

“CANNIBAL DANCER IN THE KWAKIUTL WORLD”

MARSHA PADFIELD

The dance ethnologist attempts to understand the dance through analyzing, examining and understanding the larger cultural context. The dance ethnologist also can begin understanding the culture through the study of dance and ritual—the dance event which Schiffilin says can be interpreted as a microcosm of the larger society.

It is the special perspective of the dance event as an integrated part of the larger culture whole which I find so challenging and stimulating. Contained within it are layer upon layer of symbolic meanings that provide clues about the cosmology of people. Indeed, within the forms and symbols of groups' expressive behaviors are many elements that embody and encode the meaning of their mythic complex and world view. Richard Waterman has said, “dance ... simultaneously symbolize(s) and support(s) the most essential aspect of world view” (Waterman 49). Clifford Geertz speaks of ritual as a symbolic fusion of ethos and world view, models “of” what people believe and models “for” believing it (Geertz 112, 113).

I have had the opportunity of doing some study of the Kwakiutl of the Pacific Northwest coast. There is a great wealth of material on the tribes of the Pacific Northwest and Kwakiutl in particular. The research covers a long period from the late 1800's almost to the present. Several scholars have written re-evaluating and re-interpreting or just interpreting the data. Anyone writing about this group must, of course, acknowledge the incredible work of Franz Boas in compiling a monumental amount of data on the Kwakiutl.

Land of Abundance – Theatre of Violence

The Kwakiutl Indians of the Pacific Northwest Coast are a fascinating and challenging group to study. They possess vivid, beautiful, and disturbing works of art. They perform spectacular violent dramas. They seem to live in a relatively peaceful, regulated, ordered society, yet display wildly violent rituals. To a casual, non-Kwakiutl observer, these seeming inconsistencies and incongruities are distressing and hard to comprehend. However, further study reveals an incredibly complex, very consistent, functioning ritual pattern that supports and is supported by a developed mythology that articulates with their world view. The environment of the Kwakiutl people is one of abundance. Indeed, the various forms of expressive behavior are also found in great profusion. The patterns and interrelationships of behaviors also hold clues to their cosmology. Finally, and especially for the dance ethnologist, the Dance Event and the Dance Symbol within it embody and encode layer upon layer of the meaning of their mythic complex and world view.

The Hamatsa, Cannibal Dancer Ritual

A vivid illustration of the interrelationship of symbolic systems each containing a model of Kwakiutl world view is presented in the Hamatsa or Cannibal dancer. When perceived and analysed in a ritual setting, he becomes The Dance Symbol in the dance complex (Fuller-Snyder 214, 215). As such, the Hamatsa (Dance Symbol) contains both outer aspects (costume, movement, and paraphernalia) and inner aspects (stimulation, transformation, unification with group or society) (Fuller-Snyder 223). We see the dominant symbols of the Kwakiutl expressed in static form—costumes, masks, crests, totem poles; in vocal form—songs, speeches, dialogue;—and in motion—drama, dance. Victor Turner, in *The Forest of Symbols*,

says that dominant symbols bring into close contact ethical and jural norms with strong emotional stimuli (Turner 29). These norms and values become saturated with emotion, while basic emotions become regulated with social order. Based upon my study, I believe that this is what occurs during the Hamatsa Ritual. Walens views the ceremonials in a similar fashion:

The Kwakiutl contextualize their feasts and ceremonies, simultaneously heightening their dramatic impact, through the contraposition of images of voracious hunger with images and rituals of moral control (Walens 139).

The Hamatsa myth provides the perfect vehicle for the interaction of Turner's "ideological pole" (of norms that guide and control) and "sensory pole" (of gross feelings and desires) (Turner 29).

Winter Ceremonial – Tsetseka

The Kwakiutl divided the year into two parts. The spring and summer were perceived as the secular times of the year and were called "Bakoos" (Hawthorn 36) or "Basux" (Gill 125). The time was one of intense outdoor activity involving gathering, hunting, and preserving food. As well, it was a time of travel and visiting between groups. People were often spread out from one another.

The coming of winter saw the people return to their villages and shelter. The winter ceremonial season, "tsetseka" (Gill 124) or "tseyka" (Holm 1972:10), was the season of the supernatural. It was a time of intense ceremonial activity. In a sense, time as well as activity stopped. Activities of daily life like food-gathering, hunting, fishing and visiting were suspended (Walens 138). The Kwakiutl even carried this reversal into the entire order of human existence, believing that winter wasn't a time at all, but rather a re-enactment of the timeless (Gill 125). During the time of the winter ceremonials, the people live communally, in large, wooden houses and they perform their dances in the Winter Ceremonial Lodge (Gill 124).

