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First Contact as a Spiritual Performance: Encounters on the North American West Coast

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> The first thing they did when they approached within about musket shot of the ship was to begin singing in unison to their motet and to cast feathers on the water ... [T]hey make a particular signal. They open their arms, forming themselves in a cross, and place their arms on the chest in the same fashion, an appropriate sign of their peacefulness.[1]

This first meeting of native and stranger, Haida and Spaniard, on the northeastern Pacific shores in 1774 was, like first meetings everywhere, brimming over with danger and possibility. Both peoples sought to minimize the danger and maximize opportunities. Without a common language, both did so by performing for the other.

Despite all their differences, the natives and strangers engaged in plays that contained many of the same messages and wrestled with similar questions. What gestures to make that would not provoke? What costumes to wear to inspire the appropriate awe or respect? What face to put forward to show the right mixture of strength and openness? What precautions to take to indicate readiness but not fear? What steps to take to prevent treachery? What gifts to offer to suggest one's wealth and interest in trade?

The first encounters between indigenous people and the Spanish and British along the northwest coast of North America in the eighteenth century were largely peaceful.[2] That they began this way hinged on the messages exchanged by speech and gestures, music and armaments, dress and deportment that comprised the contact performances. Undoubtedly, what was sent via the performance was imperfectly received by the audience, and the response to the misunderstood message was no doubt also misunderstood in a cycle of confusion. At the first meeting of the Spanish and Haida, the pilot Martinez recorded, "I asked them a thousand questions [by signs], all

having to do with whether we could cast anchor, but they did not understand me, and their replies were to say that they had plenty to eat and drink if we would come ashore."[3] Still, the overwhelming desire for peace and the increasingly refined messages on both sides ensured that the misunderstandings did not cause offence.

Greg Dening has written about the theatricality which is always present in intercultural contact and "is intense when the moment being experienced is full of ambivalences. The 'encounters in place' of natives and strangers to the Pacific, 1767 to 1797, were full of such charades that were directed at producing effects in others." It was, he says, "a time of intensive theatre of the civilised to the native" but also, as I emphasize here, of the native to the stranger.[4]

A sailing ship is visible to the shore, and shore to the ship, long before it arrives, so both native and stranger had some time to choreograph their first messages. Even on those rarer occasions where natives and strangers stumbled upon each other without warning, performances were quickly improvised, each drawing upon earlier ceremonies where, in different contexts perhaps, they had performed for others. The strangers and natives performed their wealth and their interest in exchange for each other. That both were trading peoples, each with a cultural imperative to acquire wealth through exchange, goes some way to explaining the peacefulness of these encounters. But they also, I will argue, performed their spirituality – their mythology – for each other. These were not just diplomatic and trading encounters, they were spiritual encounters as well. Even more than their mutual desire for gain, it was the spiritual that, in large measure, determined the peaceable outcomes.

I have deliberately chosen the word "spiritual" for its capacity to encompass the vastly different religious beliefs of Europeans and indigenous peoples. Europeans were governed both by their religious beliefs and more secular cultural mores when they met indigenous people, the former obviously spiritual, but the latter also infused with moral guidelines based in religious teachings. Indigenous people made less of a distinction between the sacred and the profane. For the peoples of the northeastern Pacific shores, spiritual power animated the whole world, and every action had a spiritual component.[5]

The first contact was not so much "an event" for both European and indigenous peoples as an initiation of a dialogue which, once commenced, could not be easily broken off. To the limited extent that these contact texts have been compared before, they are usually seen as speaking past each other. Here I want to look at them as speaking to each other, and so in context with their counterparts across the cultural divide. Since the interactions were comprised of a series of performances, each in response to the

other, it ought to be fruitful to see the early contact accounts as part of a single dialogue, a "contact situation" that encompasses both native and stranger.[6]

One of the most obvious difficulties is comprehending the performances of the indigenous participants. One must of necessity enter into a world that is distant in time and alien in culture, attempting to perceive indigenous performance through their eyes as well as those of the Europeans.[7] Clearly, this is a challenge that can be met, at best, only partially. But this difficulty we are at least aware of. The key and usually unremarked problem is that we have insufficient distance from our own and our ancestors' world view. The hidden, and so more rarely engaged challenge, is to step outside and see one's own culture as alien and to discern the mythic in the performances of one's own histories.

