



Artwork from “Visions of Power, Symbols of Wealth: Central Coast Salish Sculpture and Engraving” depicting a Yokwals burning food for the Ancestors 1981 University of British Columbia

“Yo-Kwels¹ - Those Who Help the People, Maintain our contact with the Ancestors, the Supernatural Worlds...”²”

William A. White, Coast Salish (Nanaimo – Cowichan) , 2003, 2023

“... At night when the streets of your cities and villages will be silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with returning hosts...”²”

The quote from Chief Seattle from the southernmost tip of Coast Salish territory identifies several important aspects of ritual and ceremony, for the purpose of this paper assists with providing the cultural context for the healer and specialist known as Yokwels.³

¹ The Anthropologist Dr. Barbara Lane identifies individuals who receive professional training in this area as ‘Religious Functionaries’ and constitute a group of specialists called Seers, Ritualists and Mediums. 1953:8 “A comparative and Analytic Study of Northwest Coast Religion” unpublished Phd manuscript University of Washington. 1953

² Amelia Sneatlum/Suquamish elder translates Chief Seattles’ 1855 Speech. In Robin K. Wright *A Time of Gathering: Native Heritage in Washington State*. University of Washington Press, Seattle. 1991:262-266

³ It is not possible to provide background information about how the Yokwels operates as there is very little ethnographic information about this. In addition, this activity is also deemed sacred and private.

Complex ritual and ceremonial rites enacted by Coast Salish who inhabit SW British Columbia and NW Washington State families predated the arrival to xwulanitum/white people to our homelands.

Various elements of Seattles' speech such as ancestral contact, sacred territories beyond village sites, and being kind to others constitute common themes which traditional leaders consistently reinforce within ceremonial activities today. His speech represents a good example of power associated with talk, words, songs etc. Understood by the Coast Salish as persisting over time and space and eternal Our old people and Ancestors taught that these things represented 'being in balance' with the natural and supernatural worlds and each other. Common understandings in which a Yokwels operates. More importantly, words, songs, ceremonies as a cultural phenomena form the basis for consistent interactions with the ancestors, the creator, natural and supernatural phenomena. It is for this reason that *words are sacred* and that the *land too is sacred*. Specialists like the Yokwals and others continue to access sites where teachings, training and gathering have been left over thousands of years.

Ceremonial rites brought order and balance to our world and reinforced our relations with all living things, including the natural and supernatural worlds. Ancestors and supernatural and natural beings, including ceremonial and food gathering sites connected to the Qualicum are found throughout the island. Rules associated with being 'clean and balanced' continue to exist within families raised in a traditional family, these are in fact when applied constitute being Cowichan, Nanaimo, Saanich, or Qualicum⁴, etc. These teachings are from the beginning of time and are at least 15 generations old. The arrival of the European to the coast constitutes approximately 10 generations⁵.

One of the most powerful ritualists used by the Qualicum has been a Yokwels who is not only a healer but maintains connections with Ancestors and the natural and supernatural beings. A Yokwels does not operate independent of family and other community specialists. From the beginning of time Coast Salish⁶ families located in southwestern British Columbia, northwest Washington State and southeast Vancouver Island relied on a number of specialists identified by the anthropologist Barbara Lane as 'religious functionaries' to mediate between the natural and

⁴ The systemic oppression of both Church and State has adversely affected individuals throughout the regions and who as a result may no longer work with traditional rules and regulations

⁵ Grant Keddie. Songhees Pictorial: A History of the Songhees People as seen by Outsiders, 1790-1912. (Victoria: Royal BC Museum, 2003) p. 8

⁶ Salish territory is located in southwestern British Columbia, southeastern Vancouver Island and northwest Washington State.

supernatural worlds. These were Shaman, Seer, Ritualist, and a Medium whose

“...power derives from dead people. Mediums see and communicate with the dead.⁷ They are ordinarily hired ...to burn food for the dead. Mediums sometimes also act in a curing capacity.”⁸

You are probably asking why it is that you have not heard anything about Coast Salish healers before? There are at least three reasons for this gap in understanding. The Coast Salish have been described by the Anthropologist Barbara Lane (1953) and Art Historian Norman Feder (1983) as the most conservative Indians on the Northwest Coast. In this regard traditional and or pre-contact institutions such as the Winter Dance Complex⁹ and Shaker Church continue to operate. It is likely that this very conservative nature, ie things sacred or xaxa/bad should not be spoken about especially with outsiders. In addition, the impact of systemic discrimination by Church and State to eradicate ceremonial systems only serve to increase lack of knowledge outside of our own communities. Healing, sacred voices, ritual specialists represent phenomena clearly different from western academic training. The ethnographic literature contains very little about Salish healing practices causing the Anthropologist Micheal Kew to observe that curing ceremonies are not well documented.¹⁰

For the ‘living culture’ of the Coast Salish ‘words’ whether in speech¹¹, prayers¹², or song¹³ constitute a vital if not central aspect of sacred

⁷ Use of the term the ‘dead’ is to generic a term and not likely used by traditional people because it is associated with grieving loss and death. It is more accurate to use the term ancestors which automatically identify use of traditional specialists, trained elders who through ceremonies provide necessary protection for the vulnerable.

⁸ Barbara Lane. “A Comparative and Analytic Study of Some Aspects of Northwest Coast Religion” unpublished ms. University of Washington. 1953:40-43.

⁹ Throughout the Coast Salish region at the peak of the Winter Dance season at least 1000 families from throughout the region attend ceremonies at selected longhouses. These events are hosted by individual families.

