

RENEGOTIATING THE PAST
CONTEMPORARY TRADITION AND IDENTITY OF THE COMOX FIRST NATION

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates expressions of tradition currently being brought forth by members of the Comox First Nation as markers of their identity. A history of massive depopulation and territorial movement, combined with extensive intermarriage outside of the community, has left the Comox peoples with varying degrees of traditional and cultural knowledge. Bound on all sides by the Central Coast Salish, the Nuuchahnulth, and the Kwakwaka'wakw, rights to their traditions are restricted to certain families in the community. This limitability of tradition has led the Comox peoples to bring forward and reinvent traditions that are accessible to all members of the First Nation. This study moves away from the tendency of anthropological investigations to concentrate work amongst perceived cultural cores, and instead looks directly at dilemmas and resolutions of identity that are prevalent within border communities.

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Dedicated to the memory of

Margaret Elizabeth Frank
(Audie)

1897-1997

“Without you I would be nothing.”

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When I left Comox by canoe in the summer of 1997, I knew I was in for a long journey. Each paddle stroke pushed me onwards, inching my way towards Victoria. I quickly realized that the canoe would only move when everyone on board worked together. Our canoe started the journey as a group of individuals and finished as a team.

As in life and as in a canoe journey, the process of writing this thesis has been a collaborative effort. Support for my work has been undying. Though doubts were sometimes cast by myself and others whether I would finish my trip, I am proud to say that the end of the journey is near.

I would like to thank Nicole, my mom, my dad and the rest of the family for their love and stability. Without their constant asking, "How's the thesis going?," I probably would never have finished. I would also like to show my gratitude towards Travis Reaveley and Steffen Nielsen who would always offer constructive criticism and warm friendship. Finally, I want to thank Dr. Bruce Miller for his patience and understanding throughout this long journey.

PART I: INTRODUCTION

Members of the Comox¹ First Nation currently live in an era of cedar bark and Gore-Tex where they daily negotiate between layers of their identity. At once they are Canadian or they are Native; they are First Nations or they are Indian; they are Kwakwaka'wakw or they are Salish; they are modern or they are traditional. At times, these self-designations blur into each other and members will simply state that they are Comox. It is this declaration that concerns this thesis.

When declaring a Comox identity, members of the First Nation will often ask themselves what it means to *be* Comox. In answering this question, many will bring forth examples of "tradition" to support their claim. Because of a perceived loss of the majority of Comox traditions through a history of population decline, territorial movement, tribal mergers, and colonization, however, the deeper question of "which tradition?" is then asked. In this light, attempts to define one's identity have persuaded many families to look outside of the community to their affinal relations in order to forge a connection to tradition and the past. Many members of the First Nation, for example, will take part in Kwakwaka'wakw potlatches or go south to witness Central Coast Salish spirit dancing. Because participation in these traditional activities is largely restricted to those who have rights obtained through descent or by marriage, they are *inaccessible* to most of the Comox people. Comox members have therefore increasingly begun to pursue customs that are *accessible* to everyone and therefore *perceived* to be owned by the entire First Nation. This study endeavours to look at the history of the Comox people and to provide examples of the traditions that are currently being brought forth, renegotiated, and sanctioned by the First Nation as expressions of a changing Comox identity.

This thesis is of particular import to the academic community not only because it fits within the larger body of work on ethnicity, identity, and tradition but because it looks at an ethnic group that is situated politically, geographically, and culturally between other distinct and, conceivably, more dominant tribal districts. It is, in essence, a study of a *border community*. As a border community, the Comox are consistently overlooked or deliberately left out of the ethnographic record because they don't fit neatly or conveniently into academic typologies. Where they are mentioned by writers in the area, they are often relegated to only a few lines or to a footnote or two. Here the Comox are often explained away in many Salish texts as being Kwakwaka'wakw and in many works on the Kwakwaka'wakw as being Salish.² This study aims to look directly at the realities of life on the border and to provide insight into the ways with which contemporary Comox people deal with their plurality of identity.

Identity and Tradition

In this era of land claims and treaty negotiations, research on ethnic identity has become an inescapable part of anthropology. Practitioners of the discipline have long moved past the supposition that cultural traits form a magic glue which connects individuals together into static ethnic groups. Instead, we understand that ethnicity is adversely affected by external influences. Today, we peer through the lenses of colonization and modernization to theorize how ethnic identity can persist under such diverse and often tumultuous circumstances. Current research has allowed us to move beyond notions of a static ethnographic present and view ethnic groups as dynamic entities that can form, transform, reform, and die.

Theorists have approached the question of identity in a myriad of ways. One common stance is predicated upon the belief that power and politics can and do shape ethnic identity. For proponents of this belief, the ways in which an ethnic group reacts to political and economic forces largely determines identity formation and maintenance. In circumstances of social dominance, for instance, ethnic groups have an opportunity to manipulate cultural markers in order to create or modify an *informal* political structure within the framework of a *formal* political system (Cohen 1969:2). In this way, culturally-charged symbols can give political clout to members of ethnic groups where power would otherwise be absent. This is just as relevant in North America as in other parts of the world. First Nations involved in the treaty process, for instance, may utilize a strategy of emphasizing common origins and a long-standing connection to territorial lands in its fight for settlement.

Another way to look at responses to political economy is to question the life cycle of ethnic groups and how Natives see and shape their own history (Sider 1993; Sider and Smith 1997). From this vantage point, it is important not only to understand the outside processes that affect identity formation, but also the inner agencies of change. It is the ways in which members of ethnic groups confirm or deny aspects of their history that are important to the record. Understanding of an ethnic group's life cycle is obtained as much by looking at what it silences as what it commemorates. The ultimate goal being to construct its *history of histories* (Sider 1993; Sider and Smith 1997).

Yet another useful way to look at identity is to recognize that there exists a relationship between ethnicity and kinship. Contrary to populist ideas that identity is strictly a derivation of genealogy, Charles Keyes (1981:5) has postulated that "ethnicity ... derives

from a cultural interpretation of descent.” It is not only genetic ancestry, but the common bonds of myths, beliefs, origin stories, and even experiences of intense suffering that may draw ethnic groups together. In this way, ethnic groups can emphasize commonalities present within the group and, in turn, legitimize its cohesion. Perhaps more interesting, is that this can also work across cultural boundaries. A prime example of this is the formation of a pan-Indian identity where Natives throughout North America can look to the shared experience of cultural domination and adopt symbols that create solidarity across the diverse array of cultural groups.

Continuing with the theme that ethnicity is based on a cultural interpretation of descent, we come to the crossroads where identity and tradition meet. Any individual doing work amongst First Nations would be hard-pressed to ignore the significance that tradition plays in the construction and maintenance of their identity. For many Aboriginals, tradition becomes crucial to the identity of both the individual and the group as it lends legitimacy to their existence by connecting present First Nations to their past through a continuation of cultural activity (Mauzé 1997:8).

The ‘traditional’ view of tradition is of an unchanging transmission of customs, stories, beliefs, ritual and practice. It is seen as a connection to a primordial past that is inherently conservative in its use and execution. “Tradition implies antiquity, continuity and heritability” (Mauzé 1997:5). It is seen as a firm bond between the present and the past which allows individuals to seemingly touch their own history. The purpose of tradition, of course being to repeat, relive, and re-enact the same activities as one’s forebears who themselves had partaken in its use and transmission. While most adhere to the *goal* of a

perfect rebroadcast of cultural knowledge, the reality is that this is essentially an impossible task, as traditions invariably change over time.

This leads us into the question of the authenticity of tradition. If tradition is, in fact, alterable, then how can it purport to be *authentic*? Theorists have answered this by espousing the idea that tradition is dynamic—it is in a constant state of change and reinvention. It is less the retransmission of ideas over time than it is the continual renegotiation of the past through the perspective of the present. In other words, tradition is more a current interpretation of what we *think* our ancestors believed and thought than what they actually did.