Treating the contact situation as a single analytic field means putting both parties under the same ethnohistorical lens, asking the same questions of the different stories, regarding the relationship of spirituality to history, and of myth to history. When we do this, we find that both Europeans and indigenous peoples situated their contact encounters in mytho-historical frameworks imbued with and coloured by their spiritual beliefs. The "mythic and historical modes of consciousness" were interwoven in the records of both native and newcomer.[8]

Spirituality has long been out of fashion in contact stories told in history and anthropology, a result of two generations of scholarship that have denigrated its importance. An earlier generation of scholarship portrayed the contact encounter as a meeting between a technologically sophisticated, intellectually complex, rationally oriented Europe with a simple, primitive, and spiritually credulous indigenous population.[9] That many indigenous peoples initially confused Europeans with supernatural beings was held out by Europeans as a sign of their own superiority and the simple ignorance of indigenous people. It made Europeans feel good if, in the stories about these encounters, the explorer, be he Captain Cook or David Livingstone, was received as a god in the eyes of the Natives. Whether or not indigenous people thought of the Europeans as gods, European observers were hoping to see themselves in that role.

No wonder, then, that a generation of scholarship has been written against this tradition. From the 1960s and '70s on, scholars have taken pains to describe the sophisticated nature of indigenous cultures, the dark side of the so-called Enlightenment voyages, and the downside of the explorers. This scholarship emphasized indigenous agency and rationality, arguing that indigenous people drove hard bargains with Europeans and made only those deals which they considered favourable.[10] This view largely inverted the assumptions of the previous generation. In its well-meaning attempt to be relativist, it implied a universal rationality across the European-indigenous

cultural divide. This scholarship emphasized how smart and rational indigenous people were; it also downplayed indigenous belief systems and their role in shaping the indigenous response to the immigrant. Yet "rational" is a code for particular cultural beliefs – individual maximization and utilitarianism – historical constructions culturally specific to western European nations and their offshoots. This attribution of rationality to other peoples was not the cultural relativism to which this generation of scholars aspired: in fact, it achieved the opposite – a projection of European ideals to the rest of the world, "reproducing rather than critiquing the cultural and political hegemony of western industrialized societies."[11]

When, in 1981, Marshall Sahlins stepped beyond the dichotomy of the canny/credulous, rational/irrational Native in attributing the murder of Captain Cook to the spiritual beliefs of the Hawaiians, it is no wonder that he was jumped on by Gananath Obeyesekere and that their debate has been so polarized. Obeyesekere, as a spokesperson for the (postmodern wave of the) second generation, misread, as did some other indigenous people, what Sahlins was doing, and believed he was hearkening back to the first generation.[12] The postmodern critique surely tells us that what is considered reasonable behaviour in one culture – propitiating the nature spirits before embarking on a voyage, for example – would be irrational behaviour in another. In my view, Sahlins led a third generation of contact studies, looking at how people behaved "rationally" within the context of their own cultural definitions.[13] Moreover, a closer look at the Europeans would show that their rational behaviour was also determined, in part, by their non-rational spiritual beliefs.

Let me relate to you a contact story now.

This story, first recorded at Port Simpson on British Columbia's north coast in 1860, refers to the first arrival there of Europeans in 1787. The version I quote was told in 1916 by Ts'msyen (Tsimshian) George McCauley to anthropologist William Beynon:

> The people were all living on the south end of Pitt Island. Here they gathered their winter food of halibut and fur animals, seals and otter ... One day, two Gitrhala [Gitxaała] men set out from their village to fish for halibut and were so absorbed in fishing that they failed to notice a large boat approaching. When one of them looked up, he saw a huge being with many wings approaching towards them. They at once thought it was a monster which lived in the nearby rocks. They were at the time fishing over a spenarnorh ("abode of monster") from which a huge Raven used to emerge (a crest of "Arhlawaels, Kanhade"). They thought that the monster had now taken a new form and was approaching to do them harm. So they drew up their fishing lines, which were made of kelp (mawrh) and paddled in for the shore. There, they thought they would be safe. The man that was sitting

