Arthur Wellington Clah was a Tsimshian man on the Pacific north-west coast of Canada, who encountered the missionary, William Duncan, as a young adult at the Hudson’s Bay Company’s Fort Simpson in the 1850s. Moses Tjalkabota was an Arrernte man in central Australia. He was a young boy when he first came into contact with Lutheran missionaries at Hermannsburg mission in the 1880s, and was baptized in 1890. Both these men became Christian evangelists, both preached to their own people, and further afield among neighbouring groups. But here the similarities between them seem to stop. Clah was never part of a mission settlement, maintaining his independence from any established church; while Moses, who became blind as a young man, spent most of his life at Hermannsburg.

This article examines these two evangelists’ understandings of Christianity and how they communicated these understandings to their own and neighbouring peoples. Clah encouraged good behaviour, which conformed with his understanding of Christian precepts; Moses tried to communicate a more abstract form of belief through which happiness and eternal life could be attained.

Clah lived in a region where food was abundant for much of the year. During the relatively lean winter months the Tsimshian lead sedentary lives at permanent village sites. These villages consisted of wooden long houses, the building and dedication of which was an important part of the political, social, and religious life of the Tsimshian. The villages were the setting for major ceremonies, and the negotiation of social contracts. In spring people moved away from their villages to their fishing sites scattered along the rivers.
They also collected berries, fished for ocean fish, and hunted fur animals. The Tsimshian and their neighbours were hierarchically organized, status-conscious, and competitive societies. The first Europeans they encountered were fur traders. When the traders wanted to establish permanent trading posts on the coast they had to negotiate with the local chiefs. These posts often became the sites for new villages. When Fort Simpson was established by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1834 in Tsimshian territory at the time of Clah's birth, the Tsimshian relocated their permanent village site from Metlakatla, slightly to the south, to the trading post. William Duncan, the first missionary to the north-west Pacific, also established himself at the trading post.

Central Australia is a semi-arid region with low and unpredictable rainfall, although creeks and waterholes on Western Arrernte lands could generally be relied on for water. Tjalkabota and his family moved about the Ellery Creek/Finke River region (west of present-day Alice Springs) in small kin-based groups. In good seasons they congregated temporarily in larger gatherings for religious ceremonies and social interactions at sites where resources were sufficient to maintain them. Their religious life did not centre on these gatherings, but on the land in which they lived. They did not live in villages or construct permanent shelters. Moses saw permanent buildings for the first time when he visited Hermannsburg mission as a child. This was the first village in the region, to which the missionaries endeavoured to attract the Western Arrernte.

These environmental, social, and religious contexts influenced the evangelism of Clah and Moses and their reconciliation of introduced forms with pre-existing social and religious forms. Clah, the status-conscious trader, did not seek to undermine people's village-based lives and economic activities, but rather to redirect their behaviour to conform with Christian ceremonies and codes he had adopted; and to recognize Jesus as a source of supernatural power. Clah recognized the power of Tsimshian rituals and wanted to stop these alternative sources of power by changing people's behaviour, stopping the "wrong behaviour" of the old ways and encouraging "good" or "right" Christian behaviour. Clah's decision to identify himself as a Christian was not the result of a sudden "conversion" or revelation, but was a gradual process. He continued his economic and social activities at Fort Simpson and along the coast and rivers: fishing, hunting, and accumulating property to enhance his status. He also experimented with new enterprises, including: working for the Hudson's Bay Company; mining; and providing transport for miners. Clah did not uproot himself or his family to join a mission, or become a formal member of a church.

Moses, who became a mission-based preacher, challenged the existing order of Arrernte life in fundamental ways, by arguing that Christian beliefs replaced pre-existing beliefs. He articulated his attack on Arrernte cosmology in terms of the Christian "truth" as opposed to the "lies" of the old Arrernte men. He denied the spiritual power of the tjurunga and other sacred objects,

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1. The trading post was moved a few years later, again after negotiations with Chief Ligeex, and the Tsimshian moved with it. William Duncan joined this village in 1957.
and rituals such as rain-making. He does not seem to have advocated that Christians should join a mission village, but he claimed to have made the decision as a boy to stay at Hermannsburg, and not participate in the mobile hunting and gathering life of his parents.

The Texts: Clah’s Diary and Moses’ Life Story

The present discussion is based on two texts: a diary kept by Clah over half a century; and an Arrernte text dictated by Moses to the missionary F. W. Albrecht, which gives a retrospective account of his life.

Clah had a few months’ tuition in written English from William Duncan when he was in his late twenties. He began keeping his diary in 1859, perhaps to help him improve his writing and to familiarize himself with the European calendar of weeks and months. He maintained daily entries in the diary for the next 50 years. It is written in idiosyncratic English which lacks a systematic grammatical form and consistent spelling, resulting in some ambiguities in the text. The two models Clah would have had for keeping a diary or journal were: the personal diary of missionary William Duncan; and the Hudson’s Bay Company trading post journal, maintained by officers on a daily basis, which recorded the weather each day, noted movements of people in and out of Fort Simpson, fights, and trade. Whereas Duncan may have told Clah he kept a diary, and may well have encouraged Clah to emulate him, it seems unlikely the missionary would have shown Clah his private musings, which included such observations as, “They are as usual a fine intelligent race but full of cruelty.” In contrast, Clah probably had access to the trading post journal. His diary entries, like the Hudson’s Bay Company journal, always began with a description of the weather.

By the end of the diary it is evident that Clah had in mind a wider readership and was writing for posterity. He approached missionaries of his acquaintance seeking assistance to publish. Eventually the diary was sold to Henry Wellcome, and lay forgotten in the Wellcome Institute Library in London for many decades.

