

From "Wisdom of the Elders" by David Suzuki, pp. 188-9.

In their eloquent opening statement to the Supreme Court of British Columbia on May 11, 1987, the Gitksan and Wetsuweten patiently attempted to clarify how their culture's notion of circular time gives rise to a notion of cause and effect that is fundamentally different from the one by which Western civilization functions. In the dominant Western worldview, hereditary chiefs testified, time is linear. An event gives rise to another event only as time moves forward along a unidirectional time line. But in the traditional Gitksan and Wetsuweten cosmos, time must serve as the medium not only for mundane events and natural phenomena but for visionary dreams, shamanic journeys, and other, such rapturous experiences that defy time and thus form a circle. As a result, traditional Gitksan and Wetsuweten believe causality is curved and follows a correspondingly circular path.

In daily life this circular vision of time gives to the Gitksan and Wetsuweten a shared sense of identity and history. It contributes to their ethics and to the recurrent obligations they have to the natural world, and it explains experiences within that world. Their notion of a cyclic world destiny differs fundamentally from Western notions of history as a progressive unfolding of causally linked events and achievements. In their circular conception of cause and effect, the seasonal pulsations of nature, the lives of ancestors long dead, and the world-shaping transformations of the mythic era of creation have a continuous, powerful influence upon the present. Events of the "past" are not simply history but are something that directly affects the present and future. This places a heavy ethical responsibility for "right action" on the Gitksan and Wetsuweten, in much the same way that Buddhists and Hindus view the effects of one's actions as reverberating far beyond the boundaries of a single life or generation.

The whole Gitksan and Wetsuweten cosmos spins around this axis of circular time and causality. To the spiritually attuned Gitksan and Wetsuweten eye, human beings do not stand apart from or above other forms of life. They are part of a vast, multilayered, cosmic whorl of life cycles; the natural world emerges as an unbroken continuum between humans, animals, and the spirit world.