in the stern had the rope of the canoe fastened around his waist. Then they landed, the man in the bow of the canoe ran up into the woods, and the man in the stern got up and tried to follow, but failed to untie the rope from his waist. It tightened and he fell down and was overtaken by these strange beings, who resembled human beings. They came up to where he was lying and untied the rope, and he now set up and looked at them and became frightened. To protect himself he urinated in his hand, and rubbed the urine all over his body. The Gitrhala used to protect themselves from monsters and supernatural beings and ghosts, by rubbing themselves with their urine, thus breaking off any bad influence of the supernatural beings. If anything appeared to do them harm they would throw their urine at it. The urine was always kept close at hand in their houses and never wasted. These strange men now picked him up and made motions for him to come down to the canoe. They pointed first to the canoe and then to the halibut, and then to their mouths. This they kept on doing while saying "Soap," which they gave him and took a halibut from the canoe. The Gitrhala man thought that they were giving him a name. Then they made signs for him to cut the halibut up for them. So he took his knife of albatross bill and began to cut up the fish. These strangers took the fish from him and cut it up quickly. He was then frightened on seeing their weapons for cutting. These strangers then motioned him to build a fire, and he went down to his canoe and brought out his firing outfit (gyins), and began to build a fire. He worked a long time. Meanwhile, these men had gathered some moss and got their flint-lock revolvers, and set it off. When the Gitrhala man heard the report, he fell right over and "died" (sadaek, suddenly died, meaning fainted away). As he came to, he saw a huge fire burning, and now knew that these men were supernatural. So to give himself double protection, he again urinated in his hand and bathed his body. The men came to him and made motions for him to cook fish. He then went down to his canoe and got his cooking box and set stones in the fire, and filled his box up with water. As soon as the stones were hot, he put the halibut in and then the hot stones in the cooking box and kept on changing the stones. The strangers looked on for a while, and then one of them went down to the boat and got a large pot and put water in it and put the whole halibut in the pot and then boiled it on the fire. The Gitrhala man was now much frightened. When the fish was cooked, the men got out something else out of another pot which the Gitrhala man thought to be maggot (this was rice), and began to eat. They poured upon the rice black stuff which the Gitrhala knew to be the rot of people (this was molasses). They made motions for him to eat, but he was so afraid that he could not move. He now saw that they were eating and that they would not harm him. So he called out to the other man, "Come on down. They are eating. They won't touch anybody."

> They were eating the rot of people, along with maggots, and they were also eating adaeran (a fungus growth on trees) much like a mushroom, very dry, and large. These were biscuits.
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> After these men had finished eating, they made signs to the Gitrhala to show them where they lived.[14]

Some years later, George McCauley again told the story to Beynon, but this time added a continuation about how the supernatural monsters then visited the village. The strangers came ashore and were treated to a series of dances which showed the Gixaała (formerly called Kitkatla) chief's spiritual power. Then the villagers were invited onto the water being:

> They saw many fearsome things, they saw hanging down among the ropes many human skulls all around this monster and these skulls had ropes running through the eyes of the skulls and when the ropes moved they gave a groaning and moaning sound. When the Gitxałas saw these things they were very much afraid ... After they had been here some time, one of the [white] men came with his supernatural horn, which he blew and then all of the super[natural] beings danced, all dancing around the great chief of the supernatural beings.[15]

Finally, the story relates that the chief exchanged his name with the captain of the ship, and that henceforth the chief used the name Hale.

Clearly, we have performances within performances. George McCauley was engaged in storytelling in front of an audience, Beynon. He tells of a series of performances, at first improvised, as the first encounter was unexpected, and then ritualized and formalized as dances were performed and names exchanged.

But were they spiritual performances?

Indigenous peoples on the northwest coast and their ethnographers tell us that when Europeans arrived, the Native people lived in a world where there was no firm divide between the natural and the spirit world. The astronomical and meteorological phenomena, the plants and animals, even rocks and the sea, were all alive and cohabited in a world with human beings and their ancestors. Many of these other-than-human beings had another manifestation in their own parallel worlds which was human-like. Thus, the salmon lived in the water but could take off their fish skins when at home and live as humans do, and likewise the other creatures. Their homes were parallel worlds under the sea, in the sky, and over the horizon; in one of these parallel universes, the dead also lived. Spirits could be enlisted by properly prepared individuals to help, but they could also harm. People could communicate with the other-than-human beings in certain states of

heightened vulnerability and awareness – dream states, fasts, or quests – and in these circumstances the spirits of humans could move into the other universes and return.[16]

The oral histories of the Ts'msyen are full of supernatural encounters and lessons on how to deal with them,[17] so when a strange vessel sailed into the Gitxaała territory in 1787, there was no doubt about what this item was. It appeared over a spot associated with a supernatural being and the supernatural trickster, Raven. There was only one rational thing to do. Douse oneself in urine.