From this point of view, tradition does not appear as a corpus of statements handed down from one generation to the next. It is a succession of answers to questions about the present, and consequently it takes on the status of an always correct answer to the questions asked. (Mauzé 1997:7)

Instead of thinking that the present has come from the past, it is worthwhile to consider that the past is deduced from the present (Mauzé 1997:6).

For First Nations people living within the changing face of neo-colonialism, the use of tradition provides numerous benefits. It gives the individual a profound sense of self-worth and belonging and often a set of perceived social values which may translate into considerable personal success within the dominant society. By providing the opportunity to be a part of something that is much bigger than the individual, tradition lends hope in areas where poverty and social subjugation is the norm. Revitalization of traditional practices and beliefs can be seen as a means of creating group cohesion within and across tribal boundaries to the point that groups are able to transcend economic and societal hardships (Jorgensen 1972).

In cases where there has been a discontinuous history of a particular tradition, individuals or groups may 'bring it back' through a process of negotiating or renegotiating with the past.³ Some renegotiated traditions often only have small elements of political and economic motivation for their return. Others, however, lean considerably more into the political realm. Of particular interest are key cultural symbols that are used and manipulated by a group for political ends. Michael Harkin (1997:98) outlines two main components that are applicable to the use of this type of tradition: First, the tradition should be perceived as authentic in a way that is likely to elicit emotion, despite its probable origin of discontinuity. Most often, this "... involves the selection and ritual framing of latent symbols, which are already present within the culture" (Harkin 1997:98). It is the obsolete traditions that are frequently brought back because they show the practitioner a degree of connectedness with the distant past that practical traditions lack. Second, the framing of these symbols is always done for political ends in the sense that groups are united through its shared use.

In understanding the context of tradition and identity within First Nations cultures, it is worthwhile to define the degree to which its use may be restricted. A beneficial way of looking at this is to categorize indigenous tradition as belonging to either the *public* or the *private* sphere. In describing contemporary Stó:lo identity, Tad McIlwraith (1995) has utilized this model to great effect. He has shown that symbols that belong to the public domain are generally *accessible* to the majority of the population. For the Stó:lo, this would include such things as canoe races and a multiplicity of pan-Indian symbols like powwows and tipis. In opposition to this are those symbols of the private realm. This is the domain of ceremonial burnings, namings, and "sxwey'xwey" dancing, as well as the 'personal' aspects of pan-Indianism such as smudges and healing circles. In many cases, participation in these

traditional activities is restricted. This restriction becomes even tighter as one moves towards the secret realm of spirit dancing where participants invariably belong to culturally established families of the community (McIlwraith 1995:19).

Contestation occurs in modern Aboriginal communities in response to the inherent inequality that exists between the public and private spheres. Where previously members of an Indigenous community would accept the fact that some traditions are accessible while others are not, some modern First Nations have begun to apply principles of democratization on the choosing of traditional symbols of identity. More and more, the barriers of gender, status and familial connections have given way to the Western ideal of equality. A trend has thus begun wherein First Nations are now more likely to pursue traditions that are accessible to the entire community over those that are not. McIlwraith (1995) has illustrated this by showing the local level dilemma of the public/powwow culture versus the private/spirit dancing complex. He contrasts the flashiness and openness of the shared pan-Indian experience with the innately more sombre tone of the closed winter ceremonial. With regard to McIlwraith's work, it appears that the Stó:lo people have reached somewhat of a balance between the degree to which they take part in both pan-Indian and Stó:lo expressions of culture. For First Nations dubious about the composition of their own culture, however, the dilemmas have only just begun.

Introduction to myself

Before I begin further unravelling the complexities of this research, it is crucial that I make a personal declaration of who I am and where I come from. This will establish how I came to be interested in this topic and will outline the insights and biases that are inherent in my study.

My grandmother, Maggie, was born to Chief Charles Mountain Wilson and Emily Hunt of Fort Rupert. Emily was the daughter of the ethnographic 'informant' George Hunt who is most well-known for his collaborative works with famed anthropologist Franz Boas. In fact, my grandmother used to make tea for the doctor and would even clean his clothes. In the 1920s my grandmother met a young fisherman named Andy Frank who had made port in Alert Bay where she had worked. Not long after this meeting, they wed and moved to Andy's home village of Comox. Largely because of Maggie's high-born status, Andy subsequently inherited the position of the old Pentlatch chief Joe Nimnim after his death in 1940.

My mother, Mary Frank, was born in Comox and raised on the Indian reserve. At home, her first language was Kwak'wala, the language of Andy's mother and Maggie. She was instructed in Kwakwaka'wakw dance and witnessed a number of small 'living-room potlatches' that predominated this region while the potlatch was banned. In short, she was raised in a manner befitting the daughter of a chief. When she met my father, a non-native of Norwegian and English ancestry, and wanted to marry him, my grandmother was somewhat shocked, but slowly started to accept the idea of an interracial marriage. Upon getting married, however, my mother immediately lost her Indian status, was removed from the Band list, and moved off-reserve.

In 1972, several months after my grandfather had passed away, I was born and given the name Andy to represent reincarnate connections recognized by the old people. My widowed grandmother would even refer to me as her "little husband." I grew up spoiled by her, but aware of the responsibilities that are inherent when upholding the name and privileges of a late great man. I was raised to know that I was *from* Comox and that I was

also Kwakiutl from Fort Rupert. Since we did not have Indian status, we lived almost entirely off-reserve and largely away from the Comox people. After regaining our status in the mid-1980s, we moved to the reserve and began the process of re-establishing our family within the community.

Today, I am a member of the Comox Indian Band who currently resides off-reserve. I consider myself first and foremost to be *kw'úmuxwsa* (Comox). I actively participate in Kwakwaka'wakw ceremonials and often work for the Comox Valley School District in creating and disseminating cultural activities for students. In 1999, I created an interactive CD-ROM for children in order to introduce them to the Comox language. I have also conducted research for my Indian Band on both Comox genealogy and the community cemetery.

In the fall of 1993, I wrote a short paper entitled "The Kwakwaka'wakw Comox: The Filling of a Cultural Void." This paper allowed me, for the first time, to look reflexively at the situation of my own people. I quickly came to the conclusion that insights garnered from being a member of the Comox First Nation would allow me to write about things or ideas that may not be accessible to the outsider. I also began to realize the extent of the biases that being a member of only one family amongst several in the community would present. Furthermore, the responsibility of writing about one's own people is a heavy one as I ultimately have to live amongst them and face any criticism of my work. I accept this and try, to the best of my ability, to give an even-handed perspective on my people, while pointing out the opinions that are held exclusively by myself or by my family.

PART II: THE COMOX

Members of the Comox First Nation largely reside in the Comox Valley on the central east coast of Vancouver Island. Bounded by coastal mountains and the waters of the Strait of Georgia, the 'valley' is really a collection of municipalities dominated by the city of Courtenay to the north and the town of Comox to the south. The Comox Indian reserve is located between these communities along their main connecting road. Quite often, people will drive by and not realize that it is a reserve, despite the blatant display of a ceremonial bighouse and totem poles in the centre of the community. Older houses are situated parallel to this road and face the waters of the Comox Bay, harkening back to a time when travel by sea was the norm and houses faced the water in declaration of familial and tribal membership.

With approximately three hundred Band members—about half of which live on-reserve—the overall population and size of the community is quite small. Somewhat limited by this size, the Comox Indian Band has had little opportunity for large-scale economic development. The Band, however, does own and operate a trailer court and a Native art gallery that figures prominently near the bighouse and Band offices. Relatively new subdivisions, built primarily for Band members who have regained their status,⁴ are located on the hill behind the central part of the reserve.

