Shamanism and Christianity in Tlingit Culture

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B36

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In the coastal region of southeast Alaska and the Alexander Archipelago, an area that extended from south of modern day Ketchikan to the northern reaches at Icy Bay, lived the matrilineal society of Native Americans known as Tlingit or Lingít, which means “human being”. Three geographical groups of Tlingit Indians predominated Alaska during the precontact era: northern, southern, and Gulf Tlingit each with ties to a particular territory. Additionally, each community or kwaan in a territory considered itself as part of either the Raven or Wolf-Eagle moiety. In turn each moiety represented various clans and sub group divisions called sibs (lineage or house groups).

The examination of indigenous versions of Tlingit history revealed that each clan received a bestowment of a name, song, dance and most importantly a totemic animal crest. These most likely originated from supernatural beings or by a purposeful encounter with an ancestor. Precontact Tlingit society did not differentiate between natural objects or natural phenomena and the supernatural universe. In their eyes the animal world and human world were one in the same and to draw lines between the two was a foreign concept. Tlingit’s believed all living creatures reincarnated into new bodies, that the soul was immortal and that they reincarnated from their ancestors. It is not surprising that these supernatural bestowments became the basis of clan identity and, that identity affected how sibs interacted with all animate and inanimate things in their world. In fact ethnologists assert that the interpersonal relationships between sibs was the “frame work” for all social, spiritual and cultural aspects of Tlingit society.

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2 Philip Drucker and Harry B. Hawthorne, _Cultures of the North Pacific Coast_ (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1965), p 86.
relationship of animal and man and of the mortal and immortal realm defined the parameters of Tlingit society.

In 1741, Russian explorers first encountered the Tlingits or Koloshi as they dubbed them, near present day Prince of Wales, Alaska. Missionary efforts to colonize Tlingit territory began shortly there after. Although the Tlingit were attracted to the regalia and ritual of the Russian Orthodox Church established in Sitka, conversions rates fell short. Conversion efforts became more intensified with the establishment of the Presbyterian mission in 1878. The American missionaries rigorously attacked certain aspects of the indigenous culture such as communal living, matrilineal descent and shamanism. Missionaries described shamanism as “one of the worst manifestations of paganism”.  

Indeed, during the missionization of Alaska, military personnel and missionaries persecuted Tlingit shaman forcing them to relinquish their status as spiritual healers. Tlingit conversion to Christianity, coupled with the loss of Tlingit shaman as spiritual leaders, created cultural chaos, which lasted well into the twentieth century.

In order to understand how this cultural chaos developed one must first understand that shamanism played an integral role in Tlingit culture, and it was woven into nearly every facet of their society. Tlingits saw little distinction between themselves and the supernatural beings they believed inhabited their physical world. They believed these beings (guardian spirits also called yeik) where a natural part of their environment which could be called upon and controlled through shamanistic ritual. Of course direct contact with these supernatural beings was endowed only to the shaman.  

The shaman or ixt acted as the mediator between the Tlingits physical universe of earth, sea and sky and conditions brought on buy any evil spirits, which may have

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6 Drucker, Cultures of the North Pacific Coast, p 86-87.
manifested in that world.\textsuperscript{7} He accomplished this arduous process by calling on his own array of spirit guides to cure the sick, find a lost soul, foretell the future, predict the weather and even speak with rival shaman via long distance communication.\textsuperscript{8}

The greater number of spirit guides a shaman acquired during his lifetime the stronger his powers were thought to be. The \textit{ixt} mystically called upon one or more of these spirits during a séance, held as a public or “clan performance”, in order to bless the warrior before battle or to bring success on hunting and fishing expeditions.\textsuperscript{9} Consulted before any such undertaking, his prowess was held in highest regard among clan members who gathered during the séance. One séance held boasted literally hundreds of men and women in attendance (probably the shamans kinsmen.) An informant of ethnologist Frederica de Laguna gave an account of such a séance in which sib mates sang to help summon the \textit{ixts} spirit guide. The informant relayed a tale of how strong the spirit felt as it entered the doctors’ house. Hundreds of clansmen sat down around the walls, and people from other tribes as well, until the house was at capacity. As they sang the shaman danced around the fire to invoke the spirits. Laguna asserts that participation by sib mates during shamanistic rituals (summoning the spirit guides with songs) was an almost constant feature in Tlingit society.

