

## FORMS OF RITUAL ACTION AMONG THE NUU-CHAH-NULTH IN THE PRESENT SITUATION

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The Nuu-chah-nulth live on the west coast of Vancouver Island just off the Northwest Coast of North America. They were formerly called Nootka which was a name that was transferred from Captain Cook's name for Nootka Sound. Cook made the mistake in believing that this was the aboriginal denomination of the people for themselves. For many years the Nuu-chah-nulth called themselves the West Coast People, because they lived on the West Coast of Vancouver Island and their official political organization, formed in 1958, was called the West Coast Allied Tribes. In 1978 they renamed themselves Nuu-chah-nulth. It translates as "all along the mountains", and refers to the Nuu-chah-nulth places for living with, as they say themselves, "the ocean as our front yard and the mountains as our backyard". Sixteen Nuu-chah-nulth sub-tribes reside along this coastline, and they extend into the USA with the Makah-nation of western Washington, which is also referred to as a Nuu-chah-nulth tribe. The landscape is characterized by high mountains, fjords, rivers, bays and coves, the open ocean, and great forests. The Nuu-chah-nulth villages are situated in coves and on the inner side of the islands, that are less exposed to the wind and stormy waters.

The first contact with Europeans occurred in the late 1500's according to the Nuu-chah-nulth (informed personally at Alberni, April 1993). This information stems mostly from my informant Moses Smith, an Ehattesht elder and a well-known Nuu-chah-nulth politician, but also from Hesquiaht elders. According to the Hesquiaht tradition, one of the Nuu-chah-nulth sub-tribes, a Spanish ship arrived. The Hesquiaht composed a song about this occasion. Western research has, however, considered this apocryphal. The Spanish might have come up from their settlements in Mexico. The first recorded contact occurred in 1774 when Juan Pérez, captain of the Spanish frigate, Santiago, entered the waters off the Hesquiaht peninsula. A longer period of early contact occurred when captain Cook anchored at Nootka Sound in 1778, and stayed for almost one month. The people of Yuquot eagerly traded with the Europeans. However the real trading with the Europeans started in 1785, with the arrival of another ship at Nootka Sound. This was the beginning of an intensive

period of contact that in a longer perspective came to have devastating effects on the Nuuchahnulth. At the end of the next century, and the beginning of the 1900's the Nuuchahnulth went through cataclysmic changes in their overall cultural situation, superimposed by the Euro-American society. These changes through contacts with European have had an effect on almost every aspect of their way of life. We can talk of religious, political, historical, economical and psychological suppression, some of which still continues.

The purpose of this paper, however, is not to give an outline of the ethnohistory of the Nuuchahnulth but to describe and preliminarily analyze, how despite the far reaching changes, the traditional world-view and ideology in instances remain intact. We are especially going to look at the persistence of "uusimich", the Nuuchahnulth vision quest, ritual bathing, and shamanism. It is however very important already at this early point, to emphasize that we are dealing with a differentiated native society with many different levels and degrees of engagement, and approaches. The most important differences are to be found between actual ritual enactment, participation and faith, and passive knowledge in ritual action. As we will see a structure will emerge. This has four categories, two of which will be dealt with here. This structure has the two basic categories mentioned above, actual ritual participation and a more passive participation where we can talk of a religious feeling.

In all research traditions there are sets of assumptions about reality which structure the empirical evidence (Drobin 1982:272). The assumptions or postulates are necessarily beyond scientific control and, for the most part visibility (ibid). If on the other hand opposite research traditions are placed against each other, the assumptions will be visible (ibid).