The relatively urban settlement of the community⁵ has resulted in members being highly assimilated into mainstream society. All speak English fluently as, for most, it is their first language. Only a small handful can speak Kwak'wala,⁶ while the last person to speak the Comox language within our community passed away earlier this year. Schooling takes place in the public education system where trends indicate a painfully slow rise in the

graduation rate of students. A small but also increasing number of members pursue further education in universities and vocational colleges. Employment is diversified and, like First Nations throughout Canada, moderately low. While the resource industry once seasonally employed a large proportion of people in the community, few today can find work in the field. Instead, most of those members who are employed either work for the Comox Indian Band or in and around the neighbouring municipalities.

The Comox Indian Band has adopted a chief and council system as its governing body. It is here that Band politics often mirror the presence of a family network in which the closeness of one's affinal or consanguinal ties usually dictates which person to support in an election. Unfortunately, skill or suitability to the position do not always apply. Cleavages in the community often reflect upon the age-old divisions that originate from the birth of the Comox First Nation.

Comox Origins

During his first visit to the Northwest Coast in 1886, Franz Boas spent some twenty days amongst the First Nations in Comox. He greatly anticipated conducting this research as it would not only round out his studies on Coast Salish languages, but would also allow him more complete insight into the ethnographic makeup of Vancouver Island. Upon arriving, however, Boas quickly realized that it would not be an easy venture. Daily he would set out on foot from his hotel room in Comox and travel down the hill to the Native village which sat along the shore at the mouth of the Courtenay River. His letters home tell much about his first impressions of this village:

Now at last I have arrived at the much talked of Comox and I wonder how I shall get on... It is the saddest looking village I have seen. It is apparent that the inhabitants are dying out rapidly. There are ruins everywhere and beautifully carved totem poles stand in front of empty shells. (Yampolsky 1958:317)

While working with members of this dilapidated community, Boas was quickly able to distinguish three distinct cultural groups—each with its own language—living within the village: the Comox, the “Pentlatish” [Pentlatch], and the “Lequittig” [Lekwiltok].⁷

Boas’ visit marks a discreet moment in time. It distinguishes a period in Comox history beset on all sides by considerable change and represents the Comox in a state of flux: changing geographically, politically and culturally. What follows is an attempt to describe the origin and composition of the groups that would eventually make up the modern Comox First Nation. This will set the scene for the subsequent rapid and irrevocable transformations that took place in the region. Ultimately, it will be shown that these changes resulted in the compression of several strong and distinct cultural groups into one First Nation located on the border.

Houses and village groups

Before contact, identity largely fell within the realm of the collective. Individuals belonged to and were represented by their *house*, or extended family (Kennedy and Bouchard 1983:59-60). In Kwakwaka’wakw society, this group was known as the “’na’ mima,” meaning “one kind” (Suttles 1991:86). It was a named entity that could most often trace its origins back to mythic times and encounters with the supernatural. The house determined an individual’s hereditary name, rank, and access to ceremonial prerogatives. It also traveled to owned procurement sites as a unit and could span several plank houses within a village.

Each house had its own headman, or chief, and was comprised of both higher-ranking *nobles* and *commoners* (Suttles 1991:86).

Village groups were generally comprised of a number of houses. Like houses, they were also named and collectively held rights to shared territory and resources (Kennedy and Bouchard 1983:60). Village groups, however, were not entirely permanent, since houses would often splinter off or combine to form new village groups. While houses retained autonomy within a village, it was in their best interest to join with the other houses in times of mutual defense (Kennedy and Bouchard 1983:60). In pre-contact times, both houses and village groups largely remained within the geography of a shared linguistic tradition. What follows in the next three sections is an attempt to reconstruct a brief pre-contact overview of each of the major players in contemporary Comox identity.⁸

The Island Comox-Speaking Peoples

Comox history rightly begins with an origin story. According to my grandfather's sister, Mary Clifton, a man named *Shalhk'em* and a woman named *Tisitl'a* "dropped down from the sky" at *kwániwsam* (Quinsam) in present-day Campbell River (Bouchard et al. 1999:121). They brought with them the mask and garments of the *xwáyxway*⁹ and together became the first ancestors of the Comox people.¹⁰ For the descendants of *Shalhk'em* and *Tisitl'a*, *kwániwsam* remained the centre from which Comox territory radiated out towards Salmon River in the north, Cape Lazo in the south and the islands to the east.

According to information gathered from Comox member George Mitchell in the 1930s, the Island-Comox speaking peoples were once made up of at least ten different "tribes" (Barnett 1955:25). The five highest ranking of these—the "real Comox"—wintered in Cape Mudge on the southern tip of Quadra Island and dispersed to separate villages in the

summer. They are said to have once belonged to a single group called the “whale house” who, at the beginning of time, lived in plank houses while the other Comox groups still lived in bark shelters. The “whale people” were thus considered to be of higher standard and looked down upon the other Comox as belonging to a separate, inferior class.

The “real Comox” was comprised of the “s ásitla” [*sásitl’a*], the “yayaqwiLtah” the “saLaLt” [*sálhulhtxw*], the “katkaduL,” and the “komokwe” (Barnett 1955:25).¹¹ These five groups would annually gather and form a village at Cape Mudge on Quadra Island during the winter months. According to Mitchell, whose mother belonged to this sept, the *s ásitl’a* were said to be the highest ranking of all of the Comox tribes as they originally had their “fire” in the centre of the whale house (Barnett 1935-36:2:63). During the summer months, the *sásitl’a* would travel to the northernmost reaches of the territory and stay at Salmon River. The “yayaqwiLtah” and the *sálhulhtxw*, on the other hand, remained on Quadra Island and went to their villages at Quathiaski Cove and “near the point,” respectively. The “katkaduL,” in turn, summered at Rock Bay and the “komokwe” at Menzies Bay.

Of the other five “lesser” Comox groups, George Mitchell could only remember the “eiksan” [*ík^hsen*] who had their primary village near the mouth of the Campbell River. Another of Barnett’s informants recalled a group called the “papusenitc” whose name he translated into English as “big rumps.” The existence and location of this group, however, is unknown and not mentioned elsewhere in the literature. Boas (1887) provides valuable insight into the identity and location of three other groups: The “qāqēcht” are shown to have occupied the area between Cape Lazo and Oyster River and were thus the most southerly of the Comox groups. The territory of the “chāachē” or “xaxe” (Barnett 1955:167) was

apparently located on the southeast handle of Quadra Island, while the “t' ātpō'ōs” [t'āt'pu7us] are shown to have held the central east portion of Quadra Island.

The Pentlatch-Speaking Peoples

While conducting his research in Comox, Boas also recorded an origin story belonging to the Pentlatch people:

A long, long time ago two men, Kōai'min and Hē'k'ten, descended from the sky. They became the ancestors of the PE'ntlatc [Pentlatch]. Once the sea receded far from its shore and the women went far out and filled their baskets with fish. The bottom of the sea remained dry for a long time. But He'k'ten was afraid that the water would rise that much higher later on. Therefore he made a long rope of cedar branches and tied four boats together. At last the water really flowed back and began to flood the shore. So he tied the rope to a big rock in the mouth of the PE'ntlatc [Pentlatch] River, fastened the other end to the boats and the two chief families floated about on the rafts. The other people begged He'k'ten, "Oh, allow us to tie our boats to your rope. We will give our daughters as wives." But He'k'ten didn't allow it and pushed them away with poles. When the water receded again, they alone found their home again, while the others were scattered about the wide world. A whale remained stranded high up on the mountain near PE'ntlatc [Pentlatch] Lake. The water up there froze and it was unable to get away again. It can still be seen there today and that is why the glacier in the PE'ntlatc [Pentlatch] Valley is called K'onē'is. (Boas 1977:99)

Today, the Pentlatch Valley is widely known as the Comox Valley. The descendants of flood survivors remained in this locale for thousands of years and continued to speak the Pentlatch language.

