



Snuneymuxw Inter-Tribal Dancers Mid 1970's W.A. White Photo

“All the People Here are Your Family... We Should Stand Together”

New Dancers Return to the Nanaimo Bighouse, October 2, 2006¹

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The purpose of this short paper is to provide the context for some of the activities and or actions found within Coast Salish longhouses. The Coast Salish inhabit southwestern British Columbia, northwest Washington State and southeast Vancouver Island. The art historian Norman Feder described the Coast Salish “as the most conservative of any Indians on the Northwest Coast, at least in terms of keeping their traditional religion alive.”²

The last road to the Nanaimo bighouse/longhouse is lined with trees and peppered with potholes. At the end of the narrow road, the woods open into a wide clearing, now almost full of cars. Beyond them the bighouse is visible. It is a large rectangular building about 100 by 500 feet, made of cedar planks with a sloped roof. Two pillars of smoke wind out through the smoke holes in the roof. It's 6:30 pm. The parking areas beside and in front are filled. This is the very first dance and the parking lot is filled! We are arriving a bit late. It is busy. People continue to file into the building, some

¹ This version which incorporated Halkomelem terms/Ethnographic-Historical references was used for a recent International Training session held in Victoria, BC. Key Resources/Training Package. Child Rights in Practice: Tools for Social Change February 25th –March 2, 2007. The event was meant to identify elements of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and to identify ways to strengthen and support Indigenous Cultural strengths. International Institute for Child Rights and Development. Uvic

² Norman Feder. “Incised Relief Carving of the Halkomelem and Straits Salish” in American Indian Art Magazine Scottsdale, Arizona. 1983 Volume 3 #2. p. 52

from their cars, others returning from the kitchen after a dinner of roast beef, baked smoked and fried salmon³, rice, salad and pie.

We are late. People have already arrived from Duncan⁴ and Chemainus. The bighouse is filled!⁵ As soon as we get out of the car, grab our seating blankets⁶ and rolls of quarters we can clearly hear the drums. If you stand still, not only can you hear the drums but the songs can be made out as well. Some of the songs we have heard before. There is excitement in the air and as we make our way into the building we know that we are not alone. We are not alone because we will be sitting with other members of the bighouse community. Our immediate relatives will be there.

On our way in we will say hello to cousins, aunts, uncles. We walk a little faster. The winter dance season has officially begun!⁷

As we enter the bighouse, quick and quiet hellos⁸ are shared with groups of dancers and their families just returning from supper in the longhouse kitchen. A small group of men stand at the door, some of them

³ In 1876 Kwah-yum-men/Senewe'lets appearing before the Sproat Commission said, "I am a Nanaimo Indian, with a wife, a girl, and a boy. I am old, and not strong, and cannot work land much. I am a fisherman, and I get food and clothes for my family by catching fish and selling them." (BC Provincial Secretary. 1876-1878. 20 Dec. 1876: 160 PARS). Fish like dentalium shells, Nobility Blankets were used for social and ceremonial purposes as currency. In 1965, The Supreme Court of Canada ruled in Regina v. White and Bob that the Treaty signed with the Saalequum/Snuneymuxw was in fact binding treaty and that the Snuneymuxw had a right to fish as formerly. In 1990, the Supreme Court of Canada issued a landmark ruling in the Sparrow decision. This decision defined Aboriginal peoples' right to fish for **food, social and ceremonial purposes**.

⁴ In 1953 the Anthropologist Barbara Lane (1953:8) noted that the Cowichan through marriage arranged "Alliances in the great grand-parent generation... as far away as Chilliwack and Nooksack. Marriages were frequently arranged with Klallam, Lummi, Musqueam, Nanaimo, Semiahmoo, and of course, other Cowichan communities."

⁵ This means that Dancers have already filled the first two rows and they don't like to be disturbed by non-dancers making their way to the upper seats. It is easier if you have immediate family in front.

⁶ During a regular dance a seating blanket serves the purpose of softening the seat but more importantly, if you should get up, it reserves your seat.

⁷ This is the very first dance of the season and very unusual as well. During the sixties the dancing season usually did not start until December 27th. In the last few years the dancing season has begun earlier and earlier.

⁸ There is a very old cultural expectation that everyone has a very good understanding of how we might be related to the person who we are greeting. If the person is a very close relative then they are usually greeted in Halkomelem and addressed as uncle, aunt, grandmother etc. If you are related then there is also the expectation of treating each other well. The greetings are quiet and respectful in part because the longhouse is a place where sacred activities occur.

are painted with black paint.⁹ We stop at the entrance to look around for the rest of our family and are immediately met by a relative who has been hired by the host family to act as an usher.¹⁰ We have an uncle sitting with the Nanaimo section and a sister sitting with Clemclemaluts/Duncan and could sit with either. In November our family will be naming two children and so we chose to sit with our sister. Our uncle will be hosting a dance in early November for the formal return of his daughter who chose to be initiated last year.¹¹ We need to speak with him briefly about the family meeting he will have to plan that evening. We also, as with other relatives, need to speak with him about “helping out” financially.