Moses Tjalkabota became blind as a young man. The major document which survives from him is a 60-page account of his life. The Moses text is difficult to situate because we know very little about it. It is written in Arrernte and held in the Lutheran Archives in Adelaide, South Australia. Paul Albrecht, who translated it, has strong evidence that it was typed by his father, F. W. Albrecht, the missionary at Hermannsburg from 1926 to 1952.

The text is not dated, but the translator suggests that it was produced in the

4. October 1 1857, the day Duncan arrived at Fort Simpson. Microfilms A1715–1720, William Duncan papers, 1 October 1857, British Columbia Archives and Record Service, Victoria.
6. Albrecht, 237.
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early 1950s. It is not known what the genesis of this life story was — was it
initiated by Moses, or did the missionary interview him for posterity? We do
know that Moses was an old man when he recorded this account, and was
revered as a great preacher and evangelist. He did not have to prove his Christian
credentials to his missionary scribe.

The first two-thirds of the narrative relate Moses’ childhood and early
adulthood up until about the time of his marriage in 1903. Much of the nar-
rative focuses on journeys through Western Arrernte country, even though
Moses was living at the mission from quite a young age. The last third also
tells very little about mission life, while describing in some detail his travels
and preaching to Aboriginal communities. Although mission and missionar-
ies form the background of this account, they are not agents of religious
change and are peripheral to the narrative.

There is now quite an extensive literature on the analysis of indigenous-
generated texts, including mission texts. However neither of these texts fit com-
fortably into the usual categories. They are neither autobiography nor mission
text. Moses’ story does fit into the genre of exemplary lives: from an early age
he “had God’s word.” He made the decision to stay at the mission, rather than
remain with his parents; and even as a young boy he argued with his elders, denig-
rating their “heathen” beliefs. There are no admissions of temptation, “backslid-
ing,” or doubt. Yet the life story is not the kind of pious text often found in mission
archives, which repeats in formulaic ways Christian teaching and morality.

Arnold Krupat, who has written extensively about Native American texts,
divides the literature into categories according to authorship: “autobiograph-
ies by Indians”; and “Indian autobiographies.” I do not find this terminology
very helpful, but what he is trying to do is identify the process by which a text
is produced, rather than categorize texts by their content or narrative structure.
“Autobiographies by Indians” are individually composed texts written by the
person whose life is described. “Indian autobiographies,” in contrast, are not
“self-written,” but are “bi-cultural composite composition[s]” involving trans-
lators, editors, and other interventions to produce the text.

7. Paul Albrecht believes his father would not have interviewed Moses. Paul Albrecht had dif-
ficulties translating the Arrernte into English because the spelling is inconsistent and does not
follow an accepted orthography. Some words are no longer used/known by the translator. He
seems to have had particular difficulty translating text which described abstract concepts, such as
Arrernte ceremony and religious understandings.

8. The anthropologist C. P. Mountford visited Jay Creek in 1942. He noticed Moses immediately:

    I picked him [Moses] out yesterday, when the rations were being distributed. He is certainly
    a saintly old man, with an expression of kindness and mental poise that marks him out from
    a people who have more than the usual share of these qualities.

14 June 1942, C. P. Mountford Diary, June–July 1942 journey to Haast’s Bluff, Alice Springs and
Hermannsburg, Mountford-Sheard Collection, PGR1218 Series 2, State Library of South Australia.

9. Moses was accompanied on these journeys by his wife, Sophie, or an assistant Arrernte
evangelist. When Moses first suggested to Carl Strehlow that he go on an evangelical trip,
Strehlow asked, “Jakai, how will you go, seeing that you are blind?” “I will take my time. Give
me six weeks,” replied Moses. Tjalkabota, 280.

10. Tjalkabota, 249.

11. Arnold Krupat, Native American Autobiography. An Anthology (Madison: University of

the second of these genres, but we are not in a position to know what, if any, interventions were made by the missionary transcriber. The translator, who is not Arrernte, but learnt the language as a child growing up at Hermannsburg, was also a missionary. Moses did not choose the translator, but he did choose the transcriber and, I think we can assume, trusted him. Whereas he portrays his life as exemplary in terms of his adoption of Christianity, the structure of his narrative is governed by Aboriginal notions of place and country, and not western notions of time and chronology.\footnote{Tony Swain, \textit{A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being} (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1993).} Contrast this with Clah’s text, which is not mediated through a third person, but is structured by the western concept of a daily diary, organized chronologically.

Whatever interventions there may have been in the text of Moses’ story, they do not challenge its authenticity as an indigenous view of Arrernte life immediately before, and during, the mission era. Moses’ memory is remarkably accurate, as one might expect from a blind preacher who taught from extensive Biblical passages he had memorized. Many assertions in the text can be checked against other written records. In all the cases I have checked there is strong corroboration between the Moses’ text and other mission sources.\footnote{Moses lists people in baptismal classes in the 1880s and early 1890s, which can be checked against the Mission Chronicle. His memory of who was at the mission at any particular time can be verified against written records.} There are other incidents, outside the mission sphere, which can also be corroborated against sources, such as a massacre of Arrernte people by “Loritja” men, about which T. G. H. Strehlow wrote, although many years after the event.\footnote{It is possible that Moses was one of Strehlow’s sources for this story (unfortunately anthropologists do not have to acknowledge their sources), so this may not in fact be an independent corroboration.}

