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Joan Goddard 10/11/96

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VOICES FROM THE COMMONS

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o SYMBOL AND SYNERGY: THE WHALING HERITAGE OF WEST-COAST NATIVE PEOPLES

Joan Goddard

3974 Lexington Avenue
Victoria, BC V8N 3Z6
Canada

"To us the whale is a symbol..."

We've heard that before. For 25 years it's been on posters, T-shirts, and stickers put out by savers of the environment. But this was not green-speak that I heard last summer in Neah Bay. It came from a Makah fisherman.

The whale is a symbol to the Makah Indians of Cape Flattery in Washington State, and to related native tribes called Nuu-chah-nulth who live just north of them along the outer coast of Vancouver Island in Canada. For thousands of years these people hunted humpback and gray whales in cedar dug-out canoes. Whaling was an occupation of high status, reserved for certain chiefs and their kin; and its importance was evident in every aspect of their lives: spiritual, economic, social and political.

These people living along the rock-bound shore of the Pacific Ocean were exquisitely adapted to a marine environment, utilizing the rain forest's giant cedar trees for houses, storage boxes, baskets, mats, rope and clothing, and, most important, for great ocean-going canoes. Their food came chiefly from the sea, as did fur, skin, bone, bladder and sinew. While seals, salmon, halibut, cod, herring and shellfish provided staple foods, whales were hunted for the nutritious fat in their blubber and incidentally for meat. Oil rendered from whale blubber and used as a dressing for other foods was so prized that it was used as a measurement of wealth. It was traded not only to non-whaling tribes over hundreds of miles of coastline; but also to European trading ships when they appeared along the coast.

The appearance of Europeans some two hundred years ago doomed the west-coast native whale hunt. First, introduced diseases reduced the native population to such a degree that whaling crews could not be recruited. Survivors merged with other groups, disrupting the traditional protocols of whaling. Then the whales themselves became scarce as Europeans began their own hunt. At last, successive invasions of traders, miners, and settlers claiming British sovereignty crowded the west-coast natives onto reserves, where they were expected to turn their backs to the sea, adopt a European way of life and join the cash economy.

Although sporadic hunts continued into the 1920's and perhaps even later, whaling by west-coast natives was essentially over by 1910. There are very few alive who remember a whale hunt; and we look to tribal tradition, a few eye-witness accounts, and ethnological and archaeological studies for a picture of

how it went. From these sources the following description of the traditional whale hunt has emerged.

Weeks or even months before the hunt, the secret ritual preparation of osimich began. In this intense spiritual preparation, the whale hunter asked powers beyond himself to allow him to kill a whale. Sometimes accompanied by his wife, he slipped out of his house at night to bathe in a nearby pond or lake. There he would dive, holding his breath for long intervals, and swim, spouting like a whale, all the while praying for success. At the edge of the water he would scrub his skin raw with branches of hemlock. During this preparation, the whaler denied himself sleep for long intervals, toughened his physical endurance, and abstained from sex.

Whaling chiefs inherited the ritual paraphernalia, songs and prayers used in osimich. Unique to each family, they were kept secret and sacred. Some had wooden shelters hidden in the forest where effigies of whales and hunters, even human remains were used in communicating with the spirits. One of these shrines was taken from Nootka Sound in 1904 to the American Museum of Natural History in New York where it has never been displayed.

A whaling expedition was a cooperative venture, preferably with more than two canoes, each manned by a whaling chief with six to eight of his kin as crew. The cedar dug-out canoes were usually 35 feet in length. (The whales they pursued were often larger by several feet.) With paddles pointed to cut the water silently, the crew could paddle as fast as 7 knots, though an excited whale could swim much faster. The chief stood in the bow with his 16-foot harpoon shaft tipped with a harpoon head of mussel shell (later replaced by iron) with two barbs of elk horn. Attached to the harpoon head was a 24-foot lanyard of whale sinew about one and one-half inches thick, extended with longer and thinner cedar-bark line to which floats were tied. The harpoon shaft came free once the harpoon hit its mark, leaving a string of floats attached to the whale.

Although the literature has a few references to whales made fast to canoes; most descriptions are of a method that allowed the whale to swim free. The floats dragging behind it prevented deep dives and eventually tired the whale enough that it could be approached and killed with a lance.

The paddlers, positioned two abreast, each had a specific job in the hunt. At the stern sat an experienced older relative, the steersman. It was he who gave the signal to rush the whale. And it was he who, at the end of the chase, went forward and killed it with his lance, a shorter pointed staff without the harpoon.

On the bottom of the canoe lay twenty or more brightly painted sealskin floats which had been soaked the night before the voyage and laid flat. These, each with a length of cedar bark line attached, were blown up on the way to the hunting grounds.