On occasion a spirit randomly appeared to the shaman without being summoned, however to ensure success during a “clan performance” participation of sib mates through chanting (the song) was essential as the \textit{yeik} were called forth through sound. “They start beating the drums in a rhythmic and solemn fashion….the singers join in, and the shaman starts his performance.”\textsuperscript{10}

Beating of a drum, shaking of the shamans rattle, even the sound of the shamans hair was

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\item \textsuperscript{7} Kan, \textit{Shamanism and Christianity, } p 365.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Laguna, \textit{Under Mount Saint Elias, } p 670 & 672.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Anatolaii, and Sergi Kan, \textit{Tlingit Indians of Alaska} (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1985), p 86.
\item \textsuperscript{10} Anatolaii, \textit{Tlingit Indians, } p89.
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incorporated into the ritual of invoking the spirit guide. Because his long matted braids were pasted together with spruce sap, when the shaman moved during a ceremony the tendrils clacked together causing a sound similar to wooden balls hitting each other.\textsuperscript{11}

It was considered taboo for the shaman to ever cut his hair because this was his power source. Much like Sampson, the shamans mojo, his spiritual strength, was associated with his long locks of matted hair. A Tlingit at Sitka recalled, “The way they tell powerful shamans is by their hair all twisted around. When the spirit is coming to them, that thing just moves around by itself. Hair is not in braids: hair is matted, all stuck together and twisted up.”\textsuperscript{12} A photo taken about 1888 and first published in the Alaska-Yukon Magazine October, 1907 depicts the Teqwedi shaman, Tek’-ic, of Bear House, Khantaak Island, note the lengths of matted hair which touch the ground.\textsuperscript{13} Tlingit belief in the powers of supernatural possession became apparent during the séance as the shaman’s hair “moves around by itself”. This particular idea of supernatural possession incorporated with the sibmates physical involvement in the ceremony, was an aspect of spiritual fervor, which cannot be denied.

Between 1840 to 1860, the Greek Orthodox Church focused its missionary efforts, mainly in Sitka and also in surrounding northern and southern villages.\textsuperscript{14} The Presbyterian mission was also established there by 1878. Somewhere around 1885 Dr. Sheldon Jackson, a member of the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions, set out to “detribalize” the Indians. He believed, as did many missionaries during this time, that accepting Christianity was not enough and that the only way savages could be saved from themselves was to learn to speak English, abandon all old pagan practices, including shamanism and all aspects of it. In this manner the Tlingits could

\textsuperscript{11} Anatolaii, \textit{Tlingit}, p84.
\textsuperscript{12} Laguna, \textit{Under Mount Saint Elias}, p 684.
\textsuperscript{13} Laguna, p 982 plate 65. See Appendix A
\textsuperscript{14} Kan, \textit{Shamanism and Christianity}, p 366.
follow the righteous path of the white man and become “civilized” Indians.\textsuperscript{15} Scrutiny by missionaries was not uncommon during this particular period of colonization.

A war between missionary and shaman in sued with negative opinions of shamanism held by men of the cloth. Reverend Albin Johnson and Reverend H. Hendricksons personal accounts of the shaman, during their residence at the Presbyterian mission 1889-1906, were more unnerving than Dr. Jackson’s. Reverend Johnson characterized the shaman as “filthy wearing ragged clothes and stinking as if they had been dipped in seal fat.”\textsuperscript{16} He portrayed the status of the shaman among his people as hated because he (the shaman) kept them in fear and in the “deepest darkness” and should the shaman attempt a cure the natives would “sink even deeper into superstition and darkness”.\textsuperscript{17} Numerous missionaries held shamans accountable for belief in witchcraft and persecution of witches. Although many missionaries felt the shaman was a charlatan of sorts there were those who were actually impressed by the powers of the ixt and his psychic possession.\textsuperscript{18} The struggle against the shaman was not only with the Presbyterian missionary. Some religious figures in the Orthodox and the Protestant church saw shamanism as an “archenemy” and characterized the entire Tlingit religion as” being on the lowest rung of the evolutionary ladder.”\textsuperscript{19} In the late nineteenth century one particular Presbyterian preacher serving in Sitka implied that the ixt were superstitiously thought of as an “omnipotent being” whose word was absolute and considered to be a god.\textsuperscript{20} Missionary men even referred to them as

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\textsuperscript{15} Drucker, \textit{Cultures of the North Pacific Coast}, p 216-217.
\textsuperscript{16} Laguna, \textit{Under Mount Saint Elias}, p 684.
\textsuperscript{17} Laguna, p 722.
\textsuperscript{18} Kan, \textit{Shamanism and Christianity}, p 370.
\textsuperscript{19} Kan, p369.
\textsuperscript{20} Kan, p369.
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being “the epitome of ignorant heathenism.” Scrutiny of indigenous practices seemed to give way to religious resentment with shamans as the target.

Proselytizing efforts in Alaska continued and the persecution of Tlingit shaman by religious zealots became commonplace. Presbyterian missionary, Navy, Army and civil authorities began their relentless pursuit of shamans in order to purge them from their communities. One such fanatic was Commander Henry Glass whose favorite “sport” was hunting shaman. A Russian priest in Sitka relayed one such incident.