The entire speech population of this language spanned the east coast of Vancouver Island between Comox Harbour in the north and Englishman River in the south (Kennedy and Bouchard 1990:443). There were apparently four distinct village groups that spoke this language. Boas (1887) identified three of these: the “Pé ntlatsch” [péntl'ech], the “Sáa men”

[sá7alhem], and the “chuachuatl” [swáxlhu7lh]. Mitchell also provided three: the “pentLatch” [péntl’ech], the “s:uckcan”, and the “saaLam” [sá7alhem] (Barnett 1955:23-4). Putting together the territorial information that Boas and Barnett provide, we can surmise that: the Pentlatch held territory between Cape Lazo and Union Bay; “s:ucksan” territory was located between Union Bay and Deep Bay; the *sá7ahlem* lived between Deep Bay and near the Little Qualicum River; and the *swáxlhu7lh* were situated around the Little Qualicum River down to the Englishman River in Craig Bay.

The Líkw’ala-Speaking Peoples

The Lekwiltok are ultimately descended from two primary village groups: the “Weewiakay” and the “Kweeha” (Galois 1994:233). The “Weewiakay” left their homeland near the mouth of the Nimpkish River (Galois 1994:266), possibly as the result of hostility directed towards them (Bouchard et al. 1999:40). For reasons unknown, the “Kweeha” also left their territory as they split off from the Kwakiutl tribes (Galois 1994:250). It is believed that beginning around 1750 a number of Lekwiltok initiated a phase of expansion with the movement into and consolidation of village sites on the mainland opposite *sá sitl’a*-owned Salmon River (Mauzé 1992:57). By the time Vancouver entered the region in 1792, the “Kweeha” and the “Weewiakay” had already occupied the areas around Port Neville and Sunderland Channel, respectively (Galois 1994:250). Over the next fifty or so years, the Lekwiltok would subsequently divide and combine with non-Kwakwaka’wakw peoples, such as the Comox, to form as many as seven different village groups: the “Weewiakay,” the “Weewiakum,” the “Tlaluis,” the “Walitsma,” the “Hahamatsees,” the “Kweeha,” and the “Komenox” (Galois 1994:223).

Comox Formations

Two initial factors led to the eventual consolidation of three linguistically diverse groups in the Comox village: disease and warfare. Although direct contact with Europeans did not take place in the Strait of Georgia until the voyages of Vancouver and Galiano in 1792, a substantial amount of trade had occurred on the west coast of the island for some eighteen years prior. This sustained contact brought with it many forms of introduced disease, not the least of which was smallpox.

Scholars disagree about the precise time and extent that smallpox first hit the coast. Robert Boyd (1990:137; 1994:17) maintains that the initial wave came in the 1770s and adversely affected the demography of the *entire* coast. Citing oral accounts and ethnohistoric records, Cole Harris (1994) counters this argument with his theory that the first epidemic did not reach the area until 1782 and that it was *localized* to the Strait of Georgia region. If Harris is correct, the population of the Comox and Pentlatch-speaking peoples would have been severely hit by a deadly onslaught of disease while their neighbours to the North would have been left largely unscathed. In any case, it is evident that the demography of the Comox and the Pentlatch was drastically altered by unwanted viral guests. This left the region in a state of disarray as social positions went vacant or were filled by less experienced members of the community. Ultimately, this led to the disappearance of a number of cultural practices and traditions. More immediate, however, the decrease in population opened the door for territorial predation by groups less affected by disease.

Through trade contacts, both the Nuuchah-nulth on the west coast of the island and the Lekwiltok in the north had access to firearms prior to Vancouver's arrival (Galois 1994:415; Vancouver 1984:623) while the Comox and the Pentlatch did not (Kennedy and

Bouchard 1983:89). This sudden inequity in arsenals tipped the balance of warfare in the straits forever (Curtis 1915:108; Galois 1994:235; Taylor & Duff 1956:64). With their weapons, the Nuu-chah-nulth repeatedly made raids across the island throughout Pentlatch-speaking territory (Kennedy and Bouchard 1983:16-17 and 1990:443). This resulted in a catastrophic blow to the population. Likewise, the Lekwiltok, with their foothold strongly planted in Johnstone Strait, used their military advantage and began to push deep into Comox territory. Moving south after having taken over the village at Salmon River, they proceeded to capture or destroy all of the Island Comox villages north of Cape Mudge (Meade 1962:37).

The pressure of these attacks forced most of the remaining Island Comox peoples to either join with the Lekwiltok¹² or move south into the demographic vacuum left by the depopulation of the Pentlatch. A small number of Comox managed to hold their ground for a few years at a fortified village site on Quadra Island (Assu 1989:12; Meade 1962). Eventually, they also gave in to the Lekwiltok and joined their Comox relatives along with the remaining *péntl'ech* (Barnett 1955:24; Kennedy & Bouchard 1983:17) and *sá7alhem* (Brown 1989:123) in Comox Harbour during the 1840s (Galois 1994:271; Taylor & Duff 1956:63).¹³ This is put succinctly by an elderly Pentlatch man in 1864:

The Great Chief above became angry with the Puntledge and killed many, viz many of them by Small pox, until what with disease and war, the Puntledge became very few indeed & sought the friendship and alliance of their old Enemies the Comoucs for mutual protection & defence: & from that day they lived together. (Brown 1989:123)

Collectively, the Island Comox-speaking groups around this time became known as the *sálhulhtxw*, taking its title from the group of the same name (Bouchard et al. 1999:13).

Through intermarriage, the Lekwiltok formed an informal, and often tumultuous, alliance with the groups living in Comox. This alliance proved deadly, as the Lekwiltok—along with the Comox—journeyed far and wide, annihilating villages with their late-night merciless raids. In the words of one historian, “every part of the Strait of Georgia knew the terror of their name” (Meade 1965:50). Battles against the Cowichan in the south could almost be seen as national wars due to the alliances and retaliation strikes that were involved (Ferguson 1984:304). One well-known story (Curtis 1915:110; Maud 1978:161) tells of a devastating retaliatory attack on the alliance by a Salish coalition that left the continued existence of the Comox in jeopardy. Several Comox and Lekwiltok septs were decimated so badly that they simply disappeared or were subsumed by the larger groups.¹⁴

Warfare continued on into the latter half of the nineteenth century until it was stifled by the consolidation of European settlement. ‘Gunboat diplomacy’ appears to have been a prime motivator in this movement (Meade 1962:39). On several occasions in the 1860s, the colonial government deployed warships against the Lekwiltok for their attacks on various villages (Meade 1962:39) and even removed them from Comox in 1864 and 1865 (Galois 1994:234). Regardless, it appears that some of the Lekwiltok kept returning to live seasonally alongside the Comox (Assu 1989:12; Mackie 1995:48; and Yampolsky 1958:317) and continued to affect the cultural practices that lie at the heart of their changing identity.

Ceremonial Identity into the late 1800s

Although the demography of the Native groups in the Comox Valley didn't necessarily benefit from its relationship with the Lekwiltok, the richness of its ceremonialism most certainly did. Through extensive intermarriage with the Lekwiltok, members of the Comox and Pentlatch groups acquired a large amount of ceremonial prerogatives typically

associated with the Kwakwaka'wakw. Of particular interest is the way in which these privileges were incorporated into the existing realm of Comox and Pentlatch ceremonialism.