Arthur Wellington Clah’s diary, although written in the first person, is not an autobiography (a person’s chronicle of his/her life).\footnote{Krupat.} A diary might be considered autobiographical when read as a whole document at the end of a life, but its production is very different from an autobiography. An autobiography is a \textit{retrospective} account of a life. Clah’s diary is such a valuable document because it is not retrospective. He wrote in it virtually every day from 1862 until 1909 as he paddled his canoe through storms, tramped up mountain trails, or camped in the icy snow.\footnote{The entries between 1859 and 1862 seem to have been written monthly and do include accounts of his life up until 1859. The diaries, amazingly, show no water damage, even though Clah overturned his canoe on more than one occasion and spent many nights and days travelling in an open canoe in the rain.} In the later years Clah did occasionally reminisce. These retrospective comments are not necessarily borne out by his diary entries written at the time of the remembered events.\footnote{There are many accounts of Clah saving missionary Duncan’s life when he was threatened by the chief Ligeex in the early days at Fort Simpson. But neither Clah nor Duncan mention this incident in their diaries at the time. Nearly 50 years later, on 10 July 1901, Clah noted for the first time that he had saved Duncan’s life from the heathen chiefs. On 25 December 1901 he claimed that the Methodists had given him the name Arthur Wellington. Yet in 1875 when he first started referring to himself as Arthur Wellington Clah, 6 years before he was baptized (but a few days before he married his wife of many years, so presumably a Christian marriage), he wrote, “I say I am Arthur Wellington God give me new name.” (25 March 1875, Clah Diary, 140/6).} But my concern
in the present paper is not whether these documents are factually based, but what they reveal of the lives and beliefs of two indigenous evangelists — how they perceived their lives.

Moses encountered Christianity as a young child, while Clah, who grew up in close proximity to European traders at the Hudson’s Bay Company trading post, was not introduced to Christian ideas until he was in his late twenties. Moses remembered that, as a child who visited the mission occasionally, “I had God’s word. I no longer held on to the words of the heathen.”

We never get such a definitive statement in Clah’s day-by-day accounts. His first mention of the missionary William Duncan was in 1858 in the context of the school in which Clah learned English. He described himself as “head school an[d] of Tsimshen an[d] of North.” He did not mention Christianity as part of his studies. After 2 months he left the school and went to the town of Victoria on Vancouver Island, where he began keeping a diary. There are references from the beginning of the diary to God and God’s judgements of people’s behaviour as right or wrong. In July 1861, Clah was on a canoe trip with several other canoes when, fearful of capsizing, Clah harangued the others in the party, “you will Not Believe Our Great Father in heaven is God Made as [us] to living and Made all living thing. In this World and of some bad things lives in the [h]is Lake. God made them all and thee speak no more.” Two months later in September Clah recorded that he was quarrelling with everyone because he had drunk too much spirits and whisky. He was behaving badly; his was not an exemplary life. In February the following year, Clah and some companions were again caught in a storm in his canoe and called on God and Jesus to save them.

It is possible that Clah did not make a definitive statement about his commitment to Christianity because he kept the diary as a private document, and so had no need to. I think a more likely explanation is that he never formally joined a church or congregation; Christian beliefs were gradually absorbed and incorporated into his personal world-view. Moses had a much more conventional mission conversion. Christian missionaries have always targeted children as the most vulnerable to their evangelism. The young Tjalkabota responded early to their teaching. He presents himself as taking up the evangelical cause as a child. He made a clear choice between mission Christianity and his family:

I put on new clothes. I was very happy at Ntaria [Hermannsburg]. For that reason I continued to learn a lot. I didn’t absent myself any more. Not at all. From now on I stayed at the school. I no longer wandered here and there . . . Father and mother were unable to draw (me) away. My father wanted me to leave, but I said, “I will not go away with you any more. I will continue at school.”

Moses described himself as being happy at the mission, as he had previously been happy living with his family. The young Christian did not make

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19. Tjalkabota, 249.
20. Clah Diary, 1858, 140/1 (all quotes from the Diary are reproduced as written by Clah).
21. Clah Diary, July 1861, 140/1.
22. Clah Diary, September 1861, 140/1.
judgements about his family’s behaviour, but their beliefs. Clah, in contrast, railed against people’s behaviour, urging them to God because He had the supernatural power to protect them from the hostile elements. Unlike Moses, Clah never had to make a choice between faith and family. Organized Christianity had little impact on his daily life, other than on Sundays when he took seriously the priests’ teaching, that no travel or work could be undertaken on the Sabbath.  

Two Indigenous Preachers

The circumstances in which Arthur Wellington Clah and Moses Tjalkabota practised and preached their Christianity were very different. One led an institutionalized life, while the other remained economically independent. They grew up in very different cultural milieux and this was reflected, not only in their early lives, but also in their understanding and practice of Christianity. I will consider each of these men’s lives as they presented themselves in their writings, concluding with some observations about the process of religious change and Indigenous proselytising.

Arthur Wellington Clah

Clah’s day-by-day account of his life gives us an unprecedented insight into the activities of this indigenous preacher. He prided himself on his independence from any church or priest:

news come up yesterday to say Duncan laugh at me because I teach the people in tents… Some news said to me if I got licence alright I can preach the people. Now I think his little mistake God gave the licence in our hearts.  

A few weeks later Clah was on the Nass River and visited a village, Kitwenselk [Gitwunksihikw], where people were feasting and giving away property (often referred to by the Chinook term potlatch). When he reprimanded them, they excused themselves by saying they were waiting for a minister. Clah told them not to be slaves, but pray to God who would send them a teacher.

Christianity was not an institutionalized religion for Clah. He did not recognize a church authority or hierarchy, nor did he associate Christianity with a church building, or a particular location. He gave no allegiance to any of the Christian denominations which were competing with each other on the Pacific coast. When visiting Victoria or other towns with more than one Protestant denomination, he attended services in a variety of churches. At Fort Simpson, when several denominations and Tsimshian factions were vying with each other in the village, he maintained his autonomy, preaching independently of them all.

