

Kwakwaka'wakw: Colonization, Resistance, and Revitalization of Culture

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Background

In this section Snively describes research conducted in 1982 to explore the orientations towards the seashore (scientific, spiritual, aesthetic, utilitarian, recreational) of Grade 6 Kwakwaka'wakw students in 'Yalis (Alert Bay), BC. It describes an instructional strategy that took into account the students orientations (belief systems) during instruction and how it is possible to increase a students' understanding of Western Science concepts without changing, in the sense of replacing the students' preferred orientations. Snively returned to interview the adults 19 years after instruction, and explored "significant life experiences" and "life-altering circumstances" that influenced the adults' orientations and choice of career.

This background is provided to enable the reader a glimpse into the complexities of historical and cultural changes that took place in 'Yalis over the years that influenced the lives of the participants, both as students and as adults.

Who are the Kwakwaka'wakw?

The Kwakwaka'wakw (pronounced Kwak-wak-ya-wak) are the original inhabitants of northern Vancouver Island, BC, the adjacent mainland, and the islands in between. There are tribes or nations with their own names and big houses, each an independent entity, all speaking the Kwakwaka'wakw language that make up the Kwakwaka'wakw. Today, the term Kwakiutl only refers to those from the village of Fort Rupert (Cedar Hill Long House, 2018). The number of tribes has fluctuated over time ranging from 29 to approximately 19 today due to amalgamation. "Some of these 'amalgamated' tribes are waking back up and sharing their ancestral history through potlatch" (Trevor Isaac, personal communication, 2018).

The Potlatch Means "To Give"

The potlatch is a ceremony where the stories of the Kwakwaka'wakw peoples are celebrated. It gives witness to important events such as a birth, marriage, name giving, standing up as a new chief, and death. To potlatch means "to give" (Griffin, 2016, p. 1). "The people we invite are not only guests. They are also witnesses of our potlatch and we give them presents for being a witness" (U'mista Cultural Centre, 2018). As Trevor Isaac, collections assistant for the U'mista, explains, "The more you potlatch, the higher your status. If you're a tribe that potlatches more than others, your tribe will gain status (McNeel, 2012, p. 2).

In Indigenous cultures, teaching the next generation is passed on through oral traditions and is incorporated in stories, songs and ceremonies. The people dance to show their history since their history is always passed on in songs and dances. In essence, so long as the potlatch existed, the Eurocentric conditioning of church, school and government were ineffectual. (U'mista Cultural Centre, 2018)

When Indigenous peoples are not allowed to tell their stories, there is a breakdown of language and cultural traditions. For the Kwakwaka'wakw, as explained by Donna Cranmer:

The teachings and creation stories show the next generation how to live, share and *maya'xala* (treat others and all things the way you want to be treated [respect]) all things. In Indigenous cultures, teaching every generation is illustrated in stories, songs and ceremonies. Each listener takes away the teachings and meanings from the stories and songs, and uses the principles to help them in their own lives. (2016, p. 181)

As colonization progressed, the potlatch changed as well. But, as long as the potlatch existed, the civilizing mission of these forces was ineffectual. Their purpose was undermined, their authority threatened. The government may not have understood what the potlatch was, but knew well what it stood for—the intactness of an Indigenous culture.

The Potlatch Made a Crime

In 1884, the Canadian government made it a crime to take part in a potlatch, calling it an immoral and heathen practice. During these “dark years” many chiefs held potlatches in secret locations to continue the culture, giving gifts and passing along stories and teachings on to the next generation (Griffin, 2016).

On December 25, 1921, Chief Dan Cranmer held a huge potlatch on remote Village Island in Kwakwaka'wakw territory. Somehow, Indian Agent William Halliday heard about the potlatch and its location. Aided by BC Provincial Police officers, Halliday arrested 45 people. Their crime, “giving speeches, dancing, and carrying and receiving gifts” (Griffin, 2016, p. 1). Of those arrested, 22 were given suspended sentences, three were remanded on appeal, and 20 men and women were sent to Okalla Prison near Vancouver for two months for first offenders and three months for second offenders (Griffin, 2016).

Additionally, more than 600 masks, rattles, and family heirlooms were confiscated. The treatment of the sacred ceremonial objects was deeply offensive to Cranmer and other Kwakwaka'wakw. Most of the objects were divided up and shipped east to various museums, including the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, the British Museum in London, and the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of the American Indian in New York (Griffin, 2016).

The arrest of Cranmer and his guests didn't stop the Kwakwaka'wakw from holding secret potlatches in order to strengthen family ties by passing on objects such as hats, coppers, and masks, and giving witness to family dances, songs, titles, and stories.

The potlatch ban remained in effect until 1951. The first legal potlatch was held, by Kwakwaka'wakw Chief Mungo Martin, in 1952 to celebrate the completion of his Big House in Victoria in Thunderbird Park at the BC Provincial Museum (Griffin, 2016).

Return of the Potlatch Regalia

The first real effort to repatriate the potlatch objects started in the late 1950's and early 1960's when Chief Jimmy Sewid and others began to work towards the repatriation of their treasures. A few years later, with support from the Canadian National Museum of Man (National Museum), an agreement was reached to bring the objects home under the condition that a museum be constructed to house and care for the collection. 1983, the U'mista Cultural Centre in 'Yalis (Alert Bay) and the Nuyumbalees Museum in Cape Mudge, Quadra Island, were opened to celebrate the return of the National Museums' portion of the potlatch regalia (U'mista Cultural Centre, 2018).