It is quite likely that the pre-contact Comox and Pentlatch groups shared many features of ceremonialism commonly found amongst the Central Coast Salish to the south. The origin of the Comox groups themselves is intertwined with the *xwáyxway* dance tradition. Unlike their southern neighbours, however, it appears that the Comox may not have used the *xwáyxway* for ritual cleansing purposes (Kennedy and Bouchard 1983:64). Instead, it was shown only by high-ranking families in the morning at potlatches and not during winter ceremonials (Kennedy and Bouchard 1983:64). There are many accounts showing that this dance was a "hot commodity" amongst neighbouring groups and was given away as part of high-ranking marriage agreements.¹⁵

Like members of the Central Coast Salish, the Comox and Pentlatch were also active participants in the "spirit" or "winter" dancing tradition (Barnett 1955:288).¹⁶ Comox spirit dancers were called "hahagiL," a term also used to denote shamans and, perhaps, indicative of their very real connection to the spirit world. Spirit dancing was not a family-owned privilege and there was not an initiation so it appears that anybody could become involved. Spirits would first appear to individuals in dreams where, after a period of "uncontrollable moaning and singing," the individual would "bring his dance song out" and they would be able to perform at any winter ceremonial (Barnett 1955:288).

Increasing intermarriage with the Lekwiltok during the latter half of the 19th Century enabled the Comox to acquire a diverse assortment of privileges from the north. These rights were most often derived from the heart of Kwakwaka'wakw winter ceremonials. Usually they involved an initiation where an individual, about to receive the privilege, went into the

woods and became possessed by the guardian spirit of that dance society. In reality, however, much of this spiritual possession was feigned and acted out in front of a knowing audience. Rights to the Hamatsa, Nułamał, Tuxwi'd, and Hawinalał are examples of privileges that were passed down to many Comox families. Due to the exclusivity of these dance rights, these privileges took a place of prominence within the realm of the Comox winter ceremonial. The "hahagiL" were relegated to a lower status while the "Lakayin"—the initiated members of these dance societies—became the dominant participants (Barnett 1955:288). It is only because "hahagiL" spiritual possession was *real* and couldn't be controlled that they performed immediately before the "Lakayin" (Barnett 1955:288-89).

These two dance orders make for an interesting contrast: On the one hand, access to spirit dancing was essentially open to everyone and was therefore equitable. It was based on the *individual* and his or her connection to the spirit world. Membership to the "Lakayin," on the other hand, was restricted to families who had rights to these privileges through birth or by marriage. It was a *house*-owned privilege that was only temporarily given to a member of that house. Affiliation with these two dance societies is contrasted by the difference in their uncontrolled and controlled access and their comparatively sacred and secular natures. It is important to reiterate that both dance orders coexisted within the same winter ceremonial and represent a balance that was obtained between equitable connections to the spirit world and a society that was predicated upon a concept of ranked membership.

Comox Transformations

As non-native settlement increased in the region, local First Nations and their ceremonials became encumbered by laws established by newly-formed governments. The *Comox Indian Band* was created by amalgamating the remaining distinct lineages in the village and placing them under the leadership of an externally authorized body. Any real power, however, was taken away from the Comox and held by an appointed Indian Agent who, among other things, rigorously enforced the anti-potlatch law in the 1920s. Comox ceremonialism was dealt a powerful blow as this law, combined with a close proximity to the growing white population and an increasing commitment to Christianity, made it very difficult and largely undesirable to take part in traditional customs and practices. Exposure to ceremonials was essentially restricted to those that were performed in secret amongst other tribes far removed from Comox. This basically cemented Comox as a peripheral border community that had ties to all directions but had little to call its own.

Following the lead of official government policy, Comox members were guided and forcibly dragged along the path of assimilation. Men and women alike found work in the expanding resource industry while their children were shipped off to faraway residential schools. The heart of the family was ripped apart as adults lost their parenting skills and children lost their ability to cope in the Native world and were rarely given a chance to participate in white society. Assimilation and education made it rare and difficult for Comox people to speak Pentlatch, Comox, or L íkw'ala to their children, thereby resulting in irreversible damage to their languages.¹⁷

The social structure of the Comox peoples was drastically altered. The extreme low levels of population and increasing disinterest in traditional custom made it impossible for all

family lines to maintain their complex oral registry of ancestral names, ranks, and privileges. By the latter half of the 20th Century, the majority of the Comox population likely only held Christian names or did not know their *Indian* ones. Old house names, too, fell into disuse as people began to use the English word *family* to refer to their extended kin. Although many families in the community could claim descent from the *péntl'ech* group, the loss of that language in 1940 symbolically marked the end of that lineage. The small population of the Comox forced members to marry individuals from throughout the neighbouring First Nations. Although old-time alliances with the Lekwiltok were maintained through continued intermarriage, nuptials between other Kwakwaka'wakw, Nuuchahnulth, Central Coast Salish, and Mainland Comox-speaking peoples became just as common and just as viable. With the marriage of the last remaining *iksen* family outside of the community, only the *sálhulhtxw* and the *sásitl'a* remained as claimed houses in Comox.

Ceremonial Identity into the late 1900s

When the anti-potlatch law was dropped from the Indian Act in 1951, few members of the Comox community were immediately interested in returning to their traditional customs. Instead, many made it quite clear that they didn't want to be seen by the larger non-Native population as being 'Indian.' Most would outwardly avoid anything that would paint them in such a light. They would dress like the white people, talk like the white people, and act like the white people. When individuals would ask them why they had dark skin, many would quickly reply that they were of Spanish ancestry. When my grandfather wanted to build a traditional-style Kwakwaka'wakw bighouse on the reserve in 1957, members of the band loudly objected. Their objections were backed by the argument that they didn't want to "advertise that they were living on an Indian reserve" (Mary Everson,

personal communication 1996). In the end, my grandfather ended up building the ceremonial house off-reserve on the Courtenay municipal fair grounds.

With the doors of Canadian law flung widely open to allow potlatching, my grandparents returned to the arena with enthusiasm. Because of my grandmother's high position in Kwakiutl society and her extensive knowledge of Kwakwaka'wakw ceremonialism, it was the northern-style traditions that were emphasized. Andy and Maggie Frank would appear together at nearly every local event dressed in Kwakwaka'wakw regalia—my grandmother in her button blanket and my grandfather in his chilkat robe.¹⁸ The couple would make every attempt to include children from the community in their ceremonial activities, believing that it was through the youth that Comox traditions would be revived. For the most part, it was primarily Andy's kin—the *sálhulhtxw*—that would take part. When feasts and potlatches were held, it was the privileges of the relatively secular dance societies of the north that were shown. Noticeably absent from these ceremonies were the dances of the “hahagiL,” or spirit dancing complex, formerly performed alongside the privileged dances in Comox. My grandfather would, however, proudly dance in his *xwáyxway* mask given to him by former Pentlatch chief Joe Nimnim. This was accompanied by songs in the Comox language often sung by Kwakwaka'wakw singers such as Mungo Martin.

At a time when a ‘cultural renaissance’ was spreading throughout the coast in the 1970s, the revival of ceremonialism amongst the Comox was largely put on hold. While trying to raise money to move the bighouse onto the reserve, my grandfather was killed in a fishing accident in Prince Rupert. Comox fell silent to traditional song and dance. My grandfather's death in 1972 forced my grandmother to put away her ceremonial regalia and

to do something that just years before would have been unthinkable: she sold the last Comox mask in the community—the *xwáyxway*—to a collector in the United States. Fortunately this was offset by Andy's nephew and newly vested hereditary chief, Norman Frank, when he followed through with his uncle's wish and had the ceremonial house transported to its rightful place within the community.

It was in the center of the village that the bighouse could begin to serve as a symbol for the Comox people. Made obsolete as living quarters by the more practical western-style house, the bighouse could be seen as not only a venue for ceremonial events but as a marker charged with power and political might for its wielders. It is a source of pride and it is cultural icon defiantly facing encroaching modernity. It is a rallying point for the Comox people and it is a signal to the outside world that the Comox First Nation has reformed a connection to their past.