Once the whale was located, the canoe approached silently from behind, coming up to within three feet of its left side. Poised with his harpoon shaft overhead, the chief stood at the bow awaiting a signal from the man behind him to throw. Timing was critical....the whale's head should be submerged at the beginning of a dive; but the tail flukes had also to be underwater. Otherwise the canoe would be thrashed and broken up when the animal reacted to the hit.

The moment the harpoon was plunged into the whale, the paddlers backwatered furiously. As the harpoon line was paying out, as many as a dozen floats tied to it were tossed overboard. Their buoyancy and drag hindered his escape and provided markers when the whale sounded. Other canoes moved in to help by darting in still more harpoons with floats. It might take as many as twenty floats to slow and tire the whale.

Paddling in pursuit, the crews began singing the chief's songs and shaking rattles in order to persuade it to turn and swim towards the village. As it weakened, crews used their knife-sharp paddles or a spade-like blade to cut the fluke tendons and then prodded it ahead with their paddle tips. Once the exhausted animal became quiet, a fatal thrust with the lance was made just behind the left fin.

Quickly one of the crew dove into the water with a knife and cord to lace the lips closed so that it could be towed without the gaping mouth creating drag.

Joyous villagers greeted the arrival of the successful whalers and helped pull the huge carcass up the beach on the flood tide. Once the ceremonial "saddle" had been cut from the whale's back and presented to the chief, the whale's blubber and meat were measured, cut and carefully apportioned to crew, cooperating canoes, helpers and villagers according to strict protocol. At last, after the carcass had been stripped and the skeleton abandoned on the beach to be picked over later for useful bone, a celebration began that could last for days.

Whale blubber was rendered into oil, meat was eaten fresh or smoked, sinew was saved for rope, the bladder for oil storage, and bone for tools and building material. A whale's utility became grandly apparent to those excavating the ruins of the Makah whaling village of Ozette in the 1970's. Thousands of artifacts reflecting the economic value of whales are now housed in the Makah Cultural Centre in Neah Bay, Washington. James G. Swan, who was living with the Makah in 1864, described them as emphatically a trading as well as a producing people, exchanging their whale blubber and oil for commodities from tribes to the north and south and for cash in Victoria.

While the economic importance of whaling to the west-coast peoples is obvious, less easy for non-natives to appreciate is the significance of whaling in the social structure, governance and territorial boundaries of whaling villages.

The social impact of whaling upon village life was profound. Capturing a whale and towing it home was best done with many canoes. Dragging the whale up the beach and butchering it required many hands. When the work was done, there was feasting and dancing. Potlatches were held periodically in which the successful whaling chief further enhanced his status through generously distributing his acquired wealth. At these lavish feasts, guests received gifts in payment for witnessing and acknowledging the chief's ownership of tangible property and such intangibles as inherited names, dances, rituals and songs. Whaling wealth thus benefitted the whole village.

Whaling chiefs were honoured not so much for their incredible skill, strength and endurance as they were for their spiritual connections. It was understood that the whale's spirit would not permit its body to be killed unless it were addressed with respect. The successful whaler, therefore, spiritually empowered to kill a whale, had great status. This status, enjoyed by the extended family living in his house, continues today as whaling chiefs' families are given the highest seating at tribal gatherings.

In the highly stratified native society, the powerful chiefs controlled resources. But while property such as cedar stands, clam beds, salmon streams, sacred sites for osimich, even whaling grounds far out at sea, were owned by the chief, they benefitted the people under him. The support, welfare and protection of subordinate family members, commoners and slaves living within his bighouse were his responsibility.

Geographic boundaries of the chiefs' properties affected not only the people of their own village; but had intertribal significance as well. And this is of concern now as the Nuu-chah-nulth on Vancouver Island negotiate their first

treaty with the governments of Canada and British Columbia. Tom Happynook, whose great-grandfather, Ohiat Chief Mexis, killed a whale in the traditional way as late as 1928, represents thirteen bands of the Nuu-chah-nulth who are jointly negotiating their treaty. Tom's particular interest in that process is the recognition of the significance of whaling in all aspects of traditional native life, and the embodiment of whaling rights within their treaty. .

Native whaling on the Pacific Coast, which had survived for thousands of years, began to decline after 1860 as the whales became more scarce, and by 1910 it was virtually over. European and American whaling ships had almost eradicated the gray whales after their calving lagoons were discovered on the coast of Mexico in 1846. Shore-based whalers along the California coast killed those whales that escaped the slaughter in the lagoons as they headed on their annual spring migration north to Alaska and Siberia.