This effect is inevitable and especially during my first field trip in 1983 having been influenced by social-anthropological theories and some of the literature on the subject, I had preconceived ideas which gave my field-work presuppositions that were not congruent with reality, therefore I did not expect to find such a traditional situation. Having been in the field five times, over a period of eleven years, I now have a clearer picture of the conditions, e.g. Field-research methods, interviews and participant observation. Behind the veneer of Euro-American way of life, the Nuuchahnulth culture and religion is in many respects alive. Unfortunately there is not much research on the persistence of traditional culture and religion of the Northwest Coast natives overall in the present situation. This is due partly to the research tradition and the difficulty of conducting fieldwork in these esoteric and sensitive areas, something which is also pointed out by both Miller (1984:27) and Kan (1988:46) and also by K. Duffek (1983:58). As far as I know there is also almost no research being executed in Ethnology of Religion, or the History of Religions, most probably because these subjects do not have such a strong standing in

America as they do in Scandinavia where there are well developed methodologies as opposed to anthropology in North America. (Had I not been trained in the History of Religions, my presuppositions for fieldwork on the Northwest Coast had been greatly different). However, some works have been published, for instance Jilek's and Pamela Amoss's work on the Coast Salish, June McCormick Collins' Monograph also on the Salish, and some other, however mostly shorter works and articles (Amoss 1978; Jilek 1982 & McCormick Collins 1974). Worth mentioning here is Dorothy Kennedy's work, for instance her article, *The quest for a cure: A case study in the use of health care alternatives*, which deals with the persistence of witchcraft among the Okanagan, an interior Salish-group, (1984:21-31). This article also has a direct bearing on my Nuu-chah-nulth material, with similar conditions also for them.

But when it comes to the Nuu-chah-nulth proper the contemporary cultural and especially traditional religious situation is unfortunately quite poorly researched. One of the few modern writings we have, overall, are Susan Kenyon's works from the 1970's and 80's (1980:1-180). Susan Moogk wrote a master of arts thesis on the wolf masks of the Nootka Wolf Ritual in 1980, but it is not based on fieldwork (1980:1-120). She is presently working on her doctoral thesis, based on Sapir's unpublished field-notes.

Nuu-chah-nulth religion is highly esoteric, many informants want to remain anonymous both by name, sub-tribe and location, and keep sacred places, in Nuu-chah-nulth, "t'apsulh", or "uusakwulhh", where vision quests occur, and "che-us-sum" -places, shrines, secret. This is one of the reasons why it is so hard to gain insight into Nuu-chah-nulth religion. The location of Nuu-chah-nulth prayer pools, where vision quests occur are sometimes so secret that only one family member knows of their existence. Therefore in order to establish information about contemporary Nuu-chah-nulth traditional religion prolonged field-research has to take place where a mutual respect is developed and where anonymity of individuals is guaranteed. The fieldwork has to be conducted in collaboration with the informants. Incorrect actions and very negative attitudes towards the natives, have been common among many early ethnographers and collectors on the Northwest Coast, see for instance, Cole's *Captured Heritage* (1985:175).

Karen Larsen has suggested, rightfully I think, that the western scientific way of doing research and fieldwork among minority peoples, with research paradigms building on very different ways of perceiving the reality, than the people under scrutiny, "... has clearly been a form of 20th century mental colonialism." (1988:8). However, within the Stockholm school of the History of religions, with research methods advanced by, for instance, Professor Åke Hulthkrantz, the statements of faith by the believers have always been considered as a most important source, rather than just

theoretical paradigms developed in the western world, even though these of course are considered an important part of the research, see especially Hultkrantz's *The Phenomenology of Religion: Aims and Methods* (1970:68-88).

When doing research on the Northwest Coast we have to talk about degrees of acculturation and different forms of influence. For the Nuu-chah-nulth there is, for instance, a great difference between the areas that have had a catholic or Protestant missionization. Different areas in this geographically large area have been differently influenced by the culture contact. The historical change and acculturation have changed the area for more than 200 years and we have in the contemporary situation to count with the fact that there are great local differences in traditional cultural and religious persistence in the widespread Northwest Coast area, as well as among the Nuu-chah-nulth sub-tribes. This is something very obvious in the Northwest Coast material, and also something that my field-material shows from the Nuu-chah-nulth, Haida and Haisla, to whom I have also paid visits.

