

Human-Fish Relationships on the Northwest Coast
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It is spring and fishing season is once again upon us. Herring season just finished and reports of early herring spawn reverberated through the Laich-Kwil-Tach community. Now people are looking forward to the beginning of salmon season, although initial reports from Elders suggest it will be a bad year for the fish, and therefore a bad year for the fishers and the community. Maybe a first salmon ceremony is in order, and in fact, two Elders are talking about holding the ceremony this year. At the same time, one or two families quietly continue their own first salmon ceremony, returning the first catch to the ocean and keeping only a few to make *lubək^w* (salmon roasted beside the open fire) in celebration of the annual return and to pay their respects to the salmon themselves.



Figure 1: Salmon roasting at the fire, *lubək^w*.

The Northwest Coast of North America is home to dozens of First Nations. For many, salmon was and still is a vital food source and is closely linked to concepts of well being. The Laich-Kwil-Tach is a First Nation, now centred on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, closely linked by language and culture to their kin, the better-known Kwakwaka'wakw. My dissertation research seeks to understand the relationship between the Laich-Kwil-Tach and fish (with a focus on salmon) and is informed by the works of

Bird-David, Descola, Hallowell, Ingold, Viveiros de Castro, Willerslev, and others (e.g. Bird-David 1999; Descola 1992; 1996; Hallowell 1960 [2002]; Ingold 2006; Viveiros de Castro 1998; 2004; Willerslev 2004). With the generous support of the Richard F. Salisbury Award, I spent the last year conducting field work among the Laich-Kwil-Tach. Connecting the results of this work with the body of ethnographic data for the Northwest Coast, with a specific emphasis on the Franz Boas and George Hunt materials, has resulted in an examination of the human-fish relationship, how it is represented in late 19th- and early 20th-century ethnographies and oral/written texts, and how this relationship is manifest in the modern context. An important tenet throughout my research, both in the community and while reviewing the ethnographic texts, has been to conduct my research from animism rather than on animism (Haber 2009:418). In this way I endeavour to explore the world that people engage and experience rather than grapple with an animism in which humans treat other beings as people, an approach with inherent Western assumptions.

Three stories highlight my approach. One is considered a legend and explains how salmon came to be present in the human world. The other two are recollections of separate potlatch events at which guests were welcomed and treated as salmon upon their arrival in the host's village.

The legend of how salmon came to the human world concerns *O'meal*, an important figure in Kwakwaka'wakw cosmology (Boas and Hunt 1902-1905a:322-349; Boas 1910:217-245). The story begins with O'meal searching for a twin to marry, for twins are the human incarnate of salmon (Boas 1932:203). He is successful in this marriage but his poor behaviour and his disrespectful actions toward salmon cause his



Figure 2: Salmon in the smokehouse.

wife, *Ma'isila* (Salmon Maker), to leave with all of her salmon kin, including those who were already preserved for winter. Nevertheless, O'meal was determined so he and his kin, the myth people, travelled to the salmon world to make war.

Upon their arrival, O'meal and his people were first treated as guests and fed salmon and it is here that O'meal learned the importance of returning salmon bones to the ocean, for this ensures their resurrection. This necessity thwarted O'meal's first attempt to obtain salmon by stealing a salmon occipital bone – for without it the reincarnated salmon was incomplete. O'meal's determination remained staunch so he and his warriors kidnapped four of Salmon-Maker's children, forcing the salmon people to their canoes in pursuit. O'meal's canoe, however, was special, for O'meal had been to the spirit world and had obtained as a supernatural gift, a "Folding-Canoe" with a special paddle that manoeuvred the canoe at great speeds (Boas and Hunt 1902-1905a:348). Thus, he led the salmon people to the human world where he ordered Deer to perform the fools dance upon them, capsizing their canoes, forcing them into the water, and causing to them to assume their salmon form. This gave O'meal control and he sent each of the salmon to the different rivers, thus ensuring that salmon were present in the human world.

The concept of salmon as non-human persons is also recorded in the recollection of a potlatch (Boas 1925:357:142-237). In this account, L!aqolas orders a watchman's pole built as part of the naming ceremony for L!asotiwalis, who is to be named YaqoLasEme (Boas 1925:143-145). This pole is a large step-ladder-like structure that has four legs, a wide ladder on one side, and a platform at the top. Generally the watchman's pole was used to welcome and monitor the salmon as they approached and filled a salmon weir (Boas and Hunt 1902-1905b:196; Boas 1910:7), but it is also used here in the context of the potlatch.



Figure 3: Watchman's pole at Cape Mudge, Image PN11708 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives.

The watchman's pole is a privilege that is not accorded to everyone as it came "from the beginning" (Boas 1925:147), from "grandfather at the far end, when first our world was lighted up" (Boas 1925:151). In other words, it is a supernatural gift obtained from the spirit world and only the watchman has the privilege to use it. To do so, he is painted with ochre, covered in eagle down, and he climbs the pole singing to his human potlatch guests, "my schools of salmon are coming to my salmon weir here" (Boas 1925:153). The singers respond with "your salmon have come; they have come in great schools" (Boas 1925:173). They say they see the salmon coming in a great wave, and that they were overcome by the power of the watchman's pole (Boas 1925:175).