In the 1880's, even the white man's commercial hunt for gray whales ended. The gray whales had become too hard to find. For the next few decades scientists really believed they had become extinct. But gradually they recovered assisted by an international agreement for their protection. Now their numbers appear to have returned to the level that existed before commercial hunting, and the United States government has removed them from its endangered species list.

Though there were still humpback whales, their alternative prey, available along the coast in the late 19th century, the disappearance of the gray whales is thought to have been a major factor in the West Coast natives' reduced whaling. By 1905, even the humpbacks were disappearing as modern commercial steam whalers began shooting hundreds each year within the native whaling territory. The native resource was doomed.

In the late 1860's, at about the time the gray whales were disappearing, a new occupation had appeared with the advent of pelagic sealing. The natives had always hunted seals in their canoes for meat, oil and skins. Now white schooner captains began recruiting them and their canoes for a new marine enterprise. They were to hunt migrating fur seals on six- to nine-month voyages extending from California to Bering Sea and even to Russia and Japan.

For the west coast natives, pelagic sealing was to become a major occupation. Some natives even had their own schooners. It was the first opportunity native people had had to earn money, a lot of money by the standards of the day. But there was a down side. They were away too long to be able to whale, hunt and fish for their traditional subsistence.

In 1897, moving toward closure of pelagic sealing in the North Pacific, the US government forbade sealing by Americans and the Makah were forced to give up. Some Makah returned to whaling, continuing on a limited basis through the first decade of the 20th century. Alert to the advantage of new technology, they hailed tugboats that by then were operating just outside Neah Bay to tow in their catch.

On Vancouver Island, native crews continued sealing on Canadian schooners at least through 1908. When pelagic sealing ended in 1911 with the Treaty of Washington, 928 natives were among the Canadian sealers who claimed loss of income from the closure. Some said they had made up to \$500 per season at fur sealing. Though the treaty did allow native sealers, both American and Canadian, to continue sealing from shore in their traditional way with canoes and spears, few did.

When the sealing cruises ended, BC natives found work in the fishing industry, travelling to the mainland canneries by passenger steamer. Makah went to Puget Sound to work in the berry and hop fields. Again traditional food gathering had become secondary. They were now entrenched in a cash economy. And that was

just what administrators of Indian affairs on both sides of the border wanted. Natives were to forget their fishing, whale hunting and gathering. They were to give up their heathenish practices, especially the giving away of their wealth at potlatches. They were to assimilate. To accomplish this, the potlatch was outlawed and children were rounded up and sent away to boarding schools to keep their families from passing on their cultural traditions. There they were severely punished if they spoke their own language. Gradually they forgot it, and went home unable to converse with their parents and elders.

West coast native people now live on small portions of what were traditionally their tribal territories. Many have moved to the cities. But in recent years pride in their cultural heritage has been rekindled; the potlatch in modified form has been revived, old songs and ceremonies relearned. Elders teach the language to the children, and artists interpret traditional themes. And though generations have passed since whales were hunted, whaling, once woven like a tapestry thread through every aspect of tribal life, has become a contemporary issue.

In BC, where treaties are being negotiated for the first time, native people are defining who they are, where they have come from and where they want to go. The Nuu-chah-nulth have said that their chiefs will decide when and how the people will exercise their right to hunt whales again.

The Nootka whaling shrine may soon leave the storage vaults of the American Museum of Natural History and return to the care of the Mowachat people on Vancouver Island. Chief Max Savey, one of a delegation who went to New York to view the shrine, spoke of its effect on him. In touching it, he said he was suddenly overwhelmed with a need to pray. "I asked for the strength," he said, "of those people who had used the shrine. I asked for the knowledge, the self sacrifices, all the things these people had to do in order to get that whale out there."

He noticed, on returning to his home, something strange happening to him. "I used to shrink away from problems, whether it be tribal or family. I was afraid of everything; afraid of making mistakes and all the things that go with it. Today I have a hard time keeping quiet at meetings... Now I want to learn all there is to know about my culture."

The Makah are interested in reviving their whaling tradition now. At the International Whaling Commission, they will ask for a traditional hunt of up to five California gray whales per year. The hunt is justified, they say, by the treaty of 1855 which guaranteed them the right to whaling and sealing on their usual and accustomed grounds. All they've been waiting for is the return of the gray whales to a healthy population size and their removal from the US Endangered Species List.

The Makah see the resumption of whaling as an opportunity to strengthen their community and give their young people a source of pride. Traditional whaling, after all, demanded clean living, respect for the prey animals, and reliance on a spiritual power outside of themselves to accomplish great things.

It was the 61-year-old Makah fisherman, John McCarty, who summed up for me the Makah feeling. "We gave up most of our land in the treaty," he said, "so we could keep the use of the ocean which gave us what was important to our lives." He added with great feeling, "To us, the whale is a symbol."