The Gitxaała account is a rich one, and variants of it have been recorded several times, the first in 1860, probably within the living memory of a few who were young in 1787. Owing to the relatively late timing of contact events in the north Pacific and the structured form of storytelling among the people living here, there are many such accounts from the west coast. In the course of this research project, I have identified close to two hundred different surviving accounts, recorded between 1789 and the present, of how indigenous people perceived the arrival of Europeans on the west coast of North America.[18]

When we look at a large number of these accounts, we see a wide variety of stories, not surprising given the amazing diversity of indigenous cultures on the west coast. But the Gitxaała account related above has something in common with almost all of them. Europeans are shown as associated with the spirit world.

This is not to suggest that Europeans were seen as "gods." Indigenous people here had no gods that they worshipped. Instead, they were aware of a wide variety of spirits that could take human form. In the stories of various peoples, Europeans and their ships were interpreted as having various links to the spirit world. They were commonly associated with the parallel world in the sky (from which many indigenous groups traced their ancestry), the land of the dead, the tricksters Raven and Coyote, or other "transformers" who had the power to change their form.

For example, several Nuu-chah-nulth stories have been recorded about the arrival of Captain James Cook's vessels, the first British ships to make landfall on the shores of the Pacific Northwest. In several of these accounts, Cook's ships were described as having come from the sky, more particularly from the moon, according to some. "Everything pointed to confirm the shamans' statements that these were the moon men. They wore yellow, had a brass band in their caps, brass buttons and epaulets that shone like the moon." The moon was the most powerful of all the spirits in Nuu-chah-nulth cosmology.[19]

An account of Cook's arrival recorded by E.O.S. Scholefield from Chief George of Nootka Sound offered several supernatural explanations:

> At first they thought it must be an island appearing, but as the object grew larger they saw it was some kind of watercraft. The ship was going quickly and making great waves. Then it was thought that it must be the work of Haietlik, or the lightning snake, making it move so quickly, and that the snake was working under the water; but others thought it must be the work of Quaots (the supreme deity of the Nootkans) and therefore a supernatural manifestation. Some of them thought it was magic, and some thought it was a salmon that had been changed by magic.

The association with the supernatural Qua-ots (*kāʔōts*), who was supposed to have arrived at the beginning of time in a copper canoe, might have been suggested by the copper sheathing Europeans used to prevent teredo worms from devouring their wooden ships.[20]

A version of this story recorded by Mary Amos from Machalat Peter goes on to say that only men who had been sexually abstinent for ten months were considered pure enough to approach the being. These were led by a female shaman who hailed the ship, "Hello you, you spring salmon, hello you dog salmon, hello coho salmon." In this story, the strangers were salmon people. After this encounter, the Tahsis *(tcesis)* people performed the "white man dance" whenever they had a feast, to reaffirm their connection to this spiritual event; the dance involved, among other things, wrapping their legs up as if they were wearing pants and holding burning sticks in their mouths.[21]

The Cook stories have the great advantage of reminding us that we ought not to be surprised by conflicting versions of the same event. This is particularly true on the northwest coast, where stories, especially accounts of supernatural encounters, were secret knowledge owned by specific families.

The theatrical nature of the first contact was also recorded by Captain Cook's officers:

> After we had anchored the boats came alongside without hesitation but none of the Natives chose to venture on board ... as they had no Arms and apperd very friendly we did not care how long they staid to entertain themselves, & perhaps us; a man repeated a few words in tune, and regulated the meaning by beating against the Canoe sides, after which they all joined in a song that was by no means unpleasant to the Ear ... As they were now very attentive & quiet in list'ning to their diversions, we judg'd they might like our musick, & we ordered the Fife and drum to play a tune; ... they Observd the Profoundest silence, & we were very sorry that the Dark hind'red our seeing the effect of this music on their countenances. Not to be outdone in politeness they gave us another song, & we entertained them with a French horn, to which they were equally attentive.[22]