Dancers from various communities around the bighouse surrounded by 10 or 20 drummers and singers sing their own songs representing gifts from either the ancestors or from the natural and supernatural worlds. Usually, those who drum are dancers themselves¹² and wear either red, black or brown face paint. The first two rows all around the bighouse are reserved for dancers and their longhouse leaders/elders. Young men who drum for the dancers might sit in the very front on a board which used to be used as a drum and hit with sticks. Drummers using deerskin drums now sit on the running board.

The ‘work’ in this case new dancers returning for the first time to the bighouse was about to begin in about 20 minutes. The usher thought we should head to the kitchen for a quick supper. As soon as we finish we head back into the longhouse. The host family, which consists of immediate relatives, longhouse relatives, and host community members, have already pinned money on two speakers/Qweqwal to speak on their behalf. The speakers have already announced why the people have been invited to attend

⁹ There is also a very old rule which requires that persons who have been initiated into Siowan wear their paint at all times in the bighouse. In essence they have stepped outside of their secular energies and are prepared to move quietly respectfully and with the teachings/ceremonies of the old people.

¹⁰ In keeping with treating guests with the utmost respect, the host family hires at least two persons to help with parking. Immediately upon entering the bighouse, two more persons have been hired to help with seating arrangements. Often families might be escorted to their seating area.

¹¹ As an immediate relative and last remaining uncle we are culturally obligated to stand by him and his family when he conducts his formal ‘work’. He is the first Uncle from Nanaimo who has participated in the Winter Dance initiation process for the last four generations.

¹² Until recently non-dancers were allowed to help with the drumming however in the last few years several non-dancers have become spiritually sick with Siowan and several longhouse leaders have begun to restrict who can drum.

the bighouse this night: the return of new dancers initiated into Siowan last year. The enlarged family of about 80 or so people have lined up all along one side of the longhouse with rolls of quarters in hand.

The line begins immediately beside the two speakers. The two speakers have moved along the floor to the middle of the bighouse, standing between two large fires, about four feet by four feet. The communities across from us have traveled the furthest. In this case, the longhouse community from Cowichan, ClemClemaluts. Witnesses are called by their Hwulmuxw names in Halkomelem and asked to witness the activities for the night. They are also asked to stand so the family can make their way to give them two quarters. Three or four of the family members proceed, using the proper method. Each of them holds two quarters as payment for witnessing the new dancers' formal return to the bighouse.¹³ Once the witness has received payment from each family member, the next person is called until, all the dancers or individuals with Indian names have been payed to bear witness to the event.¹⁴ The speakers then face another community and the process begins all over again until all of the communities present have had witnesses called.

I stand with my uncle¹⁵ whose daughter went into the bighouse last year and thus we have stepped beyond our own families and become members of the spiritual family. Once witnesses have been called from the entire longhouse those who are not immediate family quietly move to their respective seats.¹⁶ Members of the host family move beside their speakers. The most senior member of the family quietly speaks to the QweQwal to let them know that his two sons are returning to the bighouse following their initiation last year. The speakers turn to the guests to announce the 'work' and to formally thank all of the guests for attending their return.

The speakers then call out the Indian names of two sets of women the family has previously asked to help by laying out at least a pair of blankets

¹³ The individuals who are asked to stand as witnesses to the return ceremony in essence are 'helping' the family by witnessing and therefore when placing the quarters in their hands it is done with respect and kindness. Every individual who moves on the floor is in fact a representative of the older members of their immediate family.

¹⁴ Periodically, individuals who have not attended bighouse ceremonies attend and the speaker quietly walks over and asks what his Indian name is.

¹⁵ I stand with my Uncle who is my late fathers' youngest brother. He is older than me, his immediate family was active in the bighouse last year. He is the more senior member and thus I should follow him

¹⁶ Siowan/Winter Dancer activities represent the epitomy of 'sacred' activities and the room is reserved for Speakers/QweQwal and dancers and their respective singers and drummers.

in the family section for the new dancers to be escorted to. These are usually senior members of Siowan. Once the women have finished, another line of extended family lines up to pay the women fifty cents each for their help. As soon as that is finished the Speakers face the crowd again and call out the names of four men, all senior dancers, who were asked to walk the new dancers in from outside to their seats, now covered with blankets. These men leave the floor and head to the door, then return, each holding a young man by the arm, gently walking them into the bighouse. This is the first time since they left the bighouse last year that they have been able to return. They are seated on the blankets. Two more senior dancers have been called for each son. They are asked to help put on face paint. Two more senior dancers are called to help put on the spiritual black face paint. With each action, the ancestors/supernatural beings move closer. Siowan, their song energy, their ancestral energy moves closer. They prepare to leave their secular selves and to travel with the supernatural beings, with their ancestors. Their membership with a spiritual family becomes stronger.