This connection, in turn, is delicately portrayed in paint on the front of the house. It shows the common crests of the Comox and Pentlatch-speaking peoples—the thunderbird surmounting 'Queneesh,' the white whale. The design is rendered entirely in the distinctive art style of the Kwakwaka'wakw. Externally, it tells the story of a unified community that has come to terms with its complex origins. Internally, however, the bighouse tells a different story. The central houseposts are marriage poles that show the unification of my grandmother's and grandfather's families. The only other post finished in the house shows the crest of Andy Frank's mother from a northern Kwakwaka'wakw community. In this way, only one line of the *sálhulhtxw* people is portrayed in the house; a line heavily imbued with substantial Kwakwaka'wakw connections. Conspicuously absent, however, are symbolic references to the other lineages within the First Nation. It is examples such as this

that have created the situation in Comox where certain identities may be perceived to be unattainable by members of various familial lineages.

Comox Renegotiations

Comox history has been one of consolidation. Its very origin is based on the relationship between as many as twenty different village groups speaking three languages. Through historical circumstances, the Comox have been thrust together and compressed into a position of a border community between several large and culturally strong First Nations. In the past, the Comox were able to negotiate this situation into a cultural tradition that was comprised of a number of diverse and rich ceremonials. Their system worked. Today, however, the situation is different. Where mixing sacred and secular, Salish and Kwakwaka'wakw traditions was once possible, it is no longer seen as viable. What follows is an attempt to show the present situation and the options that the Comox people have pursued in trying to construct a cohesive Comox identity.

Despite the fact that many competing cultural realities may today be present in Comox, Kwakwaka'wakw tradition has managed to retain a level of dominance within the community. This is the case for several reasons: First, it is due to the generations of intermarriage between the Comox and the Kwakwaka'wakw. As it is generally the socially-elevated members of the community that would marry individuals from the north, it is they who would often dominate and control tradition at ceremonial functions in Comox. Second, where other First Nations had lost much of their own traditions, the Kwak'waka-speaking peoples have managed to maintain a considerable degree of continuity with past ceremonials.¹⁹ In other words, many people would argue that Kwakwaka'wakw ceremonials

could be considered more 'intact' than others. This would certainly seem tantalizing for individuals looking to find their identity. Third, the creation of a Kwakwaka'wakw style bighouse within the community has—for ceremonialists—cemented the position of the Comox within the Kwakwaka'wakw system. In fact, before the construction of the bighouse in Campbell River, many Lekwiltok would travel south to Comox in order to use the bighouse for ceremonial potlatches. Finally, Kwakwaka'wakw tradition is seen by many as having an inherently tangible and aesthetically desirable quality to it. It is comprised of a complex series of masks, songs and dances and its widespread exposure through the anthropological record and into film has made it into a prototypical representative of Northwest Coast culture. In contrast, the traditions of the Central Coast Salish, such as the spirit dancing complex, are regarded by many to be considerably more dark, serious, and mysterious. For those with deep Christian roots, Salish ritual may, in fact, conflict with one's belief structure and its restrictions on dealings with the supernatural.

Adopting Kwakwaka'wakw symbolism for the entire First Nation, however, is ripe with difficulties. In Kwakwaka'wakw society, a considerable amount of clout is held by those families that have continued to potlatch in spite of the laws and social trends that have made it difficult to do so. For this reason, it is sometimes hard for families, who generations earlier had abandoned traditional practices, to acquire significant social standing within the potlatch world. Furthermore, some people from the northern reaches of the Kwakwaka'wakw will often state that the Comox are Salish and, as such, shouldn't take part in their traditional activities. To highlight this with an example, the Comox Indian Band once hired a well-known singer from Alert Bay to come down to Comox in order to teach members a repertoire of songs in Kwak'wala. He was highly criticized for this until he

explained to his critics that he was teaching songs that belonged to my family and that many Comox members, in fact, had close kin connections to an assortment of Kwakwaka'wakw houses.

Perhaps the most important reason why it is hard to establish Kwakwaka'wakw symbolism amongst the Comox, however, is that not all families have close kin connections to the north. Instead, many are married into or descended from Central Coast Salish, Nuu-chah-nulth, and Mainland Comox communities. For them, adopting Kwakwaka'wakw traditions is seen as going against their own family's past—it is simply an unattainable reality. Likewise, for Kwakwaka'wakw descendants, symbols of these other cultures are also seen as inaccessible within the parameters of their own culture.

For the Comox First Nation as a whole, then, this can be viewed as somewhat of a problem. The desire to cut across familial ties to this village or that and to move beyond the tensions that are present due to unequal access to cultural symbols is strong within the community. The pursuit of community-wide attainable symbols has lead the Comox to employ two different strategies: one is the dissemination—through the local school district—of a local legend that establishes Comox origin within the realm of myth. The other is the resurrection of the latent symbol of the canoe as a means to bring the community together.

The Legend of Queneesh

In 1994, the Comox Indian Band and the Comox Valley School District unveiled the results of their recent collaboration: "Legend of Queneesh: A Study Unit of the First Nations People of the Comox Valley." This unit was developed for the grade four level in an attempt to supplement the curriculum with relevant information on the local First Nations. It is composed of a sequence of ten lesson plans that allow students to explore numerous aspects

of the 'traditional' Comox lifestyle including food preparation, the importance of cedar, and arts and crafts. All of the components to the program are designed to revolve around the central theme of the legend of Queneesh (see Appendix I). It is through this legend that kids—including Band members—learn about the mythical origins of the Comox people.

It is interesting to look at the choice of legend picked for use in the program and to analyze the way in which it is framed for contemporary consumption. It's clear that one of the primary reasons this story was chosen is that it concerns the most widely recognized landmark in the Comox Valley—the Comox glacier. According to the legend outlined in the unit and its accompanying videotape, the story concerns the saving of the Comox people during the time of the great flood. This story shares most of its key elements with the *péntl'ech* legend Boas recorded in 1886. It differs, however, in several respects. First, the modern incarnation of the legend is a significantly sanitized version. In Boas' copy, members of the community get left behind to drown in the flood waters. On the video, however, the whole community is saved from certain death. Second, the new rendition outlines the story of the *Comox* whereas the old one concerns only the *péntl'ech*. This, clearly, is an example of framing the legend for political ends. It's in the local First Nation's best interests to have the community tied to both the territory and to the temporal aspects of this legend. By replacing the *péntl'ech* with the more modern term, 'Comox,' the First Nation is able to cement its place in the consciousness of all those who read, watch, or hear this legend. Third, the recent version of the story frames the legend so as to draw parallels with the Bible. For instance, it speaks of an old chief that is told by the creator to prepare for a flood. The old legend clearly, however, lacks any allusions to Noah and his ark.

The video is similarly framed to take on the dimensions of an accessible symbol of the Comox community. Besides the occasional insertion of a few words in the Comox language, the most interesting aspect of the video, from my perspective, is the portrayal of the bighouse. Done in a sequence of oil paintings, the bighouse appears much like it does in real life. It has the same thunderbird-over-Queneesh emblem as the real thing. What's really intriguing, though, is the rendering of the interior of the house. Gone are the poles of my family's lineage and the problems that they may bring up for a unified Comox identity. In their place are prototypical posts that appear as though they came from the Cowichan area. Interestingly, they are arrayed in the same manner as Kwakwaka'wakw bighouses, not in the way that Central Coast Salish longhouses are typically constructed.

The development of this program has had a number of implications. One is that the legend of Queneesh has been reinforced as a story that explains Comox origins. It positions the Comox people as the original occupants of the Comox Valley, imbuing them with a sense of legitimized temporal and geographical history. From the flip side, it serves to largely silence contesting origin stories. Stories about the original Island-Comox speakers coming down from the sky at *kwániwsam*, for instance, are left out of the popular record. Furthermore, the recording of this version of the story under the authority of the Comox Indian Band and the delivery system of the School District acts to sanction it as a definitive account. Ultimately, this undermines the structure of oral tradition by questioning the authenticity of any other variant of the legend. Prior to the release of this learning package, I would suspect that relatively few people—Native and non-Native—knew this legend. Now, however, the legend is known by a great deal more and is able to serve as a unifying symbol of the Comox First Nation.

