long time to recover from that. It was 1974 when Laurence had the first potlatch, and the next one was about ten years later; now there are two to three potlatches every year. It’s a slow process to rebuild our nation’s traditional culture, but being traditional is living it, and making it part of your life.

The churches say that what we do is wrong because they think that we worship totem poles and masks. But this is not the case. The Nuxalk have a name for God, the Creator, and that is Tatao. We have a name for the Almighty, which is the female part of the deity, called Atlaxtang, “the ruler of all”. We have a name for the Holy Ghost, Sminyax. I read the Bible all the time, and I try to learn from it. What I’ve come to realize is that we Nuxalk people are no different than anyone else who has ever been put on this earth. But, we have been put on earth in this place, and this place is our Holy Land.

We even had the Garden of Eden. It was called Ista. That’s the place we were fighting to protect from the loggers a few years ago. People may say that our Nuxalk stories are more mystical than the ones in the Bible, yet in the Bible there was a man who lived for 591 years. So compared to our stories about this place and our ancestors, what’s more believable to you?

Part of what I am trying to teach people about the Nuxalk is this: Do you like fish? Do you like to smoke fish and eat it? What about the oolichans and the oolichan grease? What about the deer and the moose? Do you like all that? If you do, you’re Nuxalk. That’s part of you, and it’s part of living here. It doesn’t matter what else you believe in – the Bible, other stories, or whatever. If you believe that you have to live off of those things and this earth, and if those things are part of your life, then you’re Nuxalk.

TA: I guess instead of that, most people would say that you’re Nuxalk if you have a status card, a band number, and a land allotment on a reserve.

S: The true sense of what it is to be Nuxalk came to me from the elders. And not only that. Ever since I was a young kid, I grew up on the land, always involved in fishing and planting. We live in seasons. We just finished the fishing season. Before that it was the planting season. And in the winter-months, it’s season for making things. That’s part of living Nuxalk. We survive on our own. I put away everything for food. We preserve and can most of our own food.

TA: If you were left out here on your own with no electricity, gasoline, or supplies from the white man, could your people survive?

S: I know my family would! (Laughter.) But I do know lots of people who just live day to day. They don’t have food stored up. I don’t believe that most people have those skills. This year, I was talking with a young woman who has four kids, and I asked her, “Did you put away any fish?” She said, “No, my grandmother never taught me how to.” Her mother had had an illness .. That young woman come over here and learned how to do it this year. I believe that’s part of my responsibility, to teach. When I was out getting the fish I can, the Canadian government told us that we couldn’t take any Coho salmon – they wanted us to throw them overboard, dead or alive. I won’t stand for that, so I was taking in all the cohoes anyway and canning them with this young woman, and saving them to use for food at our feasts.

TA: You didn't care about what the police might do to you?

S: I was telling the other fishermen out there that I didn't care if they were going to take me to jail. I wasn't throwing my fish back in the water, not when there're people starving in our village and we need this to eat. No way. I carried my fish right up there out in the open.

TA: They didn't bother you?

S: Nope.

TA: Maybe your attitude scared them off. What about the Nuxalk fishermen who obeyed the government order, what do you think of that?

S: It's pathetic, really. I was talking to some of our other fishermen, and they were throwing back 100 fish every night. Throwing 100 cohoes in the water, dead! It upset them to do it, but they didn't want to get charged by the government. They haven't paid their fishing boats off yet; they still need that license to fish, so they didn't want to get in trouble and have those fish confiscated.

TA: So what makes the difference between you and them?

S: Money!

TA: What, you don't depend on money and they do?

S: I think some of them were really high fishermen: rich. Me and my family, we just make a bare living off fishing. But we have our freedom.

TA: People always divide this way, between the ones who live for money and those who live for something else.

S: I think we have so much division related to long-standing personality or family conflicts too. I've tried to make a point of overcoming that myself. I figure that if Jesus can love everybody, than I can do too. I work with medicines a lot – I make medicine. And when I make the medicine, I do it for everyone. I go around and give it to all the elders. Sometimes it's hard because I know a lady used to say, "Oh, she's so spoiled," and this and that about me and my family. I remember those words and how things like that hurt me. But then I say to myself, "Well, those people just don't know who I am, so I'm going to teach them differently." I've been doing this for a while, and it's been quite difficult, actually, with some of my own family, because of politics – my Mom's brothers and sisters pulled away from me. But because of the work I've been doing, things have opened up, and right now I believe I have a relationship with just about everyone in this village.

