



'Yalis cemetary, September 2007. Photography courtesy Charlie Dobie

Reprinted from "The Power of Giving" exhibition catalogue.

History of the Kwakwaka'wakw and the Potlatch

by Joseph Isaac

The Northwest Coast First Nations of Canada reside in a wet and mild climate. The mountainous terrain along the coast provides ideal habitat for temperate rainforest, which dominates the region. The climate produces an abundance of natural resources in Canada that has allowed the development of highly complex societies that governed the First Nations of the Northwest Coast. This region also has the greatest variety of languages in Canada, containing five of the eleven language families in all of Canada. Most First Nations on the coast harvested resources in seasonal camps as resources became available. Winter months were spent in larger villages with long houses built of cedar. This is where great feasts, potlatches and the various winter ceremonials took place. These stratified societies placed great emphasis on the rank and privileges transmitted through these ceremonials. The privileges of a family group or tribe included ownership of resource harvesting grounds, which was vital for survival. Within this Northwest Coast First Nation grouping, the Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwak'wala speaking People) are arguably the most academically discussed group. This is largely thanks to the tenacity of the Kwakwaka'wakw in protecting their cultural survival as well as the work of early anthropologists like Franz Boas.

The Kwakwaka'wakw (previously known as the Kwakiutl) are located on the North East of Vancouver Island as well as part of the adjacent mainland. The traditional Kwakwaka'wakw diet includes salmon, herring, eulachon, halibut, berries and to a lesser extent, goats, seals, and porpoises. The Kwakwaka'wakw social structure was organized into extended family units or 'na'mima which means "of one kind". Each 'na'mima has ranked positions or offices that



Sacks of flour to be given away, Alert Bay 1921.

Photo by William Halliday. Image H-03980 courtesy RBCM

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come with many responsibilities and privileges. There were approximately four 'na'mima to each of the seven-teen tribes. The Kwakwaka'wakw had a comprehensive and stable governing process prior to increased legislative attempts by the Canadian government to assimilate First Nations. The traditional governing process successfully managed limited resources and settled legal matters and disputes within a constantly evolving traditional culture. Despite the focused legislative campaign against the core of their identity, the Kwakwaka'wakw continue to thrive and practice the traditional ceremonies given to them by their ancestors.

The Kwakwaka'wakw trace their origins back to their ancestral creation. The lower ranked chiefs within a 'na'mima owes their creation to their ancestral chief. A head chief gave roles and responsibilities to the families within his 'na'mima in which no two people were of equal rank. These positions were filled according to primogeniture, with the eldest son of the line to a particular rank assuming the title. His younger brothers stood as his potential successors, in case the heir died without a son. The brothers of chiefs were considered secondary nobility and were given respect for the possibility of being given the chief's title. Each 'na'mima had several sub-chiefs ranked second, third and fourth, who also received their title through their own family group primogeniture. These chiefs mobilized their family to harvest the lands given to them by the head chief. 'Na'mima chiefs had three main administrative responsibilities which included economic organization, management of his territory and directing ceremonial obli-

gations. These positions had to be publicly confirmed in a ceremony known as the potlatch

Surplus from harvests were given to the chief to perform these ceremonial obligations, which were made up of potlatches and feasts. All elements of Kwakwaka'wakw life culminated in the potlatch. Spiritual, economic, judicial, social and political organization, performing arts and the major events of an individual's life were all integral parts of the potlatch. External disputes that were beyond a chief's singular authority were settled at potlatches. Potlatches were also a means of ensuring all members of the larger Kwakwaka'wakw society were living well under their chief. As the wealthier tribes held potlatches, it acted as a redistribution of wealth to the relatively poorer tribes. This ensured that the threat of starvation was minimized during the long months of winter.

The potlatch was a public view into the legal transactions of a 'na'mima. The people that witnessed these transactions were paid through gifts of food and material wealth. Reasons to potlatch included naming, marriages, births, initiation into secret societies and other ceremonial transfers. By accepting the payment and witnessing these events the guests assent to the family's claims. Traditionally, the 'na'mima could only potlatch through the office of the chief because he owned all of the wealth within his territories.