In order to be a successful person in the traditional society of the Nuu-chah-nulth, in hunting, fishing, love, in fact in almost anything, you had to come into contact with the spirit world, "chechaa", or "hupakwinim" in Nuu-chah-nulth. With the strictures of the missionaries and the ban on the potlatch and spirit-quest, stipulated in 1884, a very serious attempt from the Euro-Americans was made to especially eradicate this religious philosophy. In the present situation the practising of shamanism is still illegal, according to the Canadian law, when it comes to practising medicine without being a trained western physician.

Yet still, shamanism is practised in various places, something which is kept highly secret. Despite the efforts from government officials, missionaries and the former residential school system to eradicate the native language, culture and especially the traditional religious ideas, these were so anchored in and central to leading a successful life to the Nuu-chah-nulth that they in their emotional life and beliefs could not entirely accept the white man's ways. The missionaries could not reach into our hearts, some of my informants say, some missionaries were also very disliked, because of for instance, their sexual abuse of native children in the residential schools. What we are dealing with is a very old world-view and ideology - a value system about how to conduct ones life in order to achieve success and happiness. With this ideology and value-system we are dealing with a different way of structuring the reality which even today has its roots in the pre-contact hunting religion. To interpret this it is very hard to use our western scientific logic since we are here dealing with a strong religious thinking following a totally different way of perception. We cannot presume a positivist attitude if we are to follow our informants' statements about encounters with the suprahuman. The Swedish researcher Århem, has also

experienced this in his work among South American natives (1992:3). In the present time it is also very much a question of feelings, most probably studied from a western perspective, and best studied through psychological and psychiatric perspectives.

As stated earlier there is a difference in attitude also among the Nuu-chah-nulth towards these matters, where the two basic categories are to be found in actual ritual participation and a more passive participation where we can talk of a religious feeling. The latter encompasses more Nuu-chah-nulths in the present situation than the first but with an increase in the former category as more Nuu-chah-nulths become engaged in the old religion, or as they say themselves, "the spirituality is coming back". We must deem a statement like this important and not only see it as an expression of striving ethnic identity. The ideology behind this thinking is that now comes the time when these things, the spirits, the suprahuman world become more active again. Where we are talking of "actual ritual participation", I mean that to the Nuu-chah-nulth there is a strong belief in the transformative action of conducting rituals. The Nuu-chah-nulth rituals such as "uusimich", the ritual bathing, consists of an interweaving of prayer during the actual ritual, and special calls in order to prepare the suprahuman world for what is about to take place. Physical action also takes place, like the manipulation of objects, the shaking of a rattle, and the actual immersion in the prayer pool, which is repeated four times. The ritual is also repeated on four successive days. An achievement is experienced with the ritual. The expected result is often some form of gift, power, confer below. According to Spiro, it is the "...expected satisfaction..." of the practice of religion that "...motivates religious belief and the performance of religious ritual" (1966:107).

The traditional pre-contact world-view and ideology talks about the need for "uusimich", if you want to be a successful member of the culture, and this is also the case at the present time among some people. Where we are dealing with rituals that engage several persons, like the still surviving and enacted "tlukwaana", or wolf ritual, the ritual works as an action which achieves certain supernatural goals, but also as a means to transfer socially and culturally the belief and value-system, and the ideology, to the people engaged in the ritual. One traditional belief that seems to run through the majority of Nuu-chah-nulths is the belief in reincarnation, similarly experienced among the Haida. For the "actual ritual action category" among the Nuu-chah-nulth, there is a strong belief in the help from ancestors and dead relatives, who might come down from their dwelling places in the sky. The shaman told me that nowadays he has to conduct exorcism all the time, because there are so many ghosts around, that sometimes need to be sent back. During my short visit in the spring of, 1994, he told me jokingly but still seriously, "I'm a ghostbuster now". To go back to the category of "a religious feeling" where many people are or become engaged, we find many

different aspects of the native culture evoking these feelings. These include different symbols of the traditional way of life, like dance paraphernalia to stories of, for instance, the deeds of shamans in the old days and stories of encounters with the supernatural. See for instance Ellis and Swan 1981:96-99.