That's a start: breaking down my own prejudices against other people and learning not to go on about past grievances and wars amongst families. Here in Bella Coola, it's hard because we are different nations all put into one. There are the Kimsquit people, the Talliomah people, the Bella Coola people here, it's called Kumquoltz, and our area is Chimolx. And also the Kwatnah people, too. Our traditions are all just a little bit different. I was very young and didn't really understand, but when our elders came together, there was a lot of pressure. Some of the elders would be saying, "Oh those people don't know how to do that ceremony properly." But we had to realize after a while, although to this day some people still don't, that we are different nations brought into one: the Nuxalk Nation.

TA: What is it that binds the Nuxalk people together today? After all this, and following the work that's been done, what are people here willing to stand up and fight for, together, as one?

S: I think that if the government, or anyone else, tried to encroach or do anything on our reserve lands, there would be a fight. But there are lots of people who don't fully believe that we also have rights in all of our traditional territory. They call the land in our traditional territory, "Crown lands."

TA: Even the Nuxalk people, they call Nuxalk territory by that name?

S: Some of them do. Whereas to us traditional people, the Crown has made a claim on our territory, and it's obvious that they're selling it off as fast as they can before the land claims are settled. They're logging it, trying to mine it, all of that. They've taken so much already...

TA: So everybody would defend the "reserve," but not everybody would defend their "traditional territory"?

S: Yep. It's a breakdown of tradition, a loss of knowledge. It's also a lack of confidence and security in being Nuxalk. There's insecurity here in the village. I mean, we have to live with the non-native people. You grow up here in Bella Coola knowing that over there is the "White Side" and over here is the "Indian Side" of the village. You don't realize, unless you've been educated in some way, that we have rights and that we have rights in all of our traditional territory!

TA: Tell me what happened when the traditional people decided to act on those rights and to try to save Ista, your Garden of Eden, back a few years ago. What was the reaction from your own people, and also from the white people here in Bella Coola?

S: There was a lot of deep, deep anger. They were angry that they couldn't do anything. And there was a willingness to hurt. No willingness to listen. There was pain everywhere. I've always been friends with everybody, but when I can here then, I would see people and their faces would just turn away. They knew that my Mom and Dad supported the House of Smayusta, and they know where I stood. With our own people, I think a lot of them were really confused. There was strong pressure on the situation from the band councillors. They were saying that we were wrong. The chief councillor at the time was quoted in the newspaper as saying that we only had 30 per cent of the village behind us – you know, he only had 30 per cent of the vote to get in to be the chief councillor himself! (Laughing.) He was confusing the people. A lot of our people sat in the middle, because they are not willing to confront. They do believe that it is our land, and they do believe in our rights, but there was a threat made by the chief councillor that if they acted on those beliefs and supported us, they would not be issued any more welfare cheques. A lot of them chose to not even speak about what they believed in because of this threat. And another threat went out to every employee of the band council administration: they would lose their jobs if they supported us – two of them were laid off for a week.

TA: Why were the band councillors so strongly against what you were doing?

S: There were about seven Nuxalk loggers who were supposed to be working in that area. During the occupation, the logging company, Interfor, had moved all the white loggers away and told all the Nuxalk loggers to go out there. Interfor told the Nuxalk loggers, "If we don't log this area, you're not going to get any more work." This is what happened.

TA: So they were threatened too?

S: Their jobs were threatened, yes. A lot of this happened because the former chief councillor had his own ideas about putting a pulp mill in here. I know this for a fact because I worked on that plan as my first job out of school, until I just couldn't do it anymore.

TA: Did the situation ever get resolved?

S: It didn't. It got logged. They threw our hereditary chiefs in jail, and the stress was so much for the head chief's wife that she died. Then the government made Laurence sign a piece of paper he would never have signed otherwise: a court document saying that he wouldn't be involved in any more protests. They made him sign this paper so that he could get out of jail to go to his wife's funeral.

TA: It must be hard to see this as anything but a defeat for your people?

S: I believe there was some positive in it because it did bring a lot of us closer together. There was a lot of strength among the people that were involved.

TA: Do you think the reaction would be the same if you decided to make another stand against logging or development?

S: Yes.

TA: What are you going to do to make sure that the same thing doesn't happen all over again?

S: My plan is to go door to door, like that old head chief used to do, and find out where our people stand. I've been to one home already to talk about a proposal to build a mine, and it's just been ...anger. Anger at me for being House of Smayusta. They said, "You're going to try to stop this!" Before I left I gave them all a hug anyway. The next time I saw them, they still just turned their faces away from me. But I have been to other people's homes, and found that there are lots of people who believe what we believe in, but they just don't speak out.

TA: That's a big question. How do you get people to stand up for themselves after being beaten down for so long?

S: To me, it's a spiritual war. It's a war between good and evil within ourselves.