¹⁰ Michael and Della Kew. “People Need Friends, It Makes Their Minds Strong”: A Coast Salish Curing Rite” 1991

¹¹ Immediately after performing ritual cleaning and or healing a Yokwals still in contact with sacred energies uses the power of speech to assist with further healing.

¹² The Yokwals like other Salish specialists strengthens her contact with the sacred/creator/ancestors by humbling herself and using her power of words to create a safe space for her and her patients.

¹³ Coast Salish traditional songs represent the culmination of consistent training and advice over ones’ entire life. Songs represent the gifts of the creator/ancestors and are used to accelerate strength, healing and perhaps protection.

activities. In fact, ‘words’ which persist over time and space¹⁴ have ritual and ceremonial power when used in conjunction with sacred activities. Ritual words associated with songs for healing, cleaning, hunting, gathering foods (berries) and plants for healing, maintaining contact with the natural and supernatural worlds, honour status and or ancestry are the most visible link with ancestry. Often words, prayers and songs are left at various locations throughout our territory.

In his 1855 Speech Chief Seattle spoke about the land of the dead, by saying, “Dead—did I say? There is no death, only a change of worlds.¹⁵” From the southernmost region of Salish territory Chief Seattle spoke about the traditions associated with ancestral contact.

The specialist called Yokwals are also called upon to provide ritual/spiritual cleansing of individuals who may have inadvertently encountered the dead, or have been overcome with grief, sadness or to intervene when no physical reason can be found for illness within an individual. Their ritual and ceremonial skills are deemed essential to ‘maintaining order and balance’ within our communities.¹⁶

Within the immediate region they are seen as fundamental specialists who are called upon by individuals and families to assist with maintaining order in a very complex social/ritual world. They are often asked to assist Coast Salish families who encounter problems while undergoing rites within the longhouses and for individuals within their homes. They are also called upon to burn food/clothing for the ancestors immediately after a funeral¹⁷, or prior to a naming in the longhouse, or in some cases in the longhouse itself during a memorial.¹⁸ In other cases they would also provide essential

¹⁴ Modern day Sulalewqw/Elders and the Yokwals who are directed by the ancestors will use terms and phrases often used by the old people/ancestors from another time.

¹⁵ Amelia Sneatlum/Suquamish elder translates Chief Seattle’s 1855 Speech. In Robin K. Wright *A Time of Gathering: Native Heritage in Washington State*. University of Washington Press, Seattle. 1991:262-266

¹⁶ Grief, anger, sadness and its associated conditions are deemed to be harmful for the maintenance of good mental/physical/spiritual health. In addition to ritual interaction personal assistance may be provided for counseling, training around strengthening teachings and hands on healing. The nursing profession has recently begun to work with the concepts around ‘hands on healing’. These activities have been employed by Religious Functionaries for at least twenty generations.

¹⁷ At which time formal contact is made with the deceased and advice provided with regard to healing.

¹⁸ At this stage, contact between the living and the dead is also meant to formally end the cycle of mourning for the family. Contact by the living with the dead is also deemed too dangerous, called Xaxa, and is advisable only with the use of specialists.

aftercare, ritual cleansing, or healing, of individuals called, “Tsewhaat Tus Musteemuxw¹⁹”.

This is deemed essential during periods of change from one state to another such as initiation into dance societies, receiving an ancestral name or during illness, etc.²⁰ This process is deemed by Sulsalewh/traditional elders as fundamental to maintaining good relations, strong families and to ensure the capacity to work together. The consistent application of complex rules, regulations, songs, prayers ensured the development of a safe, secured, ordered and healthy community.

Traditional specialists such as the “**Yo-Kwels**” and “**Thii Mahtt Shulmuxw-Stus**²¹” and formally trained speakers called “*Qwe-Qwal*²²” and elders are called upon in various ceremonial longhouses throughout the ritual season (November to March of each year). A Yokwels is a principal player and is seen as essential in terms of assisting individuals, families, and communities to operate in healthy ways. Their teachings are as old as time itself and clearly reflect the teachings of parents, grandparents, great grandparents etc. There is no counterpart for their skills and or training in the western tradition, at least in terms of their formal institutionalized role.²³

Suggested Readings

Michael J.E. Kew. “Central and Southern Coast Salish Ceremonies Since 1900” in Handbook of North American Indians Volume 7 Northwest Coast ed. Wayne Suttles. Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. 1990

Michael Kew, Della Kew. “People Need Friends, It Makes Their Minds Strong”: A Coast Salish Curing Rite. In The World is as Sharp as a Knife: An Anthology in Honour of Wilson Duff ed Donald Abbott Victoria: B.C. Provincial Museum, 1991: 29 – 35.

¹⁹ Personal Interview Laura Antoine. May 2004

²⁰ Traditional trained persons who understand the full application of traditions and values also believe that a person who drinks, who is argumentative, who does not listen well is immature and does not understand the application of traditional values called “Sinyews”.

²¹ Individuals who through ancestry receive and use a rattle complex called Shulmuxstes

²² With thanks to Bea Sam for helping me identify our name for a speaker Dec. 11, 2001

²³ In part they serve a communities/individuals and function as a counselor, social worker, therapist, priest, healer only with ‘ancestral skills/connections’ to interact with the natural and supernatural worlds.

Robin K. Wright A Time of Gathering: Native Heritage in Washington State. University of Washington Press, Seattle. 1991

Waynes Suttles. “Central Coast Salish”. in Handbook of North American Indians Volume 7 Northwest Coast ed. Wayne Suttles. Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. 1990