The Cranmer family hosted a potlatch to celebrate the opening of the U'mista Cultural Centre, which served to recognize the vitality of the potlatch, art production, language, singing and dancing. At the opening ceremony, the film *Box of Treasures* was showcased. As described by Trevor Isaac:

A box of treasures, to me, means a physical box which contains ceremonial artifacts, such as rattles, masks.... All hereditary chiefs would own a box of treasures that falls within his family's history and origin stories that would be passed on to the next generations; including masks, songs, dances, names, all spiritual. (Dos Polocas, 2017)

Gloria Cranmer Webster spoke at the opening ceremony:

We came very close to losing our culture, our language, for a lot of people even interest in knowing about those things. We're lucky; we're very fortunate that we've this centre in which to try and build some of this store of knowledge that all of us need to know who we are. (Olin & U'mista Cultural Society, 1983)

At the opening of the U'mista Cultural Centre, Robert Joseph, (Hereditary Chief of the Gwawaenuk First Nation, and resident of Cape Mudge), spoke of the impact of acculturation efforts on his people:

You heard some of my other chiefs' talk about losing their language; you heard some of our people talk about losing our dances and our songs, our legends. It's not an easy thing for a man to do that. It's like stripping away your soul, and there's nothing worse than that. (Olin & U'mista Cultural Society, 1983)

He also emphasized the importance of preserving the Kwakwaka'wakw culture and the knowledge that seniors and Elders in the community held at that time through U'mista:

The old people are the links to our history. So that the past does not die with them, their memories and stories are being recorded at the center. (Olin & U'mista Cultural Society, 1983)

In addition to storing and displaying objects, the U'mista Cultural Centre focused on preserving intangible parts of Kwakwaka'wakw culture through language classes, dance programs, oral history recording projects, film projects, temporary exhibitions and traveling exhibits. Gloria Cranmer Webster laments:

U'mista means the return of something important.... We've won some victories, the people in this area. The masks have come home. The old people are teaching the children what they know. We're rebuilding and we're growing stronger in all sorts of ways. We use this center as a focus of that rebuilding. (Webster, quoted in Olin & U'mista Cultural Society, 1983)

Gloria Cranmer Webster's words as well as many other's included in the documentary including Agnes Alfred, Robert Joseph, and Chief Bill Cranmer emphasize the importance of this repatriation as a victory for the 'Namgis, Weka'yi, Mamalilikala, and the Kwakwaka'wakw as a whole.

Resurgence of Kwakwaka'wakw Art and Culture

Kwakwaka'wakw art has a long history of tradition, innovation and inventiveness, and colours that go beyond the traditional. Haida artist Bill Reid was quoted as saying that "the Kwakiutl were explosive. If there was a colour, they used it" (Cedar Hill Long House, 2018).

The resurgence of Kwakwaka'wakw art since the 1950's, after the potlatch ban was lifted, has been remarkable, and largely credited to Mungo Martin, one of the most distinguished Kwakwaka'wakw carvers:

Hired by the Royal BC Museum, Martin brought traditional Kwakwaka'wakw culture and knowledge out of the banned potlatch era and into the open, inspiring a new generation of northwest coast artists. (Cedar Hill Long House, 2018)

The U'mista Cultural Museum continues to support a burgeoning Kwakwaka'wakw art and culture revival movement through its collections in Alert Bay, and its collaborations with cultural museums worldwide. Trevor Isaac, collections and education assistant for the U'mista Cultural Museum, talks about his experiences overseas at the opening of traveling exhibits and conferences in which he has been invited to speak:

It's very uplifting I suppose, how eager people are to learn about U'mista. Also in the museum world, U'mista is a very small organization.... For a museum of that scale to be known worldwide is pretty powerful and I think it says a lot about our culture but also the hard work of the people who held on to their memories or their masks, the potlatch collection, and those who made it their mission to get these artefacts returned.... It's really great to hear people's interest... The collection lives in people's consciousness as an important piece of First Nations and Canadian history, so much so that people travel from as far as Australia or Germany to see the collection. (Trevor Isaac, personal communication to Emma Knight, June 14, 2013, as recounted in Knight, 2013, p. 126)

The National Museum's ongoing relationship and acceptance of obligation to the complete return of the potlatch collection led to the National Museum assisting in the return of the remainder of the collection. This was illustrative of a broader desire in the Canadian museums sector, to recognize the value of Indigenous culture in Canada. As E.S. Rogers, Curator of Ethnology at the Royal Ontario Museum wrote to W.E. Taylor, Director of the National Museum:

We do not feel that one can establish a museum in Alert Bay and merely forget the matter. One must be concerned with all the Indians of Canada and whether or not they also are entitled to similar consideration, not because of the Potlatch Law, now void, but as Canada's first citizens. It is an exceedingly fine line that has been drawn here, between Alert Bay and elsewhere in Canada. (Rogers, E.S., 1971, October 26)

The story of the Kwakwaka'wakw and of the “dark years” is not a singular story. Throughout Canada the cultural prejudices and the missionary and political agendas of the majority culture served to undermine actual Indigenous knowledge and claims on the land and its natural resources. This colonial agenda was repeated worldwide where Eurocentric interests competed for land and resources.

As educators, we have an obligation to future generations to assist in the resurgence and revitalization of all Indigenous cultures. The world must acknowledge the paramount importance of Indigenous knowledge systems, and promote a moral, emotional, intelligent, environmentally sustainable and perhaps sacred relationship with the land and all its peoples.

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