In many native families stories of encounters of parents or grandparents with the supernatural are very common. They are often believed in, even by people who are less engaged in religion. In the category of people with "a religious feeling" we find people who intertwine these emotions with their striving for native identity. Here I believe we can talk of a need for these religious emotions in the present day context of the Nuu-chah-nulth.

The anthropologist Spiro has talked about the failure of anthropology to explain the need of religious emotions, especially suffering which we must acknowledge (Spiro 1966:124). In the category of "a religious feeling", we can place many Nuu-chah-nulth's reactions when speaking or even mentioning ceremonial, ritual and other religious sites. Dorothy Kennedy of the British Columbia Indian Language project mentions twelve different places in this group in her "*Draft ethnographic site typology*", from March 1993, for the whole Northwest Coast area. They are:

places for, first food ceremony, site for preparation of initiates, meeting or gathering site, repositories for the dead, sites/areas associated with guardian spirit quest, sites for spiritual cleansing/renewal, sites for repository of spiritual paraphernalia, sites for repository of items as protection from witchcraft, sites for obtaining ceremonial materials, sites for returning Salmon bones to water, places with therapeutic features and areas known for presence of medicinal flora (Kennedy 1993:1-11).

When it comes to the category of "actual ritual participation", we find individuals who are fully engaged in the traditional religion, world-view and ideology and who sometimes are tradition-bearers par preference, the shamans. Among the Nuu-chah-nulth, these can be both men and women. The shaman that I worked mostly with told me that his main task is exorcism and that recently he had to chase away seven evil ghosts from one house where they were becoming a real problem for the family who lived there. The shamans and their esoteric knowledge is still of importance. The shaman also told me how he retrieved the lost soul of a man in his twenties, and that if he had not done so the man would have died. Since belief in witchcraft and the diseases that witches can put into other people are prevalent, it is believed that these really cannot be cured by or even be understood by anyone but shamans, and therefore this is one of the shamans' important tasks in nowadays, (see Kennedy's article on witchcraft,

1993).

In the category of "actual ritual action", we also find people, both men and women who regularly "uusimich" in Nuu-chah-nulth, which translates as, train to get something. This is the Nuu-chah-nulth vision quest, ritual praying and bathing. The core of this ritual is the interplay of different entities in Nuu-chah-nulth cosmology. The most important being the sun, "Nas", which is the creator according to the Nuu-chah-nulth and the moon, the coming moon. It is conducted after complicated instructions and is divided into three separate rituals to be executed over nine months. It includes a cleansing ritual, a training and praying ritual and finally conversation with the supernatural world. It is conducted in a very sacred prayer pool, a natural or man-made pool in a river or stream mostly know as "usakwulh" in Nuu-chah-nulth.

Properly performed and with the right disposition the individual will go through seven different levels and receive visions and occasionally shamanistic powers. Sometimes the training does not lead to visions but according to the teaching it will still do an individual good and make way for success in different aspects of life. For these people, some of whom are elders, these teachings are the most important in life, far more important than the fact that the mainstream society is just around the corner. Nowadays however, we also find many young Nuu-chah-nulths who are very engaged in these things. Some of them so much and so eager to keep the traditional way of life vivid that they are called "keepers". I was often surprised at the great sacrifices some of my informants made in order to be able to practise "the spirituality".