Another important reason for the giving of property during potlatches was to ensure that the

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U'mista's Makes a Wish...or 12.

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- 30' Ladder
- A Volunteer Coordinator
- New Roof
- 8.5 x 11 Paper
- Box Cutters
- Plexi document holders

You never know what will happen when you wish for something! Be it big or small these are some things U'mista needs. If you are able to help us out with any of our wish list items please contact the U'mista Cultural Centre via email (info@umista.ca) or telephone (250) 974.5403

Gilakas'la!



Introducing...Joseph Isaac,

My name is Joseph Isaac and I am the new Development Officer/Bookkeeper. My mother, Bertha Isaac, is 'Namgis and Kwagu'ł on her father's side (Joseph Lewis Isaac) and Haxwa'mis on my granny Laura Cook's (Nee Rafter) side. My father, Rod Stadnyk, has roots in the 'Ma'amtagila tribe. These deep roots tie me proudly to these lands and it feels great to be home

I lived in Victoria for a while going to high school and post secondary. In December of 2009, I received a Bachelor of Arts degree with majors in Business and Political Science. I also received certification in Indigenous Governance. I have a great passion for learning and this is especially true when it comes to researching the rich depths within Kwakwaka'wakw culture.

I am absolutely thrilled to be a part of the U'mista team! I feel so fortunate to finally be able to come home and work within our community. There is so much that I look forward to doing and I am proud to be able to carry on with some of the work of my auntie Andrea Sanborn. What a great legacy! **G**ilakas'la, Joseph.



Joseph Isaac at Naka Creek, 2011.

Photography Courtesy Jenna Peterson

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“Kwakwaka'wakw noble showed himself to be a worthy vehicle for the soul of an ancestor-spirit and thereby validated both his social status and his claim on supernatural powers believed to be essential for the regeneration of the natural realm.” Due to wealth restraints, traditional potlatches tended to be limited to the head chief with the assistance of the entire 'na'mima. The giving of gifts was reserved for the high ranking chiefs in attendance to honour them for witnessing and validating the family's claims.

The potlatch was a “process of winning names through inheritance, marriage, and warfare, divesting them over the course of his life to his heir and, finally, having preserved all his names for another generation, dying as a commoner.” The class distinctions were mostly hereditary and fluid in nature as nobility ended their office by joining the rest of society as a commoner. It was a spiritual journey devoted to ensuring the regeneration of the physical world for the survival of their people. There was also deep interdependence between noble and commoner. The commoner needed a good harvest to survive and “the noble was recognized as the literal

conduit between the social and spiritual domains, birth right alone was not enough to secure rank: only individuals displaying the correct moral behavior throughout their life course could maintain ranking status.” Social status and ranking proved to be effective stabilizing mechanisms within Kwakwaka'wakw society.

Social rank of the 'na'mima and its chief played a large role in accountability and stability of Kwakwaka'wakw society. If a chief had poor governing skills members would move to another family's 'na'mima and contribute their labour to that group. This gave incentive to continually maintain a 'na'mima's social rank and favour within society. It was therefore very important to improve living conditions and to consult with council, the sub-chiefs, on management issues within the 'na'mima. If the chief lost support of the heads of the families within his 'na'mima, they could withhold their payments and paralyze the 'na'mima's governing ability. This would then threaten the rank of the chief and 'na'mima within the larger society. This incentive strengthen natural resource management of the Kwakwaka'wakw.

A loss of rank was a

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Trevor Isaac with school groups at the Lipsiusbau in Dresden.



Photographs courtesy of Trevor Isaac, 2011

A month in Dresden

Although my stay in Dresden was all too brief, I managed to accomplish a lot of interacting with the public. My trip began with the opening of “*Die Macht des Schenkens*” on May 6th at the SKD: Lipsiusbau with the rest of the gang. We danced a total of five times in that short weekend.

After seeing the home-ward bound crew off, I met up with Sylvia Wackernagel and moved from MotelOne to a flat with three other German roommates. My average day consisted of giving guided tours to visitors. The tour encompassed sharing the history of the Kwakwaka'wakw, giving brief dance demonstrations, singing songs and also answering questions.