Clah was not interested in bringing people into a formal church or building up a congregation. Nor did he share the missionaries’ preoccupation with outward signs of conversion such as baptism:  

24. Clah Diary, 29 January 1876, 140/6.  
25. Clah Diary, 18 January 1874, 140/5.  
26. Clah Diary, 15 February 1874, 140/5.  
27. Denominations included the Church of England, Methodists, Salvation Army, and Catholics.  
28. Clah was not himself baptized until 1881.
church bell in evening George Pemberton came in my house ask if I preach the friends. I don’t want preach amongst[t] our Christianity [Christians] I want preach all pline [blind] friends some stranger amongst[t] us who not interested words of god they wanted to be Christian. Some time I help the friends everywhere [everywhere] where were I travel round preach them sometimes in the Name of our lord Jesus Christ some I teach them how to prayer and song.29

Clah had no institutional support or funding, so combined his preaching with his regular hunting, fishing, trading, mining, and other economic activities. During the winter months when he was not travelling, he preached to his family and the people in the village. By the 1880s and 1890s he had become disenchanted with the missionaries along the coast, and in particular with Thomas Crosby, a Methodist missionary who had been invited to Fort Simpson in 1874 by a faction within the village led by a chief, Alfred Dudoward.30 Clah resented Crosby’s continual demand for money from the congregation. He accused him of turning people away from Christianity: “Kitwelekuts people using old persons ways. Start and go back big potlatches. someone give speech little. We blaming [blaming] thomas crosby. Keep asking collection mony [money] every day.”31 Clah seems to be accusing Crosby of corrupting people’s faith by treating Christian worship as a special activity for which they must pay. Clah, in contrast, received no money or material reward for his preaching, which was integrated into his daily life.

Clah’s world was village-based. During the winter months from December until March families stayed in their permanent villages. But even in the warmer months when people were much more mobile as they fished, hunted, and followed other economic activities, it was unusual for individuals to spend long periods of time on their own, or even in small family groups. Most of Clah’s travels up and down the coast — as far south as Victoria, north to Alaska, and inland — was journeying from village to village (whether permanent or temporary villages).32 The communities living at the permanent village sites were hierarchically organized — a social and political hierarchy that had become more exaggerated under the influence of the fur trade. The trade introduced greater wealth into these villages and, in the case of the Tsimshian, concentrated the villages around the Hudson’s Bay Company trading post at Fort Simpson.33

Clah’s travels both for economic purposes and for preaching took him along routes of rivers and trails connecting one village to the next. He took advantage of any opportunity to preach. If a house was available he would preach there, if not he would talk to people in the open. He rarely preached in

31. There is possibly also a suggestion that the association of church worship with monetary payment is like the potlatch, and that is why people are reverting to it. Diary 21/12/1891. See also Susan Neylan, “‘The Heavens are Changing’: Nineteenth Century Protestant Missionization on the North Pacific Coast” (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 1999), 170–171.
a church. Sometimes he encountered hostility both from other Christians and non-Christians. In the 1880s and 1890s, when Clah went on prospecting trips with non-natives, or provided transport for prospectors, he would preach to them as well.

Clah based his preaching on the Bible, often recording the book and verse used. While he did not dwell on the content of his preaching in his diary, he did note when he made a good speech. Oratory was important to the Tsimshian, who would compete at speech making during feasts. Clah mentioned singing as a part of religious services, and he carried around a hymn book, but he rarely commented on the singing. Preaching and praying were the religious activities to which he most frequently referred. Susan Neylan makes a convincing argument that Clah combined Tsimshian and Christian imagery. Imagery of light and dark was used by the missionaries to symbolize enlightenment and ignorance, as well as God’s lighting of the world. The Tsimshian believed the Raven brought light into the world, stolen from the Chief of Heaven. But Clah also used Christian imagery, which he presented in his own idiosyncratic way. Neylan cites one passage in which Clah used the metaphor of the heavy heart to indicate that people had turned from God, but he gave “heavy” a literal meaning, talking of hearts that weighed 10, 20 and even 50 pounds.

Although Clah did not discuss religious singing, uniformed marching brass and drum bands were important secular and later religious symbols of status. These bands became an enduring feature of life among the Tsimshian and neighbouring peoples. By the 1890s bands were closely associated with various Christian denominations: Salvation Army; Band of Christian Workers (associated with the Methodists); and Epworth League (Methodist). Yet Clah had organized and funded his own band of “soldiers” on New Year’s Eve in 1862. His reason for funding and assembling this group was to impress both his fellow Tsimshian and the Hudson’s Bay Company trading staff. Although it has no apparent Christian connotations, the occasion does resonate with the highly competitive and hierarchical Tsimshian social and political structure. The Tsimshian community at Fort Simpson had been devastated by smallpox in 1862 and many of the survivors had left to join the missionary William Duncan at his new mission site at Metlakatla to the south, including the head chief, Ligeex. It is not clear on what Clah was modelling his band of uniformed soldiers, but it is clear that he achieved his aim of impressing those

34. Sunday I was at the village preaching people in english church in the name of Jesus Christ. Week ago I preaching people in words of great God at Methodis church. Very few were believ and many were going own ways. when I preaching in english church I had some laughing outside. they want to walk their own ways some were dark heart so I told the boys keep going prayers. always the great God will help us dont waiten bad spirit. Come back in your heart so I preaching Matthew about two plin [blind] men. Preach agian before I go home I having walk about 2 miles from my house. Peope outside were dancing give away all property spenting many [money] fore dance.

Clah Diary 2 December 1877, 140/8; 11 September 1881.


36. Neylan, 163–165.
around him, and establishing himself as a force within the depleted village population:

In the evening Clah calling to all younger men of Tsimshen places an[d] his house and was giving powder to all the [men] four hundred young men an[d] four hundred guns and thee [they] will fire [fire] about 12 o clock on Wednesday night. An[d] after that we will walking in house an[d] we have Nicily [nice] music an[d] good trumpet in an[d] when we going in Clah [his] house an[d] we will learning how soldiers play. . .