Indigenous accounts of the first encounters with Europeans, coming from different parts of the Pacific's northeastern shores, have a spiritual component in common. I will mention just a sample of the more accessible ones. Squamish Andrew Paull's account of the meeting with George Vancouver near the site of the present city of Vancouver stresses the fact that Vancouver arrived at a spiritually potent time. According to Paull, the Squamish believed a disaster would befall them every seven years; Vancouver's arrival coincided with the seventh year, so special steps were taken to propitiate him.[23] Revealing a common motif in the indigenous narratives, Squamish Louis Miranda and Philip Joe related that the strangers on the ship were thought to be from the land of the dead – because of their pale faces and they way they were wrapped up tight in their clothes, like corpses in a blanket.[24] Several Nlaka'pamux accounts of their meetings with Simon Fraser identify him as the "sun"; others suggest he was a manifestation of the transformer-trickster Coyote. Many accounts say that the European ships were thought to be a supernatural bird, the Clatsop and Tlingit identifying it with Raven, the Trickster and Transformer.[25]

The names that indigenous people gave the Europeans are revealing of the link to the spiritual and suggest more than just a brief association of the two. The Nuxalk were divided on the opinion of whether the whites were people returned from the land of the dead or people from the sky. They called whites Qomcua, after a supernatural being who lived in the sky. Catharine McClellan notes that the Yukon Dene described the first whites they encountered as Cloud people, from their pale faces and the assumption that they came from the sky; a Tsimshian name for whites has the same origin.[26]

Secwepemc (Shuswap) called Europeans "Spetê´kł," the "Old Ones" or "Ancient Ones" in Shuswap language, because they were thought to be associated with the powerful transformer beings who once travelled through their land. Carrier Dene called the Europeans "Needo" and the Tsilhqot'in "Midugh," meaning, literally, "above us," possibly suggesting a celestial origin.[27]

The appearance of the Europeans was a novel manifestation, but it was not a threat to the indigenous spiritual ordering of the world. These strangers had a place in their world, inhabited as it was by the supernatural. Clearly, indigenous people were processing the new through the familiar, a principle Anthony Pagden calls *attachment*.[28] Rather than immediately destabilizing traditional beliefs, the arrival of Europeans was merely part of the ongoing proof of these beliefs.

Europeans too came to these encounters with a spiritual helper. For them, the encounter with the Pacific coast of America stemmed in part from an Enlightenment interest in science, a power play in an imperial game, a seeking after material advantage, and an imperative of their own spirituality. These were not separate interests: spirituality and religion intertwined with science, empire, and trade, and so, for Europeans too, the encounter was a spiritual one. For some of the voyages of exploration, one of the explicit purposes was evangelical. In other cases, even those where profit or science were the primary objectives, Christian spirituality and the eighteenth-century understanding of God and man's relationship to him underlay the whole enterprise.

This is most obvious on the Spanish missions. The Spanish voyages all carried priests aboard on a reconnaissance of souls, looking for information about the indigenous people and the possibilities for establishing missions. The instructions issued to the first European voyage under Captain Juan Perez were to enlarge the king's territories "so that their numerous Indian inhabitants ... may receive by means of the spiritual conquest the light of the Gospel which will free them from the darkness of idolatry."[29] We get a sense of how their Catholic spirituality pervaded their world view from the first observation of the Haida, noted in the epigraph on page 30. The Spanish recorders, priests, and officers all described the Haida as forming themselves in a cross as they approached the ship. Captain Perez described them as singing a motet, meaning "a vocal composition in harmony, set usually to words from Scripture, intended for church use." The priest, Father Juan Crespi, noted that a short time later, when a second canoe arrived, "night had fallen, and we were all reciting the rosary of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception ... Seeing that no attention was paid to them, because we were at prayers, the people in the canoe began to cry out, and they continued shouting until such time as the daily recital of the rosary and special prayers to some saints were concluded and the hymn of praise, which caused great admiration on their part, was sung."[30]

The invocation of Spanish spirituality was nowhere more explicit than in their performance of acts of possession/dispossession. When, on 30 June 1790, the Spaniard Manuel Quimper was rowed ashore at Royal Roads, near what is now Victoria, British Columbia, he read the act of possession, which starts, "In the name of God, the Trinity, the Maker and Creator." John Kendrick describes the procedure: "Having disembarked with most of the seamen and soldiers and carried ashore a Cross which they adored on their knees," the troops bore it in procession, singing a litany. When the procession ended, they planted the cross in a mound of stones, under which they placed a bottle sealed up with pitch which contained the "Acta de Possesion." The reason for taking possession was given: it was "to bring the word of the Holy Gospel to the Barbarous Nations so that they might escape the snares of the Demon and their souls might be saved."[31]

Less transparent but no less significant was the pervasive spirituality of the age of exploration in the Pacific on board the British Protestant ships.