My favourite visitors were the school groups. The kids were so enthusiastic and interested in Kwakwaka'wakw culture that it was easy to demonstrate dances for them and allow them to handle the touchable collection we

brought with us. I also taught a little bit of Kwak'wala (1-10 and colour names), common drum beats, hamat'sa, ladies dance and sang songs while they coloured native designs.

Project partner and museum director, Claus Deimel purchased five drums for his museum's collection in Leipzig. I designed a raven and killerwhale design on two of the drums. To create a “buzz” for the exhibit and further engage the public, I created traditional pictograph style art and contemporary native designs with side walk chalk outside the gallery.

Even on my days off, I found myself sharing. Meghann O'Brien and I went to different museums to view their Northwest Coast Collections. The Grassimusuem, Museum of Anthropology and the Karl May Museum where we provided information on materials of objects, cultural groups, and object descriptions for their accession files. We also photographed objects for U'mista's archives and shared proper display methods to improve preservation of the objects.

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threat that hung over the heads of chiefs and commoners alike. A council of head chiefs would decide the loss of rank of a 'na'mima, which occurred infrequently and would mean that one or two other 'na'mima would increase their rank within the tribe. The social and economic organization was a means to balance the conflicts within human nature and a way to have law and order prevail. Kwakwaka'wakw traditions are “based on a philosophy of there being two opposing forces in human relations: self-interest, greed/hunger and desire, on the one hand, and social cooperation and good-will, on the other. The system of governance tied together the ranking system within the potlatch system to harness this self-interest and produced a peaceful, managed life for its people. A chief's power was counterbalanced by the freedom of choice in 'na'mima and the competitive nature of the ranking system along with its privileges. It also unified the clans of a tribe to cooperate in maintaining their tribal status. This effective and highly complex traditional structure would change drastically upon European contact.



Tea With Beau

Because a significant amount of our gallery space was temporarily devoted to the Saxon treasures this summer, we took steps to ensure that our visitors were offered as rich of an experience of Kwakwaka'wakw culture as possible. Throughout the summer we hosted regular storytelling sessions led by Beau Dick. Beau is known around the world for being an incredibly gifted master carver, he is known locally for being a culture-bearer and an amazing storyteller. Beau's sessions were greatly enjoyed by locals and non-locals, adults and children. We plan on repeating and expanding these storytelling sessions next year based on their popularity with locals and visitors alike.



Visitors enjoy tea with master carver and storyteller, Beau Dick, July 2011

Photograph by U'mista Cultural Society



Beau Dick.

Photography courtesy Agathe Cook.

I was privileged to have tea with Beau last Friday. I want to say thank you to everyone who made this possible, it was delightful. I hope we will continue to have more such programs at our beautiful cultural centre.

Thank you very much, Beau and everyone

First Nations 101

tons of stuff you need to know about First Nations people

Lynda Gray

FIRST NATIONS 101 is an easy to read primer that provides readers with a broad overview of the diverse and complex lives of First Nations people. It is packed with more than 70 subjects including veterans, youth, urbanization, child welfare, appropriate questions to ask a First Nations person, feminism, the medicine wheel, Two-spirit (LGBTQ), residential schools, the land bridge theory, and language preservation. Author Lynda Gray endeavours to leave readers with a better understanding of the shared history of First Nations and non-First Nations people, and ultimately calls upon all of us - individuals, communities, and governments - to play active roles in bringing about true reconciliation between First Nations and non-First Nations people.

Alex Currie donated 50 copies of First Nations 101 to U'mista in memory of Andrea Sanborn, for her "commitment and dedication to saving Kwakwaka'wakw culture". We will be distributing 25 copies to 'Namgis First Nation and others and the remaining 25 copies are for sale in the gift shop for \$20.00 *Gilakas'la* Mr. Currie!



Gifts, Grants and Donations...

Our Library/ Archives received a generous donation from the estate of Helen Codere. Codere donated 10.5 feet of archival materials which includes, notebooks, photographs, microfilm, manuscripts, articles, books and audio recordings.