. . . All Tsimshens looking Clah play, an all thee [they] will please [will be pleased] with Clah. An white people at in Fort Simpson all happy. Because Clah doing better than white men and all indians an[d] white people please with Clah. But Clah do right in a happy [new?] year and all them dance an[d] in that night Clah house Amongst [the] white people all happy. Because Clah doing better than white men and all indians and Clah gave them good nice supper.

Clah’s Christianity, evangelism, and preaching should be understood in the context of this status conscious and hierarchical society. Clah aligned himself with the “white” men, not only through his close association with the trading post, but also through his adoption of their religion.

Clah’s evangelism was not only articulated as a call to come to Jesus and God. He also attacked what he referred to as the “old fashioned ways.” In the early years he attacked the institution of secret societies, and in particular the cannibal (xegedem) and dog-eating (nulim) societies. It is unlikely Clah had been initiated into either of these societies. He accused members of eating human flesh and raw dog’s flesh. Years later he claimed that there were threats made against his life when he tried to break up the secret society ceremonies. Clah’s attitude to other ceremonials was more ambivalent. He criticised feasting, dancing, and giving away property, yet indulged in these activities himself from time to time. Sometimes he justified them as Christian:

the girl name legaic [Ligeex, an inherited chiefly name] she take the uncle’s name who die in water last year ago. Tongass [Tlingit, a language group north of Tsimshian] gentlemen wanted her to give her present. Tongass indians promising to her to give big money . . . Because we promised before we start to be with Jesus Christ to stop our potlatch [potlatch] and feast and dances. I had told them to not

37. Clah Diary, December–January 1862/3. In November 1895, while Christian bands were competing for attention on Fort (Port) Simpson streets, Clah recalled, “some friends of mine I met in store theee felt happy when see me. They remember what good things I have done to them 32 years ago 2 hundred young men I making soldiers for play first saw them good thing.” 19 November 1895, 140/47.
38. Clah Diary, 30 December 1862, 140/1. In the 1880s these bands became a regular feature of Christmas celebrations (e.g. 26 December 1881, 140/15; 25 December 1884, 140/24). Later they were used throughout the year as Christian denominations competed with each other on the streets of Fort Simpson and other villages.
39. These were relatively recent innovations among the Tsimshian introduced from the Heiltsuk (Bella Bella) see Marie-Francoise Guedon, “An Introduction to Tsimshian World View and its Practitioners” in The Tsimshian. Images of the Past: Views for the Present edited by Margaret Seguin (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1993), 137–159, 143.
40. See, for instance, Clah Diary, 3 December 1871, 140/3. Anthropological evidence suggests that the eating of flesh in both these ceremonials was symbolic rather than actual. See John Barker, “William Duncan and the Myth of Tsimshian Cannibalism” (unpublished paper) for a discussion of representations of Tsimshian cannibalism, and William Duncan’s attitude towards it. It is interesting to speculate whether Clah believed his own accusations that cannibalism actually occurred.
say like that because if our priest start first to teach us how Christian feast we doing well . . . Priest never teach us how we use the Gods feast because we not calling Gods feast potletch we called glean feast.

Other times, he did not pass judgement, but enjoyed the status he acquired through the feasts he gave. Perhaps Clah’s most consistent concern throughout the diaries is whether people are “doing right or doing wrong.” Although the language of right and wrong seems dichotomous, for Clah right and wrong were on a continuum. These are gradations rather than absolute states as presented by missionaries. Wrongness can be righted, whereas doing right at one moment will not ensure that a person continues to do right. Being a Christian is always conditional. A Christian may go back to the old ways, or be tempted to break one of the commandments, but this movement away from right behaviour can be rectified. Sin is not a term dwelt on in the diaries. A good Christian is one who behaves as a Christian should and desists from bad behaviour. Bad behaviour could be returning to the “old fashioned ways,” or it could also apply to a missionary travelling on Sunday, or taking advantage of the congregation by demanding money all the time. This view of Christianity and Christian behaviour explains why Clah readily recorded his own falls from good behaviour: his sexual temptations, as well as his drinking and fighting when he was a younger man. He also recorded his wife’s “bad” behaviour: her drinking, fighting, and hints that she went with other men.

Clah accepted witchcraft as a force within Tsimshian life. In 1883, after two of his young sons had died, he blamed a man from the Nass River, Achkullah, for using witchcraft and bad medicine. In the 1890s he accused Chief Dudoward, a Methodist, of using witchcraft to rid Port Simpson of the Salvation Army. Clah’s Christianity was not a total and uncompromising system of behaviour and belief, but responsive to his needs at a particular moment.

**Moses Tjalkabota**

Tjalkabota grew up in the semi-arid environment of the Finke River/Ellery Creek region of central Australia, where food was usually plentiful. It was rare for the western Arrernte to have to move away from this river system because of drought. Nevertheless, the environment did not sustain a village-based society. The Arrernte spent most of the year in small, kin-based groups,
coming together in larger groups after good rains for major ceremonial activities, trade, and marriage negotiations. The kin-based groups were permanently associated with a named area. Moses' family was based at Laprapuntja on Ellery Creek, a place to which they returned after ceremonial meetings, food-gathering trips or, from the late 1870s, trips to the mission at Ntaria (Hermannsburg).