I-Hos

On July 21 1994, the Comox First Nation held a grand event where more than 1200 people crammed into the little field in front of the bighouse in order to watch the launching of a 32-foot traditional dugout canoe (West 1994:16). For Comox members, this moment was one of extreme joy, elation, and pride. Young men representing all of the families in the community walked together to carry the vessel down to the water. For everyone witnessing this event, the canoe was able to transcend its utilitarian purpose and become a symbol of unity and tradition of the Comox people.

For years prior to the launch, the tradition of the carved cedar canoe had been making a remarkable resurgence on the coast due to several challenges that were made between First Nations to paddle to each other's territories. The task for participants was to enter into a renegotiation with the past in order to bring back or 'refind' their traditions. In this way, carvers relearned and recreated the dying art form of canoe building, while pullers discovered the amount of physical and mental preparedness necessary to undertake such an arduous journey. Elders were consulted throughout the process in order to try to discern protocol associated with canoes in the past. Rules were established for such things as conduct within the vessel and the formal oral request for permission to come ashore. Many of these were adopted with little change by other First Nations as they became involved with the growing 'pan-coastal' canoe movement. 'Canoe culture' was born.

When a number of canoes passed through Comox on their way to the Qatuwas festival in Bella Bella in 1993, members of the community immediately recognized the potential benefits of having our *own* canoe. Fortunately, chief and council agreed with the suggestion and the canoe building process was set in motion. Kwakwaka'wakw artists

Calvin Hunt and Mervyn Child were commissioned to carve the canoe. Because they had already built one for the Fort Rupert people, it was decided that they would also carve the Comox canoe in the same Kwakwaka'wakw style. Under the advice of the oldest Comox elder, the name 'I-Hos' (*aixos*)—Comox for “double-headed serpent”—was given to the canoe and a representation of the creature was painted down the sides of the vessel.

For First Nations on the Northwest Coast, the canoe is a worthy symbol. In many respects, “the canoe is a metaphor for community; in the canoe, as in any community, everyone must work together” (Neel 1995:2). The canoe cuts across boundaries of rank and family membership as everyone pulls as a cohesive unit. When a canoe arrives in another First Nation's territory, they are seen as representatives of their own community. The order within which a canoe comes ashore is indicative of the way a community is regarded in relation to the host village. The Comox, for instance, follow village ranking and always arrive just behind the Lekwiltok. In this way, canoes provide the opportunity for individuals to publicly proclaim and affirm their identity and membership to the larger ethnic group. Interestingly, the Comox travel in a Kwakwaka'wakw-style canoe with a Comox name wearing red tunics festooned with miniature paddles, typically associated with Salish tribes. For many people, perhaps, we appear to be a floating ambiguity.

In terms of tradition and identity, canoes are the ultimate example of latent symbols on the Northwest Coast. Where canoes were once obsolete vehicles rendered useless by modern transportation methods, they have been transformed into symbols of an ancient tradition that serve to legitimize the existence and continuation of Aboriginal peoples. Although it is recognized that canoes have endured a discontinuous past, they are accepted as *real* connectors to an ancestor's way of life. The canoe allows an individual to experience

the roots of one's culture: to see the territory and the water and the triumphs and the sacrifices. For many, it is a chance to come to terms with their spiritual awareness. For others, it is a cultural awakening. For members of the Comox First Nation, I-Hos enables them to acquire the beginnings of a cohesive modern identity.

PART III: CONCLUSION

Renegotiating the past is looking at cedar bark and seeing Gore-Tex. It is understanding that what we know about the past is shaped by our knowledge in the present. It is believing that the rain gear worn on a canoe is a reinterpretation of the cedar bark cloaks of our ancestors. It is remaining faithful to the past in terms that we understand in the present.

This thesis is shaped upon the proposition that we cannot comprehend contemporary identity issues without first looking at the past. When peering back through time, we discover that the history of the Comox First Nation is tumultuous and complex. We come to realize that the Comox people were once comprised of string of numerous different house and village groups who, through severe population loss, came to live together in Comox Harbour. This, essentially, resulted in the creation of a small border community nestled between cultural giants. With this knowledge in hand, it comes as no surprise, then, that Comox identity is often mired in confusion. Since participation in traditional activities is often restricted to certain families, certain ranks, and certain genders, many people often have little opportunity to take part in expressions of custom and tradition. The result is that group cohesion becomes tenuous at best.

In response to the proliferation of inaccessible traditions and in an attempt to create group unity, the Comox people have begun to pursue a strategy wherein they consciously frame elements of tradition into symbols of a Comox identity. Two primary examples were brought forth: The first example includes the reinterpretation of a *péntl'ech* legend for use in the local school district. The political ends of this, of course, being to legitimize and cement Comox claims of territoriality. Another example follows the renegotiation of contemporary

'canoe culture' and its impact on members of the Comox First Nation. The use of the canoe is seen as a way for all members of the community to attain a connection to their past. It is this pursuit of an accessible and attainable identity that will forge the bonds across family lines in a bid to strengthen the community.

ENDNOTES

¹ Comox is an Anglicization of the Kwak'wala word *kw'umuxws*. While Comox gives its name to both a language and a town and valley on the east coast of Vancouver Island, it will primarily be used in this paper to refer to the individuals or collection of individuals who consider themselves to be Comox and are considered by others to be Comox. Generally, these individuals can trace ancestry back to the Island Comox-speaking *sálhulhtxw*, *sásitl'a* and *íkseen* tribes or the Pentlatch-speaking Pentlatch peoples. The term "members of the Comox First Nation" likewise refers to these same people. "Members of the Comox Indian Band," however, are those individuals who are enrolled on the Band list held by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND).

A note on orthographic convention: Native words appearing without italics and not surrounded by quotation marks are common ways of spelling the word. Those that are surrounded by quotation marks are written in the orthography of the corresponding reference. Finally, those Native words that appear in italics are written in Randy Bouchard's practical orthography for the Northwest Coast and Plateau Native languages (Kennedy and Bouchard 1983:147-48).

² See, for example, Codere 1990:361; Curtis 1913:31-32; and Maud 1978:161.

³ I try to avoid the use of the term "invention," as this may connote to some readers an implied inauthenticity of the tradition and, ultimately, the culture itself. Furthermore, its use undermines the authority of the practitioners of the "invented tradition" (Mauzé 1997:8).

⁴ In 1985, Bill C-31 made it possible for women who had previously lost their status through marriage to regain it, thereby making children of the same marriage also eligible for status and the right to live on reserve.

⁵ A rough estimate shows that the Comox Indian Band accounts for about 0.5% of the overall population of the Comox Valley (approximately 300 out of 60,000 people).

⁶ Kwak'wala is the language spoken by the Kwakwaka'wakw who live north of Comox on Vancouver Island and the adjoining islands and mainland. They were formerly known as Kwakiutl.

⁷ The Comox spoke the Island Comox dialect of the Comox language. Other speakers of the Comox language are the Sliammon, Klahoose, and Homalco First Nations who each speak variations of the Mainland Comox dialect. Like the Pentlatch language, Comox belongs to the northern branch of the Salishan language family. The Lekwiltok, in contrast, speak *Líkw'ala* a dialect of the Kwak'wala language which falls under the heading of the Wakashan language family.

⁸ It should be noted that the information contained in this section is derived from research performed at least one hundred years after initial contact on the coast. Primarily, it represents work conducted by Barnett in the 1930s. As should be expected, information provided by his informant, George Mitchell, must be seen in the light of oral tradition removed from its origin in both time and space. It should also be seen as a legitimate cultural record of Comox history.

Throughout many of the ethnographic works used in this section, it is unclear whether or not they refer specifically to a house, village group, or collection of village groups. It is evident that names associated with houses and village groups have also been used to identify clusters of these units. Where the categorization of the unit is unknown they will simply be called *groups*.

