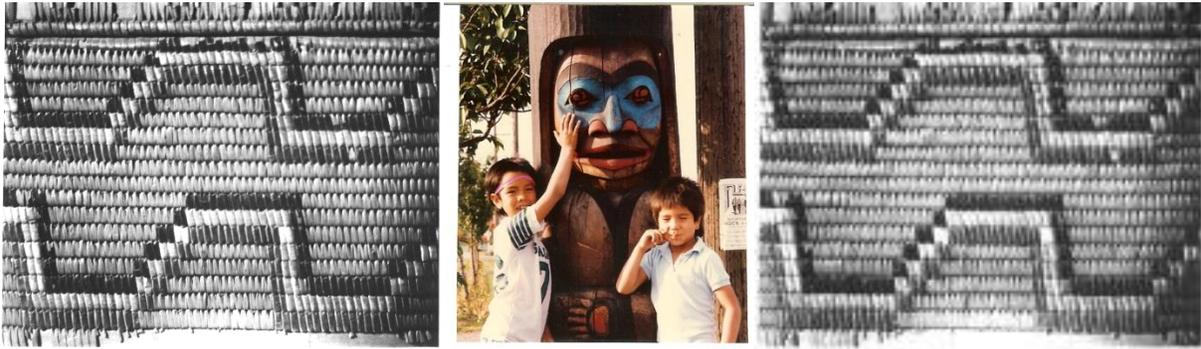


***“It Would Be Good If We All Could Learn To Bend Before We Break” –
Xpey/Cedar As a Sacred Tool***



Cedar Bark Basket owned by Katherine George, Ken George, Peter Charlie (Nephews) Photographs W. White

William A. White, Coast Salish (Nanaimo and Cowichan)

The cedar basket is a visible reminder of our peoples’ relationship with the land and all living things – consistent with the belief that all things are sacred. The basket once owned by Katherine George from Cowichan depicts mountains, oceans, other trees and perhaps the weave itself speaks about balance and supporting each other. Our ancestors believed in the strength of our relations with the natural and supernatural worlds, our families and created tools, containers which echoed that understanding. Of this relationship, Robert George, Tseil-Waututh said, “God himself is our culture. He comes to us in visions of love and brotherhood (Beginnings. 2003:79) The Creator also provided songs, ceremonies, prayers to protect and to surround – tools meant to protect children. Providing advice to young people, Velma Cayou of Swinomish said, “ Pray, that God will give you good hands, good eyes, good ears, so that you will truly be able to feed, to see, to hear.” (Beginnings, 2003:23) The middle photo is of Katherines’ *first* grandsons, Ken and Pete. She like many of our old people saw their birth as one of great joy! Our ancestors believed children are gifts of the Creator and had to be treated with love and great respect. Our mother is gone now. However, today, whenever, I see any of her grandchildren, I always remember how much she loved them. To this day, I can see her, very much like your old people, kiss and hug her grandchildren and told them how much she loved them. She lives on through them, and this is one of the important reasons the old people said to young people, “you need to take care of yourself.” This thought too, is one of the oldest teachings of our people – taking the energy of grief and loss, like the many twists of the cedar to make a design, and change it to love for those that in her words, “meant the world to her.” Not always an easy task but important. Our traditions, values are like the basket interwoven with the many and varied ways, through ritual and ceremony have been here since the beginning of time. The old people believed that each day was another time to provide teachings to the young people. Our old people lived through much more hardship, discrimination and the beginnings of poverty, than we will ever know. Most decided to use the teachings more and more.

Elders throughout the Coast Salish region, and others too, believe there is strength, cleansing and healing associated with Xpey. Kenny Moses, Snoqualmie of Washington State saw the cedar tree, “as a great gift from the Creator.” Of its’ qualities he added, “cedar bends before it breaks.” Of this value he said, “it would be good if we all could learn to bend before we break.” This is consistent Sul’eluhwst/Elders knowledge about being strong, taking care of one another, being kind. Over time all

of these things translate to inner strength. It is the aspect of working with ‘teachings’, ‘history’, that will cut across the fears associated with ‘grieving’. There are very strong, consistent teachings associated with not speaking about death, or speaking in public about these issues. When it does happen, at community meetings, the topic is lead with an opening prayer and then elders/speakers/traditional leaders providing, words, prayers, songs to protect and surround the audience.

Amongst the Coast Salish the use of xpey (cedar) as a cleansing and or protective instrument is clearly connected to rites and ceremonies associated with life transitions (birth, naming, marriage, first hunt, first basket/sweater, end of life etc.). The old people understand these rites as essential for healing, protection and are as old as time itself. The connection, and application of prayers, teachings reverence for cedar is also a reflection of the old peoples’ understanding that ‘we are connected to all living things’. The old people, our Ancestors believe that working with these teachings, talking about these teachings, using the teachings with others protects the individual and the community and is derived from supernatural contact with plants, animals and the Creator. For the Coast Salish ritual, and supernatural life is accelerated within the Coast Salish complex and Shaker Churches throughout the region. You might ask yourself what are the ceremonies in my territory that provides strength and balance? For balance our ancestors required moving, singing songs, in pairs. Four verses, four days, repeated teachings to help with remembering. It is for this reason the old people believed that talk too was sacred. They also said that we should be careful with what we say. They also believed to help a child grow strong, to feel loved and protected they should be talked to kindly.

Sharing teachings, living teachings, provides another moment to visibly show young people a significant part of our life cycles. This too is a part of healing, as the old people believed that moving with the ‘good words, good actions’ carries powerful teachings from another time and place. They believed and trusted that the old becomes the new and we prepare young people for their time. The use of cedar for ritual and ceremonial use - rattles, drums, or through songs, prayer is associated with focus, and the use of ‘words’. The use of words as a fundamental expression of the sacred carries power. It is for these reasons that there is a common understanding that when the elders speak no one else should be speaking, and everyone should be listening. The old people always said, “listen and when it comes time you will know what to say to help others.” I yas eye un Suli/May you be happy and in good spirits!

Endnote: This article was drawn from an earlier article prepared for the Kw’am Kw’um Sulitst HIV/AIDS project, Ts’ewulhtun Health Centre, Cowichan Tribes in order to develop new materials to strengthen Sul’eluhwst/elders community education using language and teachings. Fairlie Mendoza, Community Health Nurse began the project. W. White, BA History and Anthropology is the lead researcher and collaborates with Andrew Cienski, MA Linguistics. With thanks to CIHR, Catalyst Grant for funding the project. Administrative support provided by Royal Roads University and with academic support of Dr. Virginia McKendry, faculty member in the School of Communication and Culture at RRU.

A different version of this article appeared in Spirit: Sharing First Nations Health and Wellness Summer 2014 www.fnha.ca. 18 – 19. Sadly, the article carried a photo of me rather than the panel that appears at the top of this draft.