Gilakas'la Helen Codere and Patty Bersford for making sure these very valuable documents made it to Alert Bay. Codere's very useful archive is already being utilized by our members. Below is a **sample** listing of the new additions to the library collection. We would be remiss if we didn't thank our capable and generous volunteers who assisted with organizing and recording the Codere materials. *Gilakas'la* Isabel Deimel and Quentin Curat



A Kwakiutl Village and School, Harry F. Wolcott
A Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada, ed. H. B. Hawthorn
Arctic Anthropology, ed. Catherine McClellan
An Iron Hand Upon the People, Douglas Cole & Ira Chaikin
Art of the Kwakiutl Indian, Audrey Hawthorn (1967)
Bella Bella Texts, Franz Boas
Chiefly Feasts, ed. Aldona Jonaitis (2 copies)
Contact and Conflict, Robin Fisher
Contributions to the Ethnology of the Kwakiutl, Vol. III, Franz Boas
Crooked Beak of Heaven, Bill Reid
Cultures of the North Pacific Coast, Philip Drucker
Geographical Names of the Kwakiutl Indians, Franz Boas
Guests Never Leave Hungry, James P. Spradley ed.
Feasting With Mine Enemy, Abraham Rosman & Paula Rubel
Feasting with Cannibals, Stanley Walens
Fighting with Property, Helen Codere (5 copies)
Handbook of North American Indians, ed. William C. Sturtevant
Indian Art of the Northwest Coast, Bill Holm and Bill Reid
Indian Life on the Northwest Coast of North America, Erna Gunther
Indianische Sagen von der Nord-Pacifischen Kuste Amerikas, Franz Boas
Kathlamet Texts, Franz Boas
Kwakiutl, BC Heritage Series Vol. 7
Kwakiutl art, Chief Henry Speck
Kwakiutl Culture as Reflected in Mythology, Franz Boas
Kwakiutl Ethnography, Franz Boas ed. Helen Codere
Life of the Kwakiutl Indians, Ray Glazier (2 copies)
Masks of the Northwest Coast, Milwaukee Public Museum
Mungo Martin Man of Two Cultures, The BC Indian Arts Society

North American Indian Art, Peter T. Furst & Jill L. Furst
Northwest Coast Indian Art, An Analysis of Form, Bill Holm
Peoples of the Coast, George Woodcock
The Ethnography and Ethnology of Franz Boas, Leslie A. White
The Anthropology of Franz Boas, ed. by Walter Goldschmidt (2 copies)
The Black Canoe, Robert Bringhurst & Uli Steltzer
The Ethnography of Franz Boas, Ronald P. Rohner ed.
The Indian History of British Columbia, Wilson Duff
The Kwakiutl Indians of British Columbia, Ronald P. Rohner and Evelyn C. Rohner
The Legacy, Peter L. Macnair, Alan L. Hoover and Kevin Neary
The Mouth of Heaven, Irving Goldman
The North American Indian Vol. 10, E.S. Curtis
The People of Gilford: A Contemporary Kwakiutl Village, Ronald P. Rohner
The Puyallup-Nisqually, Marian W. Smith
The Religion of the Kwakiutl Indians, Franz Boas (2 copies)
The Social Organizations and Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians, Franz Boas
The Social Organizations of the Kwakiutl, Franz Boas
The Tlingit Indians, Aurel Krause
To Make My Name Good, Philip Drucker and Robert F. Heizer
Thirty-fifth Annual Report Vol. I & II, Franz Boas
Totem Poles and Tea, Hughina Harold
Tradition & Change on the Northwest Coast, Ruth Kirk

Gilakas'la Charlie Dobie for the beautiful photograph of the 'Yalis Burial Grounds, taken in September 2007 while visiting our little island.



A River of Wealth: How Kwakwaka'wakw Art Flowed Across the Continents

by Marianne Nicolson, reprint from "The Power of Giving" exhibition catalogue.