Arrernte and Tsimshian society present a stark contrast. There had been no contact between Arrernte and outsiders before the Lutheran missionaries appeared in 1877. Clah's diary started with a statement that his birth coincided with the first trading post on the north-west Pacific coast, but traders had been on the coast for decades before that. Moses recounted the first sighting, when he was a young boy, of hoofed animals and people in shoes: "Then some other people came and told us, 'some inknowaberara men have come that is, men with boots whose feet cannot be seen, some inkakutalja have come that is, horses with round feet and many tangara that is, animals with split feet (sheep). They are already Njeukakuna.'"46 In contrast to Clah's pride at being able to associate himself with the first trading post, Moses recalled these early sightings as frightening. These white men were black men who had died and whose spirits had returned. He also described them as devils. The food they offered the Arrernte was suspected of being poisonous and thrown away. These strangers did not present opportunities (as they did in Clah's narrative) but were a supernatural threat.

When the Arrernte men decided to visit the mission, they hid the women and children and went in alone. They began teaching the missionaries the Arrernte language, having presumably ascertained their humanity. The missionaries inquired after the women and children, requesting the children be brought to them. On the Pacific coast William Duncan and later missionaries were able to approach villages. They did not have to look for the Tsimshian; they were easily located. The Lutherans in central Australia came to a seemingly empty landscape, its human occupants remained hidden. They could not seek them out, but had to wait until the Arrernte came to them. They had to build their own village. Even had they wanted to, the missionaries could not have followed the Arrernte around. These people were not only wary of white strangers, but feared the unexplained presence of any people:

One evening two men came. They were enemies. They brought a lot of 'roo meat as though they were friends . . . In the middle of the night those men did not make a fire, and did not make a place to sleep . . . Then they returned home that night.

They had put on feather shoes, so we were not able to see their tracks.47

Eventually Tjalkabota began visiting the mission. At some point he accepted the word of God.48 This was to have major repercussions for the boy's life. Clah could append Christian values and behaviours to his everyday activities. Jesus could be invoked when needed. Christian morality could be adopted

46. Tjalkakbota, 242. Quotations are taken from Paul Albrecht's published translation.
47. Tjalkakbota, 248.
48. Tjalkakbota, 249.
and discarded and again adopted. Clah continued his independent economic activities. The Arrernte boy, however, followed his spiritual commitment to God with the decision to move away from his family and onto the mission. From that point, the boy’s life was regulated by mission activities. He was baptized, went to school, and worked on the farm. The only time he was removed from this environment was when the old men took him away to initiate him into Arrernte manhood.

Moses was always supported by the Lutheran mission. Before he became blind he did outdoor work. From a very young age he shepherded sheep. Later he mustered cattle and horses and helped with the building work at the mission station, including the building of the church. He does not seem to have sought employment off the mission. He taught the new missionary, Carl Strehlow, the Arrernte language after Strehlow arrived at Hermannsburg in 1894. Later he helped Strehlow translate the Bible and other religious texts into Arrernte. He also gave Strehlow information for his ethnological studies of Arrernte culture and religion. From about 1910 Moses taught in the mission school and prepared people for baptism. Sometime after 1913 he began making evangelical trips away from the station.

The best insights we have into Moses’ religious understandings are his remembered conversations with his parents and other old men. His parents were concerned that he would lose his substance, his connection with his world. “The wind will blow you away to the sandhills like a cicada, and we will be unable to find you.”49 In later encounters the debates with the old people were over truth and lies. When Moses was initiated he accused the old men of telling him bad and wrong things, not behaving badly.50 Whereas the Tsimshian, Clah, was preoccupied with people’s behaviour, Moses grappled with the true meaning of existence. Where Clah wrote about good and bad, Moses moved from the happiness of his childhood with his family — “I was happy as a child living with my father and mother”51 — to the happiness of knowing God’s word — “No, I am better off here [Ntaria]. I feel good. Here at school they teach us God’s word, we are happy, all of us children.”52 The old contentment with life had been replaced with a new source of happiness. Christian teaching gave Moses a new way of thinking, it cleared his mind, “But I had developed some good ideas, so I returned to school again.”53

In Clah’s world Christians evinced a changed behaviour, but continued to live and work as they had before. For the Arrernte to become Christians they had to move from the bush to the mission; they stopped living off the land; they moved from living in the open to living in houses. When the first missionary, H. Kempe, asked one man why he did not follow his younger sibling and become a Christian, he replied, “If I become a Christian, I might have to

49. Tjalkakbota, 254.
50. Tjalkakbota, 273, 275.
51. Tjalkakbota, 238.
52. Tjalkakbota, 254.
53. Tjalkakbota, 249.
sleep at night in a dwelling with my eyes in darkness, without a fire.”54 But
the greatest difficulty for mature Arrernte adults, which perhaps explains why
so few became Christians, was that they could not conceive of a competing
cosmological world. The philosophical arguments Moses recounted were not
about one set of beliefs being superior to another, but that only one set of
beliefs could possibly exist. After he was baptized Moses visited his father,
Tjita, who engaged him in an argument about what it meant to be a Christian.
Tjita interpreted the baptism service with (cold) water as a variation on the
initiation ceremony of boys which used the heat of the fire. He argued that the
rituals of the “initiation” ceremony might differ, but the state of knowledge
reached was the same:

You were baptized with cool water. A long time ago I became a Christian, an iliara
[initiate], with a lot of heat. You are recent Christians, but I am a Christian from a
long time ago. All of us, all the early men, became Christians by means of that heat.
You are recent Christians. We have been Christians for a long time.55

Moses went on to accuse his father of being a heathen. This was another
concept Tjita could not understand or accept. He had earlier told Moses he
should become a Christian, but it would seem from this altercation that Tjita
did not understand that Christianity would challenge Arrernte meanings and
offer an alternative source of sacred power. He assumed that a Christian and
an iliara had the same religious status and authority. The idea that a person
could exist outside religion, that is, as a heathen, was inconceivable to Tjita.
Many years later, on an evangelical trip west of the mission, the old men
gathered around Moses and those he was evangelizing to warn them not to
spread his “silly talk.” The old men reacted to his Christian message as they
would to sacred knowledge introduced by Aboriginal people from elsewhere.
It was knowledge that should not be revealed to women and children inappro-
priately. They were afraid that if protocols were not observed they would all
die. The Christian hymns were like sacred songs whose meaning should not
be revealed to the uninitiated (including those who followed the old ways).
When Moses told them they should become Christians, they gave him a similar
answer to that of his father many decades before, “We are like old Christians.
We have been made clean by the real fire.”56