As Hawthorn, Gill, and Rohner all discuss, the season is one wherein the supernatural spirits come for the purpose of initiating the young into the dancing societies. The initiations into the societies consisted of feasting, oratory, and display of family privileges in drama and dance (Hawthorn 1967:36). Drucker expresses most succinctly that these winter dances are cycles of dramas wherein:

the protagonists encounter with a spirit who kidnaps him, bestows supernatural powers upon him, then returns him to his village, repeating the experience of the ancestor from whom the performer inherited the right to perform (Drucker 1955:148).

These cycles comprised many dances by hierarchically graded dance societies. Each dance society held more or less prestige for its members, indeed members were even hierarchically arranged within societies (Drucker 1940:201). As Hawthorn describes, each society had its own ritual order, its own hereditary outward signs taught to them by their supernatural ancestors (Hawthorn 38).

In conclusion, these performances were embedded in a ritual context of a rank-stratified system (wherein only certain people had the right to particular names, song and dances). The intention "was always to convince the village of the real presence of spirits and the supernatural" (Hawthorn 39). The winter ceremonial expressed the notion of a spiritual counterpart to the physical world. The manner in which it accomplished this was dramatic, often involving trickery and illusion. Franz Boas defined the term "tsetseka" as "fraudulent, to cheat"; Irving Goldman analyzes it "to convey the idea of imitation" (Gill 126). Whichever point of view is taken, the tsetseka was a most dramatic, theatrical performance.

As has been said, during the tsetseka persons were initiated by public performance of rites into the various dancing societies and the most complex, important and highest ranking of these was the Hamatsa Society (Rohner 107).

The Hamatsa ritual itself exists in varied forms; Boas describes some twelve versions. There are, however, some basic characteristics shared by all: the idea of taming the initiate and of returning him to a secular state was predominant among them (Boas 1966:173). The basic structure of the Hamatsa story is as follows:

... the novice's kidnapping and transformation by the cannibal spirit, his return to his village as a wild-man-eater, his capture and taming by means of dances and songs, and his ritual purification. ... (Holm 11).

Perhaps the most important points to be gleaned from this are the rituals' importance as the "keystone for the entire interaction between mankind and the supernatural" (Walens 1981:15) and the fact that the Hamatsa's "behavior could not be accounted for in human terms"—thus proving the validity of spirit possession (Hawthorn 45). After the initiate has been tamed, he is a member of the Hamatsa society. He is a shaman; he has been transformed.

There is ample evidence that an altered state of consciousness (ASC) facilitating this transformation has occurred. All of Arnold Ludwig's criteria for the production of an ASC are present in the Hamatsa ritual:

1. Reduction of exteroceptive stimulation
2. Increased exteroceptive stimulation
3. Increased alertness, mental involvement
4. Relaxation of critical faculties
5. Presence of somatopsychological factors (Ludwig 12–14)

Within the ritual we find many things producing and revealing this transformational state, rattles, whistles, songs, vibrating, shaking, trembling. All of these are used and reported by participants and observers. Charles Nowell reports:

... dancing ... with their hands shaking while we were singing ... Bob Harris went around the house still using his rattle, singing. (Ford 189).

Nowell says further:

"While I was dancing, I didn't hardly feel any pain at all" (Ford 117).

This would seem to indicate some type of unusual psychic (ASC) state was produced while dancing. In the film "Crooked Beak of Heaven," this vibrating was both discussed and seen in the Hamatsa dancer's jaw and body.

Music and the Tsetseka

In *Crooked Beak of Heaven* Holm discusses musical instrumentation in Kwakiutl ritual ceremonies. The most important is the rattle whose sound represents the direct contact with the supernatural. The rattles are used to announce entrances of dancers and are swung to honour and calm the performer. The shamans use them to call down the spirits of the Tsetseka. Rattles used in Winter Ceremonials are generally ovoid or round.