The eighteenth century is normally thought of as the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason; the spiritual is often downplayed. But the spirituality of the Enlightenment, in spite of a few well-known examples, was not materialism, or neo-paganism; it was a new, more inquisitive and expansive Christianity.

The eighteenth century witnessed the rise of Western Protestant missionary activity and the establishment of a plethora of denominational missionary agencies. Examples include the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, founded in 1698, the Baptist Missionary Society of 1792, the London Missionary Society of 1799, and the Church Missionary Society of 1797.[32]

R.S. Sugirtharajah notes that the creation of these missionary societies was contemporaneous with the founding of the trading companies such as the Hudson's Bay, the East India, and the Dutch East India Companies.[33] This was also the period of the exploration of the Pacific.

Enlightenment Christianity had two countervailing impacts on the contact experience. On the one hand, the new emphasis on science as a way to understand God's plan was the spiritual foundation for the voyages of British explorers Cook and Vancouver, of the Spaniard Malaspina, and the Frenchman La Pérouse. It was as if the kings of Europe had taken up King Solomon's proverb that "The Glory of God is to conceal a thing, but the glory of the king is to find it out."[34] Cook and Vancouver were not religious men, but neither were they atheists. Their journals testify to their belief in Providence and God's blessing of their mission. Their instructions enjoined them to reflect glory on their king, and it was not necessary to state that theirs was not only a Christian king but the head of their church. Their instructions required them to show the Natives "every kind of Civility and Regard," in line with their faith, but also to facilitate the pursuit of science.[35]

The other side of European spirituality was the inferior position it ascribed to indigenous people. In this view, the uncivilized and unchristian indigenous people were not the equals of Europeans. While James Cook was probing the far reaches of the Pacific, European intellectuals were engaged in a battle over whether man had been created in a single or a multiple genesis. If the genesis had been single, as the Bible describes, indigenous people at best represented a stage of civilization that Europe had transcended a thousand years before; at worst, they had degenerated from the divine image that God himself had set on the earth. The polygenesis approach argued that indigenous people, like other non-Europeans, were not descended from Adam; they were not made in God's image, but from other inferior creations and so were not fully human.[36]

Both the single and polygenesis approaches, however, left no doubt that Christian Europeans were superior to all non-Christians. Lack of Christianity was the criterion that marked *terra nullius*, or "empty land": according to European "law," lands not claimed or occupied by a Christian nation were "empty" and so open for claim by any Christian country. The spirituality in Europe's formal religious acts, such as the adoration of the cross and the rituals of possession, was also performed in its laws and the mixture of scientific investigation, paternalism, and disdain with which Europeans first greeted indigenous people. Christianity is to Europe what the transformer stories are to the indigenous west coast of North America. Indigenous rationality rested on the transformer myths as European rationality and assumed superiority rested on Christian mythology.

The recontextualization of the first contacts as spiritual encounters for all parties helps explain why they were largely peaceful. The coincidence of the particular European and indigenous spiritual views was a prerequisite to peaceful trading. The specific conjunction helps explain why Cook was feasted here and eaten in Hawaii. Perhaps the best proof of this is the rarer situations where one side or the other did not make a spiritual connection, or where an aggressive spirituality disposed one party to violence instead of peace.[37]

When, in 1775, the Quinault first met Europeans between the mouth of the Columbia and Cape Flattery at the entrance to the Juan de Fuca Strait, they showed no special awe of them. It was these two landings of Spaniards, from the *Sonora* under Bodega y Quadra and the *Santiago* under Bruno de Hezeta, that constituted the first European landing on the northeast coast of the Pacific (south of Alaska). Hezeta, who went ashore at 4:30 in the morning of 14 July to read the act of possession, met six unarmed indigenous men who traded salmon and other fish to the Spaniards for beads. A few miles to the north, the *Sonora* sent a boat ashore with seven well-armed men to replenish the water supply and cut some poles. Quadra reported that "When they arrived on land, some three hundred Indians, falling upon them treacherously, had surrounded the boat and knifed those who were in it." Evidently, all seven Spaniards were killed.[38]

The Quinault and their immediate neighbours to the north, the Makah, had no dread of the spiritual power of Europeans. They exhibited this again in 1808 when a Russian ship was wrecked on their shores and the survivors, including a woman, were enslaved, the usual practice with strangers.[39] The Quinault experience suggests a possible outcome when no spiritual link was made with the Europeans.