As a youth Moses challenged the men who initiated him, by refusing to
accept that the tjurunga, their most sacred objects, were “uncreated,” by
which they meant not made by humans but by the ancestral beings. Moses
accused them of lying, that the tjurunga were man-made. He later claimed
that the missionaries’ words came from God, while the old men spoke their
own words.57 Moses, the preacher, presented people with a challenge to their
known world, as did the missionaries. Christians would have to choose the
Holy Spirit over the tjurunga — truth over lies. Unlike Clah, who was selective

54. Tjalkakbota, 259.
55. Tjalkakbota, 258.
56. Tjalkakbota, 299.
57. Tjalkakbota, 275.
about what he accepted and rejected from Tsimshian beliefs and behaviours, Moses claimed to have rejected everything of his father’s beliefs.

Moses relied heavily on Biblical pictures to convey his meaning. Perhaps he believed these images challenged the power of the *tjurunga*. During his initiation he told the old men: “These are not pictures. We have seen God’s picture. We have seen Jesus’ picture, and that of the Holy Spirit. But this isn’t a picture. This is of no real consequence. It was made from wood. A fire would be able to burn this.”

He presented God and the Holy Spirit as having form and substance through representation in pictures on paper, whereas the wooden *tjurunga*, which are themselves sacred, not representations, were rejected as insubstantial and ephemeral. Songs and singing were another important part of his evangelical strategy, as it was for the missionaries. The first missionaries had translated hymns into Arrernte and taught them to children, who in turn taught them to other members of their families. At first the elders believed these songs were harmless. Tjita even helped Kempe translate them. But they soon became alarmed, “Children, you are singing wrongly, really wrongly.” The Bible was the basis for all preaching. On his first evangelical trip Moses taught the commandments and the story of creation “as far as Adam,” as well as passages from the New Testament, including Jesus’ sermon on the Mount.

Moses’ evangelical trips were undertaken on his initiative, but he needed Strehlow’s permission and material support to leave the mission. He reported his first journey south of the mission was such a success that he was unable to reach his planned destination because people along the way begged him to stay with them:

Saturday I was there [Henbury pastoral station]. Sunday I was there. All the people came to the camp where I was staying. Then they give me food, bullock meat and ‘roo meat. They said, “Moses teach us God’s word. You must teach us the commandments, and you must teach us songs,” They said this on Saturday evening and also on Sunday. . . . I wanted to go to Horseshoe Bend on Monday morning. The men, the women, and the children all came and said, “Ingkartai [boss, ritual leader], don’t leave us. This is also your place. You teach us at this place. Under no circumstances leave us.”

Moses stayed with the Henbury people for 5 weeks. They begged him to return, which he did over 1 year later. This was the start of many evangelical trips over the next 30–40 years. On his evangelical trips away from the mission Moses was unsupervised by missionaries. He was deemed reliable and forceful. But his work on the mission would inevitably have been overseen. Clah was able to preach in whatever manner he chose, but Moses must have

58. Tjalkakbota, 274.
60. Tjalkakbota, 287.
61. Tjalkakbota, 246.
62. Tjalkakbota, 246.
63. Tjalkakbota, 281.
64. Tjalkakbota, 281.
conformed to the requirements of the Lutheran Church, particularly when he was preparing people for baptism.

Moses, like Clah, outlived his own children, most of whom died during the drought of the late 1920s. But, unlike Clah, who blamed witchcraft for two of his children’s deaths, Moses clung to his Christian beliefs and the hope they would be reunited in heaven:

God gave me children, and took them back again . . . When all my children died I did not grumble about my children. I kept God the Father in my mind, I kept Jesus in my mind . . . When I die, I will see them there in happiness.65

Conclusion

Both Clah and Moses, in their very different environments, focused their accounts on journeys. Clah’s journeying was much more frequent and extensive. His main form of transport was his canoe. At the beginning of his diary he made the long trip to Victoria several times, worked on Hudson’s Bay Company boats, but most of his journeying was to fishing and hunting sites. In the latter part of the diary he was travelling further north and inland going prospecting, or supplying transport to prospectors, looking for work at the industrial fisheries, rather than fishing himself, and generally interacting more directly with a variety of Euro-Canadian officials and private individuals. Moses, whose life was centred around the Hermannsburg mission and later Jay Creek ration station, nevertheless, gave an account of his life as a series of journeys. In his early childhood his journeys were from Laprapuntja (where his family was based) for food gathering, visiting, attending ceremonies, and learning about his country and how to live off it. The last third of Moses’ story recounted his evangelical trips. The long periods he spent at the mission were passed over. The story Moses wanted to tell was the story of Moses the preacher and his travels. The descriptions of his journeys as a Christian were very similar to those he remembered from his early childhood. He detailed the routes he took, where he spent the night, means of transport (by foot, wagon, camel), and where and how he obtained food (usually rations, not wild game). This conforms to other Aboriginal narratives which are structured according to place, rather than chronology.66

Although the circumstances in which Clah and Moses preached were very different, there are some parallels as well as fundamental differences in their attitude to their adopted religion and its dissemination. Neither man sought evidence in the form of baptism or other outward signs of conversion that he had succeeded in winning people to his views. This may have been partly because they were not answerable directly to a mission society, but also because they were linguistically and culturally much closer to those they were proselytising than missionaries from outside, so were able to judge their success in terms of the responses they elicited. Clah made it clear that he was mainly interested in preaching to those who had not encountered Christianity before — “blind

65. Tjalkakbota, 300.
66. See Swain for a discussion of Aboriginal notions of time, especially chapter 1.
hearts.” He was not concerned with building up his own congregation. Church buildings and churches as institutions did not interest him. It would seem that he envisaged Christianity in terms of good and bad behaviour within a Tsimshian environment, where Jesus and God were supernatural powers that protected Tsimshian from harm, and guaranteed a life after death. Clah was not necessarily typical of Tsimshian preachers. The other preachers whose lives have been documented were much more closely associated with particular denominations, and their evangelism promoted the expansion of their churches.