A captured shaman was invited aboard his boat and received with honor, Glass would talk to him in a friendly manner, inquiring about his life, the number of his spirits, the extent of their strength and power. Then he would announce that he was also a shaman who owned yeik and suggested that they compete against each other. Upon his order, a charged electric battery was brought out. The shaman was asked to hold the wires in his hands, while the two poles were being connected. The shamans’ body would begin to twist. His own people witnessing his strange and funny poses and hearing his screams and moans became frightened. The shaman himself learned a practical lesson about the power of his white colleague. But the captain did not stop at that. Shamans always left his boat with their heads shaved and covered in oil paint, and having never to practice shamanism any more.

The aftermath of indignations committed against shaman, in the observers mind, portrayed their spiritual healers as weak (spewing out grotesque sounds and writhing in pain.) Perhaps Commander Glass’s practice of head shaving was a purposeful effort to strip the shaman of his spiritual strength. Could “brute force” have been the causative factor in the shamans’ ultimate loss of power? In reality, many ixt were fearful of punishment and practiced healing séances in only isolated areas, if at all. This lack of spiritual leadership created a veil of doubt concerning the shamans’ abilities as a healer. It certainly placed American military in a dominant light.

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Persecution by missionary and military personnel was not the only factor leading to the practitioners lose of power among his people. Rather, it was his inability to cure the diseases, which Europeans introduced to Alaska. In 1837, smallpox ran rampant throughout the Koloshi settlements of the Alexander Archipelago. In Sitka alone the smallpox epidemic killed nearly 400 Tlingit Indians (one half the population) in three-months, as the villagers refused to be immunized. Previously vaccinated Russians and Creole half-breeds were among those who survived the outbreak. The remaining Tlingit at Sitka consequently lost faith in their shamans healing abilities because they were unable to save the survivors relatives from smallpox death. Seeing that the Russians and Creoles escaped the disease unscathed, influenced the Indians decision to also be immunized and ultimately their decision to be baptized in the Russian Orthodox faith.

Many shamans believed it was certain death to be immunized. One powerful shaman in the Kenai district appealed to locals to save themselves and their families from sure death by killing the vaccinators and burning their bodies. Tlingit shaman might have foreseen their own demise as spiritual healers with the coming of Western medicine. For the Tlingit, perhaps loosing faith in their shamans ability to summon the spirits and initiate a cure, meant losing religious convictions of long standing as well. Author Caskey Russell purports that, “Since a shaman could not heal European diseases, it would make sense to put faith in Western Medicine and putting faith in Western Medicine also demanded faith in Western religion.” Undoubtedly, accepting faith in Western medicine signaled the rapid decline of the nineteenth century Tlingit

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24 Laguna, Under Mount Saint Elias, p 177.
shaman. The shamans’ inability to combat the ravages of disease coupled with persecution and fear of punishment forced shaman to relinquish their place as spiritual leaders and healers. Thus, their standing in the tribe became less and less relevant to the clans social and religious life.²⁷

As Tlingits turned away from their shaman for spiritual guidance they became more susceptible to the proselytizing efforts of missionary. It was during this time of cultural transition that Tlingit chiefs, in the best interest of the tribe, supported the missionaries’ movements towards acculturation. When the Indians discerned that their old way of life had vanished and they were unable to cope with the complexities of Western religion and Western civilization in general, they looked to their chiefs for guidance. The chiefs felt that the missionaries offered the only solution to the Indians problem and in turn they supported conversion efforts.²⁸ In a letter from Missionary John Brady, dated March 30, 1878, their desire to be good Indians becomes evident. A Kootsanoo tribal chief who visited John Brady told him that he wanted to be a “firm friend” to the white man. He wanted his people to have schools and churches because in the past his tribe was bad and foolish but wanted to do better.²⁹ John Brady prayed the heathens might find salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ. One can only speculate what the going rate for salvation was in those days.