There is a plausible explanation for why the Quinault were unusual in their response to the Europeans: they had met offshore strangers before. In 1833, a dismasted Japanese fishing ship washed across the Pacific and wrecked itself on their coast. The three Japanese crew members who remained alive

were promptly enslaved. Probability suggests that in the two thousand years that the Quinault had occupied these shores, this was not the first such arrival. The Quinault name for these exotic strangers was "wandering people." The Clallam, also neighbours to the Quinault, called them "men who washed ashore," a name that predated the arrival of Europeans. Most likely, the Quinault (and Clallam) were integrating Europeans into a pre-existing category of seaborne strangers, and not the spiritual world.[40] In west coast societies, strangers – people with no kin connections – had no standing, and attacking, killing, or enslaving them would not constitute a transgression of social norms.[41]

As contact increased between native and stranger on the west coast, the integration of the "other" through the "spiritual world" ebbed. On the European side, the expeditions to the Pacific northeast became more specialized. Initially, the explorers were replaced by the merchants. Merchants were also a product of European spirituality but tended to emphasize the inferior place ascribed to indigenous people in European culture, rather than the paternalism and scientific curiosity that characterized the voyages of discovery. The result was an increase in the level of violence inflicted by Europeans on indigenous peoples. Later, the merchants were replaced or augmented by missionaries. Clearly, spirituality was the overriding concern for the missionaries, and thus the mission-led interactions with indigenous people were at the peaceful extreme of the continuum. As the forerunners of the Canadian and American states were formed, the government took on and reflected the conflicted spiritual views regarding indigenous people. Since then, the spiritual and mythological elements in the European approaches to indigenous people have changed but have not disappeared.

On the indigenous side, increasing familiarity with Europeans altered their understanding of the European links to the supernatural but did not destroy them. Indigenous associations of the European and the spiritual persisted in variable forms, and from people to people, long after the early contact experience had ended. The continuance of these beliefs, which has been not been sufficiently acknowledged in studies of this process, obviously requires a full examination in its own right. But since this longevity speaks to the importance of the spiritual at first contact, let me outline an argument for that persistence.

Distinctly indigenous views of the spirit world survive today in many indigenous communities. This is evident from the statements of indigenous people themselves, from the persistence of the winter spirit dances in many communities, the ongoing potlatch exchanges, the Shaker Church, and the

use of good and bad "medicine" to help or harm people. The evidence is also statistical. A 1972 survey of Indian bands in the Fraser River drainage of British Columbia asked "does anyone in your band think the salmon spirit is important now?" Representatives of 32 percent of the bands said yes, and the positive responses ranged from a high of 43 percent in the upper Fraser drainage to a low of 13 percent in the urban Fraser Valley.[42]

If the belief in the spirit world is different and less widespread than it was 250 years ago, does this mean that a more or less linear decline occurred in such beliefs? Not likely. Although it may have taken only a short acquaintance with Europeans for indigenous people to decide that they did not come from the salmon world, the land above, or the land of the dead, and that they were not manifestations of Raven or Coyote, it took a long acquaintance before Europeans and their goods lost their association with the supernatural.[43] The place of the European stranger has shifted in indigenous cosmology, but probably not as rapidly as some have suggested.[44] Likewise, the place of indigenous people in European cosmology has shifted, but slowly, unevenly, and incompletely. When Europeans found a densely occupied "empty land," they were not immediately prompted to re-evaluate their belief systems. When they found indigenous people working hard, this sight did not immediately undermine the myth of the "lazy Indian."[45]

It is in the nature of belief systems that they change slowly, and that their strength is precisely in incorporating the novel into the familiar. In explaining to themselves what was happening and what had happened, indigenous people (and Europeans) had nowhere to turn but their own mythic consciousness. If Europeans were not from the land of the dead, or the sky, alternative explanations which were consistent with indigenous cosmologies were quickly developed.[46]