Whistles are also of importance to the ceremonials and are of several types; single, double, and triple. Those used in the Winter Ceremonials produce single notes. The Kwakiutl use no melodic instruments except the voice. The presence of supernatural power is expressed by the sound of the whistle. The Hamatsa is particularly known by his whistles (often played by his attendants). It is interesting to note that the whistles are not intended to be seen when being used. They are often made with the openings at different locations on the barrels so that a pulsating note

of two pitches results. Holm provides the following description of the double whistle:

A single-chambered whistle—is joined by lashing to the mouthpiece of a vibrating reed whistle. The two voices produced contrast in pitch and quality, one being a clear flute-like note and the other a buzzing or squealing tone.

As whistles vary so much in size, sound quality and pitch, they are often employed to represent various particular spirits.

The Masks

Of all the transformational devices, the most important and spectacular are the masks of the Kwakiutl. These are hereditary property linked with social rank as well as ceremonial patterns. They are carved of cedar and brightly painted. The masks play a critical visual and religious role (Walens 15). For the Kwakiutl, the mask is what is real. It isn't symbolic because it covers up or disguises; it is symbolic because of what it makes present: the spiritual reality (Gill 73). As such, masks are seen as objects of immense power.

In the mythology of the Hamatsa dance, the masks are believed to transform the wearers once they are donned. Further, "the dancers are seen as mask wearing men who take on powers and characteristics of the being represented by the masks." The Hamatsa bird-monster mask was worn on the forehead at an upward angle; it also covered the sides and back of the dancer's head. (Holm 1972:14). In addition, there were red cedar bark fringes hanging from the back of the mask. (Hawthorn 105). A harness was needed to help support the mask; this also anchored strings by which the dancer could move the lower beak (Hawthorn 105). Some of the power and majesty these masks could induce is expressed by Bill Holm:

... the setting of a fire-lit plank house, ... the masked dancers stepping, then crouching and hopping to the syncopated, percussive beat of the song, the bark fringes swaying, the masks turning with birdlike jerks, and then the jaws snapping in resounding staccato—all conjure an impression of supernatural life (Holm 1972:16).

The masks were physically transformational as well as spiritually. The creature portrayed in the dance may suddenly transform into another being, as the mask "splits" opens by moving parts to reveal another character. This "folding out" mask (Holm 1972:48) may be used to illustrate incidents in myths that are dramatically presented in the dance. Continuing with the idea of "trickery," or "all is not what it appears to be," are many dramatic facets of the Hamatsa ritual event.

Often complicated sets of tunnels, props, ropes, and boxes were used to create rather bloody, grisly effects. The literature cites many of these ruses but two examples will express the quality and nature of the illusions. Charles Nowell comments that the elements of trickery ran all through the dancing and initiation rites (Ford 25), and mentions several frightening illusions, one in which a girl is placed in a box and supposedly burned to death. In actuality, "There was a hole under the box with a tunnel leading out of the house, ... then someone sang into the fire through a kelp tube" (Ford 120). Nowell also describes decapitation, wherein a woman's head is seemingly cut off. "This production was worked by a sleight of hand and by a mask which was a perfect portrait of the dancer ..." (Ford 1968:121). These tricks were the property of the secret society that used them.

The Hamatsa, Cannibal Dancer, society's most prized trick may have involved the eating of human flesh. Did the Cannibal actually eat human flesh or was it a carefully staged deception? Scholars appear to be divided on this issue. Drucker

(Drucker 1955:151) and Hawthorn (Hawthorn 45) believe it was trickery involving sleight of hand, other theatrical devices, and possibly dried bear meat. It is interesting to note that this is a change of attitude for Drucker, who in 1940 in his article "Kwakiutl Dancing Societies" stated:

He bites only high-rank initiates, who have been chosen—and notified so—beforehand ... and the people bitten are paid for their wounds (Drucker 204).

Stanley Walens would appear to agree with this earlier position of Drucker. Walens explains how the Hamatsa's assistants keep careful record of who was bitten in order that these people may receive return payments (Walens 147). He expresses no doubt that actual biting and eating of human flesh occurs. In fact, he engages in lengthy discussions of the ingestion of flesh and its later regurgitation (Walens 145-148).

I would tend to believe that what actually transpired was most like the description given by Charles Nowell:

In eating them, I don't think they were eating them, but just pretending, they were pretending ... some of them did it, but these are the ones that didn't know any better. When they bit a piece off another's arm, they had to give him something for it (Ford 114).