For their return, the two boys each have paddle jackets and headpieces to put on. The family called forward two additional senior dancers to assist with putting on their regalia. It is their responsibility to ensure the jacket is firmly zipped up and the headpiece securely tied onto their head.

Their spiritual safety and reputation of the family is at stake¹⁷. As soon as their regalia is put on they stand immediately in front and to the sides of the two new dancers. Forty to fifty family members have lined up to pay them quarters in response to their 'helping out'. With all of these actions the young men and the families reinforce the importance of seeking help from other members of Siowan.

The returning dancers are ready. In turn they rise. At least a hundred drummers and singers from all around the bighouse sing in unison. The talk is finished. Their respective songs begin, you can feel the drums hundreds of voices fill the entire longhouse. Out of deep respect for the new dancers the entire longhouse stands as soon as the dancer rises. Immediately in front of the Nanaimo section stand at least 30 drummers and singers who are familiar with his song and it is their responsibility to carry his energy as he moves around the room.

¹⁷ It is because of the extremely serious spiritual nature of Siowan that experienced members are called upon to help the young men formally enter the bighouse again. Those who have been asked to help the new dancers have the responsibility of protecting and surrounding. No others, especially non-dancers or those unclean are allowed close to the young men.

Once the boys have finished the QweQwal move forward to the center of the building again. From each of the longhouse communities the oldest members of Siowan are called forth. They are asked, in Halkomelem, to provide advice to the new dancer about, ‘who they are – in this new life’, ‘what responsibilities they have to their fellow dancers and their community’. It is during this time they are likely to hear the phrase often heard in other longhouses throughout the Salish region, “All of the people here are your family” and “many people have come forward to help you out, and by doing that they remind you of the obligations to stand together”. The young men are no longer individuals but because of the way their families moved with them during the initiation process they are closer as a family. They are likely to move to meetings and other events as a family. In addition, they will have learned they are now a member of the longhouse family associated with Nanaimo/Snuneymuxw and thus in the future will travel with them and help out others as well. Finally, various other communities have gathered to witness and to help out the immediate family’s work – in doing so the young men will recognize they belong to a larger spiritual family spread throughout the Coast Salish region.

And the voices of the older dancers reverberate throughout the longhouse, surrounded by 300 or so people, the concepts of togetherness and belonging captured in the phrases “All the People Here are Your Family. We Should Stand Together” is actually demonstrated to the young people. Hereafter they will never walk alone.

Suggested Readings:

Chief Dan George and Helmut Hirschall. My Heart Soars Hancock House Saanichton. 1974

Wolfgang G. Jilek M.D. Indian Healing: Shamanic Ceremonialism in the Pacific Northwest Today

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.

Daniel P. Marshall. Those Who Fell From the Sky: A History of the Cowichan Peoples. Cowichan Tribes, Duncan B.C. 1999

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

Wayne Suttles. Coast Salish Essays Talonbooks, Vancouver. 1987

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

Video Resource:

1999 - 00 **"Echoing of the Elders: Teachings for Coast Salish Youth"** video. Co-Producers Dr. Philip Cook/William White¹⁸. In the heart of Salish/Coast Salish territory there is very little in the way of visual resources which speak to issues identified by First Nations youth and responses by either traditional or political leaders. This exciting video project has (Agnes Pierre/Katie)¹⁹, Dr. Samuel Sam, OC, and Salish artist Charles Elliott, Chief Robert Sam/Songhees, Chief Vern Jacks/Tseycum speak about Creation Stories, Salish art, Canoeing and the Winter Dance complex. Young people discuss issues such as racism and begin the process of identifying what an elder is? The video was produced to assist elders from other communities interact with youth around a number of central themes. In keeping with the traditional teachings of the immediate region the focus of the video is assist young people to operate from a strengths based approach. (email iicrd@uvic.ca for order forms)

¹⁸ Currently a member of the RCMP Commanding Officers Aboriginal Advisory Committee –BC.

¹⁹ Formally a member of the RCMP Commanding Officers Aboriginal Advisory Committee-BC