WE CANNOT SAY FOR CERTAIN who was the first to come to our territories with the idea of taking away our artwork. Some say it was a man by the name of Johan Adrian Jacobsen, a Norwegian collector working for the Museum of Ethnology in Berlin. If so, he was only the first of many museum collectors and anthropologists who came during the late 1800s into Kwakwaka'wakw territory looking for art or artefacts. These collectors were seeking masks, regalia, utilitarian objects and anything of interest that could fill the waiting vaults of their grand institutions. Encouraged by legislated cultural suppression by the Canadian Government, vehement discouragement by the Church and a devastating population decline, the Kwakwaka'wakw reluctantly began to part with their dɬugwe' (treasures). Sometimes, if objects could not be acquired by more legitimate means they were stolen. What started as a trickle soon became a deluge and from 1880 to 1915 the halls of the Ethnographic Museum in Berlin, the American Museum of Natural History in New York, and the Chicago Field Museum amongst others became flooded with art from the Pacific Northwest Coast.

Later, in the 1920s, Canadian institutions such as the Museum of Man in Ottawa, precursor to the Museum of Civilization, compiled their own collections, some of which came from the illegal bargaining of the Indian Agent William Halliday. It may have seemed like there were more artworks in institutions than remained within the Kwakwaka'wakw communities themselves. This was not quite true. Some families held onto their most precious pieces and some artists remained working in the communities despite the oppression of the traditional culture that required their services. Charlie James, Mungo Martin, Willie Seaweed, George Walkus, Herbert Johnson, Arthur Shaughnessey, and Tom Patch Wamiss are a few who continued creating commissioned works for potlatch Chiefs during the potlatch ban from 1884 to 1951, the year the ban was removed from the Indian Act by the Canadian Government.

By the mid-20th century the opinions of the general public were starting to change. With the potlatch ban quietly lifted, there emerged an aura of general collectability and value for Kwakwaka'wakw art. In the 1950s, the Museum of Anthropology and the Royal British Columbia Museum set up carving programs. Mungo

Martin, Doug Cranmer, Ellen Neel and Henry Hunt participated in this transition. In 1953, after restoring totem poles for the UBC Museum of Anthropology and the Royal British Columbia Museum, Mungo Martin was paid to re-create a traditional house on the grounds of the Provincial Museum. In Victoria He accompanied his house opening with a potlatch. He recorded songs, dances, carving techniques and oral histories providing a base from which not only the museum benefited but also future generations of Kwakwaka'wakw.

In the 1960s, the first Aboriginal art dealers set up 'fine art' galleries in major city centres. These galleries were no longer curiosity shops of the primitive and exotic, but, were considered purveyors of high art under Western ideas of what art was. This shift of opinions helped facilitate a resurgence in Kwakwaka'wakw creativity. Encouraged by the hungry market, a younger generation of Kwakwaka'wakw were able to consider a livelihood as artists. Artists such as Tony Hunt, Richard Hunt, Calvin Hunt, Beau Dick and Wayne Alfred emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as skilled and proficient Kwakwaka'wakw artists. These artists in their own turn have trained a new generation of artists throughout the 1990s and 2000s who are multiple and diverse in expression and medium.

Now, the artwork of the Kwakwaka'wakw is visible and vibrant up and down the west coast and across North America. This revitalization is palpable not just within the general public domain, but also within the ceremonial life of the Kwakwaka'wakw where a corresponding resurgence has occurred.

Most interesting of all is the ability of this generation to visit, view and re-create many of the works that were collected from the Kwakwaka'wakw communities in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Some of these works were repatriated back to the U'mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay and to the Kwagiuth Museum and Cultural Centre in Cape Mudge in the early 1980s. An institutionalized change in museum attitudes has opened the doors to Kwakwaka'wakw artists looking to understand older forms and confirm ancestral rights. We are reclaiming that which was never truly given up. A Kwakwaka'wakw river of wealth has travelled across continents and we are still connected as its source.



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Your Opinion Matters...

Please let us know what you think of our Newsletter. We welcome any suggestions, ideas, and feedback, especially if its positive!

HOURS of OPERATION

EXTENDED Summer Hours Open Daily 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.
May 23 to September 5, 2011

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