For this "actual ritual participation" category of Nuu-chah-nulth protocol is something very important. Protocol requires that there have to be four meetings with the elders and the hereditary chiefs before any important decision is made. Among the Nuu-chah-nulth we have also a very intact social organization as well as in some areas a very intact indigenous language. In some places there are unfortunately severe social problems, especially alcoholism. Some people suffer from and try to cope with and forget different forms of abuse, for instance sexual abuse in the residential schools, by drinking. There are in all Nuu-chah-nulth schools today a well developed program for teaching the indigenous language, as well as the traditional culture. This program makes extensive use of computers. The enculturation is today also in the everyday school-program. There is a very evident effort being made to keep the language, the culture, and the spirituality alive. There is pride now.

The four categories that were mentioned above, which the present Nuu-chah-nulth society of about 5980 people can be divided into, even though these categories are sometimes overlapping, are:

Actual ritual action and collective participation, intended ritual individual action, knowledge of and ability in ritual action but not carried out, and lastly, the most common today being faith in ritual action but unperformed and without the knowledge of how to perform. Of course there are also people who do not fit at all in any of these categories.

The traditional religion is still of importance. Here, however, we have to make it clear that great local differences are at hand in the geographically large northwest coast area. This depends among other things on that we have to respect the fact that different parts of the area have had different local historical courses of events since the first culture-contact with the Europeans. Even among the Nuu-chah-nulth sixteen sub-tribes in Canada, there is a great difference between the areas that have had Catholic or Protestant missionization. The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins has convincingly shown that different peoples, among them the Northwest Coast Indians, react differently to culture-contact and are influenced differently by it (1988: 114-115, 225).

We can talk of degrees of acculturation and different forms of influence. This has unfortunately been far too little considered in much of the research on the Northwest Coast Natives, which in turn is derived from some very influential researchers and their ideas, among others Franz Boas. Tove Tybjerg is of the same view (1977:189). In spite of far-reaching societal change the religious persistence is explicit in some areas along this coast, and it seems to be especially so among the Nuu-chah-nulth. Many researchers have shown that the cultural element that changes last in a culture is traditional religious behaviour. This remains unchanged the longest, even when social, economical, material and technical changes have occurred. This is exactly my experience from field-work along this coast.

However, the traditional religion and its persistence functions a little differently in different areas. In some places it is more a question of a genuinely traditional situation, while in others it is more a question of a mixture of genuinely traditional religion, and reborn traditional religion. Here we also find innovation of new religious manifestations. A thorough analysis of the conditions in the different areas will therefore give partly diverging results. We can say that we are dealing with different forms of traditionality. With some groups the traditional religion, the reborn religion, and the newly invented religion are evidently more connected to the native identity and the striving for identity. Here we have to pose the question as to what extent the religion functions as a criterion of identity. The genuine religious persistence is still being expressed in what has always been the strongest religious manifestation of the whole Northwest Coast, i.e. shamanism, which, however, in the present time must also be seen as a phenomenon divided into categories. In some of the areas which are and

always have been very isolated, the indigenous language is also fully alive.

In order to interpret the traditional cultural and religious persistence in an adequate way we may have great use of a method of analysis advanced for a cultural and religious situation where all members in the current society under study do not have the same engagement and knowledge. This way of analysing has occurred as criticism of "classical" symbolical anthropology, of for instance Geertz's type, by researchers such as Sergei Kan, Roger M. Keesing, Robert W. Hefner and to some extent Ulf Hannerz (Hannerz 1983:157; Hefner 1983:665-683; Kan 1988:1-56 & 1989:405-422; Keesing 1987:161-176). Sergei Kan's research area is the Tlingit, the northernmost linguistic group on the Northwest Coast, which makes his material even more interesting here. It is also Kan who in particular has developed this method of analysis, "Cohort Analysis".