Conclusion

The Hamatsa ritual possesses all of the central themes in Kwakiutl theatre and mythology—kidnapping by supernatural forces, demonic possession, death and resurrection. Drucker succinctly summarizes the event:

Shamanism provided the plot of the drama, mythology, the key figures, the concept of hereditary prerogatives selected the actors and provided the incentives for participation, warfare, the concept of graduated social rank, potlatching and the carver's art were all drawn in ...

The Hamatsa, as Dance Symbol, has been discussed in his Outer aspects of costume and paraphernalia and in his Inner aspects of stimulation and transformation. Some comments on the movement of the Hamatsa dancer in his frenzied state and in his taming will unite the Inner and Outer, and show some of the synergy within the parts of the ritual. The Hamatsa steps, crouches and hops. He jerks to a percussive syncopated beat (Holm 1972:16). He has an almost constant flow of movement, broken at intervals by rather sudden, but not necessarily jerky changes of motion and direction (Holm 1965:93). He squats down, extends his arms sideways, trembling violently (Hays 172). He uses simple, mimetic gestures and wild frenzied running and twirling ("Crooked Beak of Heaven" film). Then he is ritually tamed following this frenzy. He is now human again and is reunited with his tribe and group. It is through this taming that the power of ritual, of morality, of the winter ceremonial is emphasized. At this point in the ceremony the soft, inner bark of cedar is used as a pathway; smoke fills the room and everyone is cleansed and right thinking and action return (Walens 157). Boas describes a Kwakiutl song that reinstates and reinforces the creative purpose of the Hamatsa Dance:

The Cannibal spirit made me a winter dancer.
The Cannibal spirit made me pure
I do not destroy life, I am life maker (Boas 253).

Through an understanding of the Dance Symbol (the Hamatsa Dancer), within the specific ritual setting (the Hamatsa Ritual) in the Dance Complex (the Winter Ceremonial-tsetseka) we learn much about a fascinating tribe—the Kwakiutl. Dance becomes a way of knowing for us, as well as for the Kwakiutl.

*University of Alberta
Calgary, Alberta*

Bibliography

- Boas, Franz. *Kwakiutl Ethnography*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1966.
- Brinton, Danial G. *Myths of the New World*. New York: Multimedia, 1976.
- Drucker, Philip. 1955. *Indians of the Northwest Coast*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Drucker, Philip. 1940. *Kwakiutl Dancing Societies*. Anthropological Records. Vol. 2. No. 6. Berkeley: U of California, Berkeley.
- Drucker, Philip and Robert Heizer. 1967. *To Make My Name Good*. Berkeley: U of California, Berkeley.
- Ford, Clellan. 1968. *Smoke From Their Fires. The Life of a Kwakiutl Chief*. New Haven and London: Archon.
- Fuller-Snyder, Allegra. 1972. "The Dance Symbol". C.O.R.D. Research Annual VI.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gill, Sam D. 1982. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hawthorn, Audrey. 1967. *Kwakiutl Art*. Seattle and London: U of Washington P.
- Hays, H.R. 1975. *Children of the Raven*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Holm, Bill. 1972. *Crooked Beak of Heaven*. Seattle and London: U of Washington P.
- Holm, Bill. 1965. *Northwest Coast Indian Art. An Analysis of Form*. Seattle and London: U of Washington P.
- Hultkrantz, Ake. 1983. *The Study of American Indian Religions*. Crossroads and Scholars P.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude. 1982. *The Way of the Masks*. Seattle: U of Washington P.
- Ludwig, Arnold. 1969. *Altered States of Consciousness*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Rohner, Ronald and Evelyn C. Rohner. 1970. *The Kwakiutl Indians of British Columbia*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Schieffelin, Edward. 1976. *The Sorrow of the Lonely and the Burning of the Dancers*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Spradley, James P. 1969. *Guests Never Leave Hungry – The Autobiography of James Sewid, a Kwakiutl*. New Haven and London: Yale UP.
- Turner, Victor. 1967. *The Forest of Symbols*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP.
- Walens, Stanley. 1981. *Feasting With Cannibals, an Essay on Kwakiutl Cosmology*. New Jersey: Princeton UP.
- Wolcott, Harry. 1967. *A Kwakiutl Village and School. Case Studies in Education and Culture*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Résumé: *Martha Padfield est un ethnologue se spécialisant dans l'étude du «Cannibal Danser»—le Hamatsa—dans les rites des Kwakiutls. Elle décrit la société des Kwakiutls et discute le rôle du danseur Hamatsa à le «Winter Ceremonial Complex».*