Another example is found among the Gitxsan recorded by William Beynon. Here a weir-like structure was built in the entrance of the house and when the potlatch guests

arrived they were caught as the weir closed behind them. The weir was opened and guests allowed to pass only once the guests sang their songs (Jimmy Williams to William Beynon in Barbeau 1920:BF 80.2).

Together these examples embody the overall concept of my research as I examine the human-fish relationship. In the first, salmon are exposed as non-human persons, sentient beings in a salmon world. In the remaining two accounts, the close connection between salmon and humans is exposed, as human-persons arriving at a potlatch are treated the same as salmon-persons arriving at a weir. Also of interest is how this relationship is manifest today? For this, I turn to my experience among the Laich-Kwil-Tach. For years, I heard comments in passing such as “that would make the salmon angry” or “that run of salmon jumps more because they are happy.” This piqued my curiosity and led to this research. Often upon specific questioning, the relationship becomes less obvious, but among those with whom I have a long friendship I was able to grasp some understanding of how this relationship is apparent today. One Elder emphasized the importance of respect in his story about his father, which is underscored by the relationship he had with salmon:

My dad was different. He'd go out [commercial fishing] on a Sunday, because we used to open on Sundays, at 6:00 on Sunday evening. He never even pulls the anchor up. He just anchors out. Fish jumping all over and we say "dad, it's fishing time." No, he never pulls the anchor up. "Tomorrow morning we will fish" [he says]. He was never greedy. One Sunday night we fished cause we made him set. We got 10,000 sockeye in one set.... And he said "enough," he said "we gotta be thankful for this fish." This is what he said "That's a lot of fish," is what my dad said. "Thankful." So he prayed, he prayed right there. And we went and anchored. Everyone else was still fishing and we could have filled the boat up. That was 1958. The biggest sockeye run that came for a long time.... They were just splashing everywhere.... He said "this is something that's special, it's not, it should never, we should never praise it because" he said "the salmon is part of us." This is what he said. "The salmon is part of us."

Although most Laich-Kwil-Tach people no longer view fish as non-human persons most still return the bones from their annual catch to the ocean. Many today say that it feeds the marine life, but I contend that this is one manifestation of an ongoing tradition, codified in O'meal's story, of returning the bones to the ocean to ensure salmon's resurrection. Furthermore, some people consider the emotions and feelings of salmon (and other fish like eulachon and herring) as they are caught in a net, expressing empathy for the feelings the fish feel when they are caught:

I'm sure they'd be sad because their brother or friend got caught and they were able to keep going, fish keep on swimming, but their friend got caught. I don't know if they know, if they knew where that friend was going once they got caught. Cause they have [a] mind or brain to be able to think that sort of stuff you know. Like I'm trying to put myself into their shoes, what would happen if we were all running down the road and some of us got caught and some kept going, you know what I mean? It's just that their world is all water.

My research suggests that these thoughts and concerns about fish are remnants of the relationship Laich-Kwil-Tach people had with fish prior to the 20th century.

In the bigger picture, how then does this relationship inform the rights debate? Although the Aboriginal right to fish is protected in Canada, the right to manage fish is not recognized, nor are the rights of the fish considered. This is counter to 18th- and 19th-century practices on the Northwest Coast in which the fish, particularly salmon, demanded respect, which informed management and use practices. The notion of a non-human having rights is also found in South America in the form of *Buen vivir*, a concept that confers rights to “nature” and offers an alternative to development that moves beyond neoliberalism (Gudynas 2011:441). Although difficult to translate as a model, *Buen vivir* includes ideas of quality-of-life, but a life in which well being is only possible

within the context of the community, which includes both the human and non-human person (Gudynas 2011:441). There are two primary concepts associated with Buen vivir that set it apart from the dominant development process: (1) the inclusion of critical reactions to classical Western (and colonial) development theory; and (2) the inclusion of alternatives to development that emerge from Indigenous traditions in order to explore options beyond the Eurocentric tradition (Gudynas 2011:441). In short, “nature” (often as non-human persons) has rights and all development must respect those rights (Radcliffe 2012:241). Thus, although animism often seems irreconcilable with modernity, Buen vivir offers hope to create a space in which it can have meaning and agency.

Working to understand the relationship between human persons and non-human persons for what neoliberal thought generally classifies as a resource (fish) can help to build a space in which rights of the human-person are better understood and it becomes possible to imagine rights that extend to the non-human person. As I work toward completion of my research I continue to seek a way for these concepts to gain meaning and life as alternatives to modernity. The human-fish relationship between Northwest Coast peoples and salmon can inform this discussion and it provides an example of how management of a resource can be informed by relationships that are still important and present today.

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