The missionary became the driving force behind tribal acculturation, and in the first decade of the twentieth century controlled their religious destiny. Presbyterian and Russian Orthodox missionary had “Christianized” all Tlingit villages by 1910. Additionally the Salvation Army and other fundamentalist churches baptized a significant number of natives.³⁰ From 1910 until

²⁷ Kan, Shamanism and Christianity, p 371.
²⁸ Drucker, Cultures of the North Pacific Coast, p 221.
²⁹ Alaska State Library Digital Archives, Angoon and Killisnoo Papers 1878-1911, http://vilda.alaska.edu, see Appendix B.
³⁰ Kan, p368.
approximately 1960, Tlingit parishioners felt compelled to hide traditional practices from the clergy, and they also took a defensive stance when explaining old customs to non-Tlingit whites. Missionaries often interfered with the “pagan” potlatch ceremony, scolding natives for being wasteful and old fashioned. Because Tlingit were sensitive to public ridicule, they began to rationalize pre-Christian beliefs by downplaying there religious aspects. In order to avoid cognitive dissonance devout natives attempted to reconcile Christianity with old customs.\textsuperscript{31} Ethnologist Frederica de Laguna wrote, “During the span of my fieldwork I have heard several older natives regret their renunciation of the old ways and have witnessed their attempts to revive them again.”\textsuperscript{32} In recent years non-native clergy have become more tolerant of indigenous practices if they do not clash with Christian teachings. However, Tlingit elders worried about the contradictions between the two. “Tradition bearing” elders believed shamanism was a key component of tribal culture and they have had great difficulty reconciling shamanism and Christianity.\textsuperscript{33}

It becomes apparent that the impact of two distinctively different religions (traditional Tlingit religion and Christianity) thrust together causes an inordinate amount of mental anguish for those involved.\textsuperscript{34} What comes into question is how this mental anguish, cognitive dissonance if you will, affected Tlingit culture itself. The burning of Kake totem poles in 1912 illustrates how cognitive dissonance manifested into a type of cultural chaos or discord. In 1912, the village of Kake Alaska admitted that Tlingit culture was inferior to American culture. To demonstrate this the tribe cut down and burned their totem poles (over zealous missionaries considered these to be pagan idols.) It was, to the villagers, a symbolic gesture to cut ties with the past and to

\textsuperscript{31} Kan, \textit{Shamanism and Christianity}, p 369.
\textsuperscript{32} Laguna, \textit{Under Mount Saint Elias}, p 7.
\textsuperscript{33} Kan, p 371.
\textsuperscript{34} Russell, \textit{Cultures in Collision}, p 243.
demonstrate the end of traditional culture. Reverend George Beck, dean of Alaskan missionaries, was present during the burning of the totem poles. He downplayed the presence of the poles depicting them as large and crude and claimed that a shaman actually initiated the demolition order. Supposedly the shaman believed if all remnants of traditional life, including the totem poles, weren’t destroyed then the whole village would be “wiped out.” This information was never confirmed, however. Beck intended to lead the Indians away from the darkness of idol worship into a modern world as he brought magistrates, jails and other Western bits of civilization to Kake. In actuality he also brought “religious factionalism, separation and division, and disunity.” Beck himself admitted that Kake Indians were divided religiously between the Salvation Army and the Presbyterian run Friends Mission. The totem poles were allegedly burned on the pretense that they were a health menace. A few of the mortuary totems did contain bones. The real motive on the part of the missionaries was to symbolically destroy unholy traditions. Most likely the symbolic gesture of the Tlingits burning the totems was in response to the demands of modern religion and change in cultural perceptions.

The Tlingits universe has expanded significantly since first contact. Shaman practitioners imbued with mystical powers no longer invoke spirit guides during clan séances. They no longer bless the warrior before battle, foretell the future, or heal the sick. The loss of the shaman coupled with proselytizing efforts of missionary created a ripple affect, which was carried well into the twentieth century. Thus faith in Western medicine gave way to faith in Western religion. Amidst the confusion of reconciliation conversion gave way to cultural loss and chaos. The religious destiny of Tlingit in the twenty first century becomes a question of how well they

36 Russell, p 244.
37 Russell, p 245.
navigated through the intolerance of traditional Tlingit religion in the past, and their ability to now synthesize old religion with new religion.
The Teqwedi shaman, Tek-ic, "Little Stone's Father" (1836?–1890?), on the steps of Bear House, Khantaak Island. He was given by his brother's daughter, Minnie Johnson. Erroneously titled "Anna-boots, Chief of the Kak-wan-tans at Sitka's man's friend," this picture was first published in the Alaska-Yukon Magazine for October 1907, p. 179.

Appendix A

Teqwedi Shaman
Fort Wrangell, Alaska.
March 30th, 1878.

To all whom it may concern—

A representative of the Kootenai tribe called to see me this afternoon. He says he wants his people to have schools and churches that hitherto they have been bad and foolish. But now they want to do better. He intends to be a firm friend to the white man and will do all in his power to prevent his people from doing anyone harm. He heard of my being here and came to see me to tell me what he wanted. His tribe has had a bad name but may the time be hastened when they shall have the love of God in their hearts to guide them in the path of righteousness.

Beset of all men to treat him kindly and encourage him to think of better things. May the Salvation lift and teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ soon be made known to his people.

John D. Brady
Missionary to Alaska.

Appendix B
Letter from Missionary John Brady