Kan uses two main criteria and the degree of Americanization in order to divide the Tlingit in his "*Cohorts*" (1988:11). The two main criteria are age, which according to Kan has three main divisions each with different outlook, and the ability to speak Tlingit. He says however, "these cohorts are only "ideal types", with many individuals located in between them and with some values being shared across cohorts. In addition some move from one cohort to another, as they become older and/or more concerned with the "old customs" (Kan 1988:11). With this method we get a very useful analysis instrument which can help us to a better understanding of the cultural and religious state at present, among the natives in many communities along this coast line, and with great certainty also with peoples who have had similar experiences in other places.

In connection with using Sergei Kan's "*Cohort Analysis*", a definition of tradition is of great importance. We must in the present situation see the traditional culture and religion and its persistence as not only differentiated between the individuals in these societies but also in a further nuanced way where we define tradition or traditional in accordance with the Indians' new contemporary context.

In accordance with M. L. V. Vogel, I am of the view that "...*anthropo-logical definitions of culture tend to become 'categories of reality', instead of being recognized as useful abstractions*" (Vogel 1991:39). She means that these definitions are of western European derivation and therefore "*etic*" (ibid:39). What Vogel instead proposes is an open definition of tradition, where current traditions are defined and interpreted from within the studied people (ibid:47). This is in line with many researchers within the new ethnography, for instance Marcus and Fishers's ideas, an *emic* perspective (Marcus & Fisher 1986:8).

This definition of tradition is important for an adequate interpretation of the traditional religious and cultural persistence at the present time if combined with Kan's "*Cohort Analysis*". What we are dealing with here are different forms of the traditionality. In the present situation we, for

instance, see as mentioned above new invented ceremonies, religious manifestations among the Northwest Coast natives. Robert Davidson, one of the leading Haida artists today, says, "the only way tradition can be carried on is by inventing new things" (Davidson, interviewed in Steltzer 1976:168). Davidson has also contributed to revitalize Haida ceremonialism and also invented new ceremonies. One such was "ceremony for the living Haida", which was held during the vernal equinox 1980 (Blackman 1985:37).

Some of the newly invented ceremonies function as traditional ceremonies, and in many ways they reflect traditional values. In these, sometimes completely new dance-masks are used in spite of the fact that they are new and are being used in a traditional context. The form of the ceremony is traditional even if the content is new. Also the reborn ceremony has a traditional function.

One example of a reborn ceremony I experienced myself in August 1993 when the Nuu-chah-nulth sub-tribe Opetchesaht, held a Mi-att ceremony. This is the first Salmon ceremony carried out in order to pay respect to and celebrate the spawning salmon of the most important species, "the sockeye". According to Ron Hamilton, Opetchesaht, the ceremony is conducted for many reasons, among others to strengthen the ethnic identity. The ceremony is also open to the white population and this is a new feature of a Nuu-chah-nulth ceremony. It is done in the hope of establishing a little better understanding of native culture in the mainstream society (Hamilton 1993:8-9; Pankratz 1993:1, 9). Confer here also Pamela T. Amoss's article on the Coast Salish's First Salmon Ceremony (Amoss 1987:56-66).

Hobsbawm says in question of similar contexts that, "*the actual process of creating such ritual and symbolic complexes has not been adequately studied by historians*" (Hobsbawm & Tanager 1992:4).

Here is therefore a very important task to fulfill. Among these Indians analysis of the strong traditional culture and religious persistence that we have in places, is that this depends on both social and cultural causes as well as on the maintenance of the traditional economy, and living locations. Of course there are also other causes and mechanisms for the traditional cultural and religious persistence than these mentioned above. A further analysis should also consider psychological causes.

The social causes behind this persistence are to be found in the new social context of the natives where the total picture is everything from racism to commercial and federal threats against their existence which makes them use the traditional culture and religion as a weapon against these developments and threats. The cultural causes we find among the Indians themselves, the traditional culture and religion lives on from within through faith, sui generis. The Indians feel or believe that the spirits really can change their lives and cure the ill. It is here that we have one of the greatest reasons for the persistence of shamanism. The social mechanisms

of the cultural and religious persistence also provide the cultural mechanisms with further fuel.

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