Moses grew up on an isolated Lutheran mission, so the issue of competing denominations was not part of his early Christian life. A Catholic mission was later established in the region against the wishes of the Lutherans, and to the south-west a Presbyterian mission was started in the late 1930s with the support of the Lutherans. In Moses’ account there was no mention of denominations or different forms of Christianity; rather his world was divided between the heathens and Christians — two competing world views. Moses’ insistence that there were two exclusive forms of religious understanding was not necessarily shared by later Arrernte Christians. Austin-Broos has argued that many present-day Arrernte talk about “two laws,” which she suggests should be understood as a continuing construction of culture in the face of hierarchical order.67 Moses the preacher was more uncompromising in his adoption of Christianity. Moses shared Clah’s interest in preaching to the unconverted, as his evangelical journeys attest. Both these men had an urge to preach to their own people, and confront them with Christian ideas and practices. Their preaching took them beyond the old boundaries, physically as well as ideologically, as they journeyed to distant peoples and places. Christianity allowed them to escape the boundedness of their geographical worlds, particularly Moses, who would otherwise have remained a prisoner of his blindness and the mission. His preaching enabled him to travel to places his parents had associations with, and beyond.68 Both men believed that God protected them from the dangers of these journeys.69

This parallel discussion of two Christians reveals that the coastal Tsimshian, who had been fishers and traders and subject to new ideas and innovations from outside, incorporated aspects of Christian morality and ceremony within a village-based, hierarchically organized society. Even those Tsimshian

68. On one evangelical trip Moses was greeted by people related to his mother who were crying because his father had never visited them. They were so moved that Moses had come. Tjalkakbota, 293.
69. Moses claimed, “God himself protects me on the road, so that people cannot harm me.” Tjalkakbota, 293. There are many examples in Clah’s Diary of his faith in God’s powers of protection. He recounted that during a storm which threatened to overturn canoes he and his companions were travelling in:

Clah said to them. We will not Die. I pray to the Father in Heaven and God Save us and the Lord Jesus Christ take care of us and We will not Die and thee [they] please with Clah.

Clah Diary, February/1862, 140/1.
who joined William Duncan’s Christian village away from the Hudson’s Bay Company trading post at Metlakatla, maintained many of their economic activities and gave Tsimshian ceremonies a Christian form. Clah and other Christians who did not join a mission were able to make these adaptations more freely. Clah, in his diary, was preoccupied with Christian forms of behaviour and ceremonies which were Christian, rather than following the “old fashioned ways.” Tsimshian could have a glean feast, but not a potlatch feast. Feasting in itself was not bad. Show and display to enhance status was another Tsimshian attribute which Clah engaged in all his life. Humbleness was not a Christian virtue mentioned by Clah. Whereas he did occasionally talk about sin, it was never in relation to particular behaviour, but rather a general state which had to be repudiated if one were to go to heaven.

Moses’ understanding of religious change did not focus on behaviour, but on attaining a sense of happiness, both in this life and the next. He came from a society where it was not conceivable that innovations could challenge existing beliefs. Whereas kin-based groups had their own ceremonies and relationship with their environment, many were shared over long distances. There was respect for distant people’s beliefs, and spiritual and supernatural powers. The older generation initially assumed that Christianity had similar attributes to other Aboriginal cosmologies. It had its own songs and ceremonies, which were harmless when taught to children and the uninitiated. They gradually realized that these songs were of a different quality and lacked the layered meanings of Arrernte sacred songs; that the Christians did not respect their beliefs and ceremonies and wanted to destroy them. Moses, the young convert to Christianity, articulated these challenges, saying the inconceivable: that people were without religion — heathens; that that their sacred objects had no power; that they were lying, while he had the truth.

Arrernte Christians not only had to confront these challenges to their whole world-view, but they also had to move into a village from their previous non-village-based lives. The appearance of Europeans on Arrernte lands did not result in an economic partnership. It very quickly undermined the economic base on which the Arrernte had depended. Within 1–2 years of their appearance, Moses and his male relatives were working for the missionaries and later for the pastoralists, shepherding sheep and managing cattle and horses. These economic changes would also offer challenges to Arrernte religious beliefs in a way that the appearance of traders on the Pacific north-west coast had not.

Missionaries such as William Duncan, H. Kempe and Carl Strehlow left Europe on their evangelical enterprises with no knowledge of the peoples they were to encounter and “convert.” Indigenous peoples were forced to translate Christianity into a form with which they could engage and which they could accept. Clah’s and Moses’ texts indicate that, for them, Christianity existed outside its institutionalized Church settings. It could be preached and practised wherever people congregated. They did not insist on baptism, church membership, and other outward signs of “conversion” which were so important to the missionaries who depended on support from a church or
mission organization. Christianity was accommodated and communicated in very different ways by these two indigenous evangelists, even though they both based their preaching on the Bible, and used prayers and hymns learnt from missionaries. Each man had to express his Christian beliefs in ways that challenged existing understandings by presenting a meaningful and more powerful alternative within the context of the everyday lives of their audiences.