As Dening points out in the context of the South Pacific, "The waves of diseases that swept over Indigenous People reinforced cultural beliefs rather than challenged them. They believed that it was sorcery that caused them even as they associated them with Europeans." On the northwest coast, the oral histories also tell of smallpox as a supernatural disease, sometimes linked with Europeans, and sometimes not. Fur traders used their association with supernatural powers to threaten and control the local peoples. And when Frances Densmore was collecting songs among the peoples of the northwest coast in the 1920s, she recorded the spirit songs that had saved many people from dying of smallpox.[47]

Moreover, indigenous people, like Europeans, were perfectly capable of understanding their spiritually linked ideas on a number of levels. When we say that something is supernatural, we may mean that it is of the spirit world, or that it is far beyond the ordinary, or that it has characteristics we would normally associate with the spirit world – perhaps one of the meanings

invoked in the popular tourism slogan "Super, Natural British Columbia." Likewise, we must assume that indigenous people were and are perfectly capable of holding metaphoric and literal meanings of their spiritual beings at once.[48] Calling the newcomers the "Old Ones" does not necessarily mean they were literally thought to be the Old Ones. It may mean that they had characteristics that invoked the stories of the Old Ones, and so they seemed to be associated with them. This is particularly true, given that their main spiritual actors – Coyote, Raven, and Mink – were tricksters with lusty sexual appetites and the full range of human frailties that constantly caused them trouble.[49]

In a coastal indigenous society, wealth came from having powerful spiritual helpers. The wealth of Europeans, and especially their access to metal goods and weapons, implied that if they were not spiritual beings themselves, they had powerful spiritual allies. A full generation after the first encounters, the Tsimshian were still telling stories of meeting supernatural Europeans.[50] Europeans also appear in the indigenous pictograph and petroglyph rock art associated with spiritual encounters.

That indigenous people remained interested in European spiritual powers even a century after first contact will come as no surprise to those who have read the recent work on indigenous relationships with missionaries on the northwest coast. In most cases, missionaries were invited into indigenous communities by community members who sought them out. Some indigenous people, anxious to obtain help from a white ally, saw economic benefits from association with the missionary. Few were interested in replacing their own spiritual beliefs and powers with Christian ones. They sought to add the spirit powers of the whites to their own.[51]

For a time after first contact, European goods also had a connection to the supernatural, so even the exchange of goods had a spiritual context. We see this especially in the indigenous ritual use of copper associated by the Nuu-chah-nulth with the spiritual figure Qua-ots. Indigenous people often incorporated European trade goods into their spiritual ceremonies and used them as items of adornment to show a link to the Europeans themselves.[52] The use of pants in the white man dance mentioned above, or the fact that the Chinook called buttons by the name they used for stars, are examples. European items worn to signify a connection to Europeans include one of the two spoons taken from Perez's ship on its brief halt near Hesquiaht. This was worn as an adornment around the neck of a chief until purchased by Captain Cook; the first axe head traded in Haida Gwaii was also used as an ornament on a necklace.[53] Such associations endured for a century at least.

One example of the lasting association of Europeans and their goods with spirit powers comes from the accounts of a Stó:lō man, Old Pierre, given to anthropologist Diamond Jenness in the 1930s. Old Pierre talked about the

persistence of the belief in spiritual helpers and noted that the steam engine and the locomotive were particularly potent spiritual helpers among the dancers with whom he was associated. Irving Goldman, working with the Ulkatcho Dene in the 1940s, found that objects from the "white world," such as a spring mattress, were held in special veneration, used as status symbols, and not slept on. Catharine McClellan, working with Tutchone elders in the 1970s, heard them recall that their shamans had spirit helpers that came from tobacco, 30-30 shells, angels, books, and mirrors, as well as the more "traditional" natural helpers.[54]

The recognition that the first and ongoing contacts between native and stranger were spiritual encounters as well as material ones asks us to rethink the contact history of the northeastern Pacific coast. Indigenous and European peoples did not have a spiritual view of each other at one moment and a rational view the next, nor did they have to choose between one or the other. In most cases, as Jonathan D. Hill points out, "mythic and historical modes of consciousness complement rather than oppose each other." Myth can, has, and does provide the foundation for understanding history.[55]

This reinterpretation asks that we take spirituality seriously. To do this, we have to re-examine our joint history. An ethnohistory of any contact event asks that we probe the extent to which the European as well as the indigenous history was recorded and performed in a language steeped in its own spiritual mythology. Understanding the spiritual component of contact events, and the stories that have arisen from them, should bring a better understanding of the misunderstandings embedded in those foundational first encounters.

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