⁹ The *xwáyxway* is known throughout the Central Coast Salish region as the "sxwayxwey." Dancers in that area appear in the mask and regalia of the "sxwayxwey" in order to perform ritualistic cleansing rites (Suttles 1982).

¹⁰ Boas recorded a similar version of the story in 1886 but likely misidentified “Nga’i çam” as Cape Mudge instead of *kwániwsam* (Bouchard et al. 1999:121):

A long long time ago Ciā’tlk’am descended from the sky. He wore the feather garment Quā’ēqōē and settled in Ōgā’i çam [Cape Mudge]. He became the ancestor of the Çatlōltq [Comox]. With him his sister Tē’sitla arrived. She was so big that she needed two boats to cross the sea. The brother and sister wandered through all countries and visited the Nanaimo, Nī’ciatl [Ne-Such], Tlahū’s [Klahuse] and many other tribes who all became their younger brothers. (Boas 1977:86)

¹¹ It is readily apparent that the names of the groups, “yayaqwiLtah” and “komokwe” are Kwakwaka’wakw in origin. In all likelihood, “yayaqwiLtah” is the Comox equivalent of the Kwak’wala word *ligwilhda7xw* [Lekwiltok] (Bouchard et al. 1999:18). As Bouchard (ibid.) points out, this may suggest that the “yayaqwiLtah” obtained their name due to extensive intermarriage with the northern groups. The “komokwe” are a whole different matter. In Barnett’s fieldnotes the “komokwe” are not identified as belonging to the whale house. Instead, a tribe called the “saLuL’but” who were “like cousin” (sic) to the *sálhulhtxw* appears in its place (Barnett 1935-36:2:63). It is probable that both the “saLuL’but” and the “komokwe” represent the same group and, like the “yayaqwiLtah,” changed their name through interaction with the Kwakwaka’wakw.

¹² The “Hahamatsees” (later called the “Walitsma”), the “Komenox,” and the “Tlaaluis” of the Lekwiltok are said to have had origins amongst the Coast-Salish or Comox-speaking peoples (Galois 1994:237-40, 244-45, and 256-57).

¹³ It appears that the groups represented in Comox at this time were primarily: the *sálhulhtxw*, the *sásitl’a*, the *iksen*, the *pénit’ech*, and the *sá7althem*. With the exception of the *sá7althem* who would often return to Qualicum, these groups could now be likened to houses of the Comox village as their separate status as village groups was now gone.

¹⁴ The Pentlatch-speaking “suckcan” were apparently “accidently” exterminated by a Central and Southern Coast Salish war party on their way to attack the Lekwiltok (Bouchard et al. 1999:28). The “Tlaaluis” of the Lekwiltok were nearly wiped out from an attack by either the Bella Bellas or the Salish around 1845. Survivors subsequently joined with the “Kweeha” (Galois 1994:257) who, when their population was diminished, later lived amongst the “Weewiakay” (Galois 1994:251). The “Komenox” appear to have been subsumed by the “Weewiakum.”

¹⁵ Boas (1921:891-938) recounts the story of a marriage between a Kwakwaka’wakw man with the daughter of a chief at Comox. The *xwáyxway* mask and regalia make up the bulk of the marriage payment that goes with the wife to her new home in the north. Amongst the Kwakwaka’wakw, the *xwáyxway* became known as the “*xwixwi*” and is still owned by many families who trace its origin back to the Comox.

Sapir (1939) provides details of the *xwáyxway* dance tradition being passed to the Nuuchah-nulth from the Comox as part of a marriage payment. This *xwáyxway* came specifically from the “Xá’^oxé” sept of the Comox and was unique in many ways. In this instance, it came with a bear dance that was closely associated with the privilege. The story describing the origins of the dance differs markedly from the version from *kwániwsam*.

¹⁶ See Amoss (1977) and Suttles (1987) for examples on the state of contemporary spirit dancing and its role in identity formation amongst the Central Coast Salish.

¹⁷ The last speaker of the Pentlatch language died in 1940. The last fluent speaker of the Island Comox dialect of the Comox language died in 1995. Although the speech population is largely composed of individuals over fifty years of age, there is currently an active effort to teach L íkw’ala to children and adults in the Campbell River area.

¹⁸The Chilkat blanket is a privilege owned by the Hunt family of Fort Rupert derived from the marriage of Tlingit noblewoman and chilkat weaver Mary Ebbets to Hudson's Bay factor Robert Hunt. The privilege was passed on to my grandfather through his marriage to my grandmother.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Cranmer Webster 1990 and 1991 and Holm 1977 for examples of continuity and change in Kwakwaka'wakw ceremonialism.

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Appendix I: The Legend of Queneesh

The following is a version of the Queneesh legend that appeared in the local paper, The Comox District Free Press (n.d.). It is taken from School District #71's Grade Four component, "Legend of Queneesh: A Study Unit of the First Nations People of the Comox Valley."

A white glacier watches majestically over the blue waters and green mountains that was for thousands of years the land of the Comox Peoples

Along the shores of Comox Bay, they built homes of cedar planks. Canoes were carved to ply the waters along the coast. Totem poles stood outside the longhouses.

The men set weirs to catch salmon and built smoke houses to cure their catches of fish and clams. At the time of the legend, they had a village of more than a thousand people.

An old man, Qwoi qwa lak had a dream which told him to warn the chief of an impending disaster. The Voice would give him the words when he spoke with the village.

In the morning, Qwoi qwa lak ran to the lodge of Gye gye janook, the Chief of the Comox Peoples.

"I have had a strong and compelling dream. The Voice tells me the rain will fall and will not stop for a long time. There will be great flooding. We must prepare if we are to be saved."

These grave predictions could not be ignored, for an elder's advice must be heeded.

The Chief ordered that the people of the village were to build more canoes, harvest cedar which was to be prepared and woven into more baskets.

But the Voice also asked them to weave a long cedar rope miles in length. A large supply of fish and clams were smoked, cockles were dried and seaweed preserved.

Men were sent out to hunt deer for meat that the women cured in preparation for the great time of flooding. The women also wove new clothing of cedar bark that would shed rain. Everyone was assigned a task, even the children.

Then came the hardest decision--which possessions could be taken into the boats? The ceremonial masks and regalia were the most important, but only so much could be taken with them.

Then when all was ready, the strongest and bravest of the young men took the long cedar rope and climbed high into the mountains until they had reached the glacier. They attached the strong rope in

such a manner that it would hold through the flood. The people in the village had great faith the men would choose wisely where and how they would attach the cord.

The rain began. The canoes (filled with ceremonial treasures, food and clothing) were attached along the rope. As the Comox Peoples climbed into the canoes, they took one last look at their village.

They watched sadly as first their homes, then the trees, were covered with rising water. They saw their abandoned cedar boxes float away, but there had been no room in the canoes to take everything.

When the rain began to fill the bottom of the canoes, the people became afraid. The children became restless, they could no longer run along beaches or play on the grass.

Daylight and darkness came each in their turn, but still it rained. There was great fear as the mountains disappeared, and only the top of the great glacier remained in view.

As the Chief and the medicine men began to pray to the Great Spirit, something they never dreamed possible began to occur.

The glacier which they had seen so often from their village began to take on a form of its own. It was though it was breaking water like a great whale.

There was a terrible commotion; everyone watched in silent awe as they realized that Queneesh had become a great white whale to pull them to safety.

The rains stopped. The air was fresh and sweet. The canoes and the cedar clothing began to dry out. There was no more silence. Everyone began to chatter and laugh with excitement. They began to shout out to the other boats making preparations for a great feast.

As the waters receded, Queneesh returned to the glacier and assumed his natural position looking out over his people.

Sometimes, when you walk through the Longhouse you can hear a whispered prayer. Kwa la whee gai Queneesh (Thank you, thank you Queneesh).