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To Find a Treasure: The Nuu-chah-nulth Wolf Mask

ARNOLD KRUGER

"He did not know whether he was alive, because it sounded so loud when it spoke. It started playing with him, circling about him, doing all kinds of things, fooling with him."[1] This is how the Nuu-chah-nulth (formerly Nootka or Westcoast) tale of the Origin of the Wolf Ritual began, with the touchstone of the meeting of the worlds: the natural touched by the supernatural, the hero engaging the spirit world. The legend was reenacted throughout Nuu-chah-nulth territory as a means of celebrating this primal spiritual encounter of the tribal hero; and also as a means of conserving the powers and insights gained for the larger social grouping—the wisdom earned through religious quest and discipline. For Robin Ridington,

> the experience of visionary transformation is fundamental to Native American spirituality. Although it is ultimately personal and begun in isolation, the quest for it is fundamentally conversational and social. Power comes from a person's conversation with the supernatural. It comes from an encounter with sentient beings with whom humans share the breath of life.[2]

The Wolf Ritual, or Tlukwana, with its associated regalia of masks, dances, costumes, and musical instruments, was a major feature of the Nuu-chah-nulth Winter Ceremonies.[3] In common with other Northwest Coast Native nations, the lives of the Nuu-chah-nulth people were controlled by the seasons, and following a summer and autumn of gathering and preserving the abundant coastal food resources, the settled sacred time of winter began. It was in the winter that Nuu-chah-nulth ceremonial life proceeded. All aspects of life underwent a kind of saturnalian reversal: the tribe moved to its winter village quarters; summer "songs, normal personal names, usual words about wolves, gum chewing, hat wearing, basketry, and mat weaving were prohibited";[4] and frivolity, joy, and feasting in the ritual life of ceremony were everyone's tasks for the season.[5]

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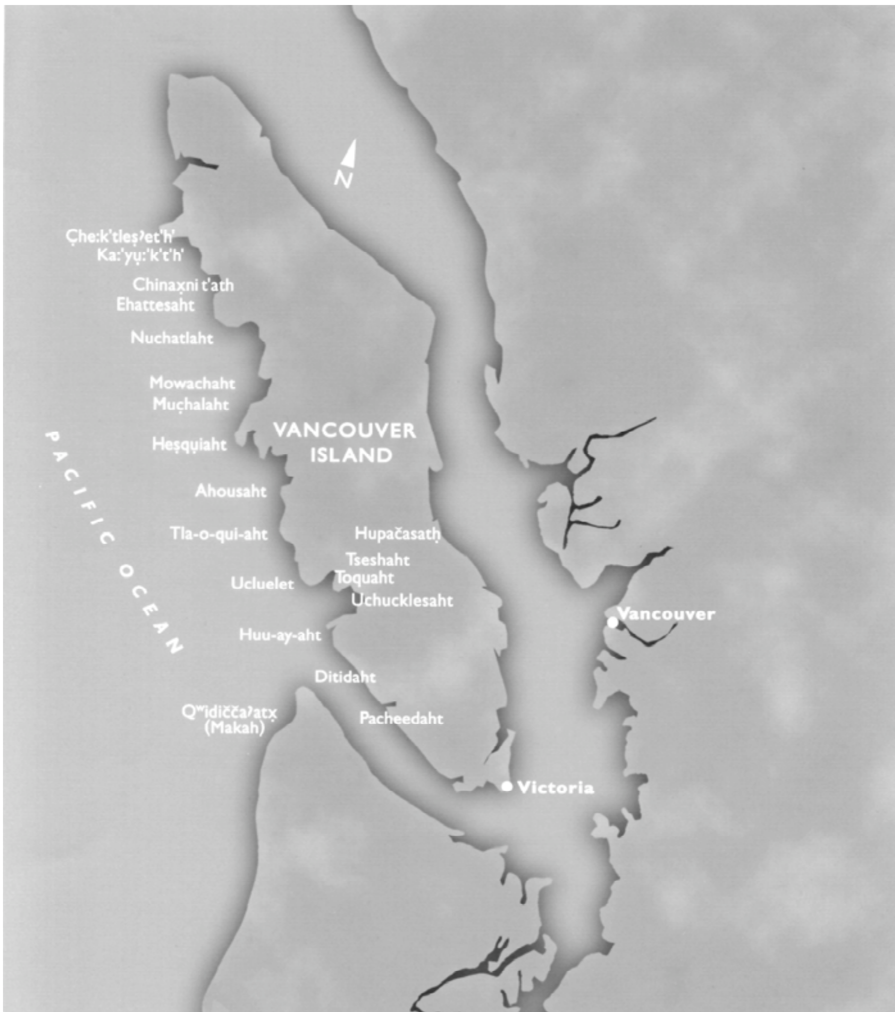

FIGURE 1. *Territories and settlements of the Nuu-chah-nulth people. Courtesy of the Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria, B.C. Photo: Trapeze Communications.*

In this organized life of ritual, the Wolf Ceremony was paramount for the Nuu-chah-nulth.[6,7] Its basic structure dramatized the legend of the warrior's encounter with a supernatural being, his gaining of power, and his return to the people bearing the gifts of empowerment, to be both articulated and enshrined in ritual.[8] The tale continued:

> he knew that he had had a supernatural experience. . . . The young man thought it over. He started making the thing he had seen there on the mountain . . . he gave it a feast. It was a Wolf Ritual. He took his mask and put it on his face.[9]

The spiritual power, and the masks that both symbolize and embody it, could be seen at work in tribal life as the Wolf Ritual began with the capture of a group of novices by marauding Wolf people. These "unfortunates" were spirited away into the forest, to be possessed in body and soul by the Wolf Spirit. After a time the novices, now wild and heedless, were recaptured by initiates and tamed by the group through ritual magic. This left them free of the wild Wolf spirit, but gifted with powers, their lives quickened with meaning.[10]

There were three distinct Nuu-chah-nulth Wolf masks, corresponding to the three main acts of the Wolf Ritual drama. The first was the Crawling Wolf mask (see figs. 2 and 3). It is the smallest of the three, and was said to be the most sacred.[11] It is normally carved from a single block of cedar, with only a suggestion of surface detail, as in teeth and nostrils, and is usually painted flat black. The example in figure 3 is somewhat unusual in being carved from alder, and in being rendered quite naturalistically. When seen in motion by firelight, the suggestion of a wolf's snout and mouth must have lent credence to its reality as a wolf; and when the firelight was reflected and flashed in the polished copper eyes, it must have given a thrill of powerful supernatural presence to the onlookers. Holes can be seen behind the eyes and would likely have been the attachment points for swags of dark hair or blackened cedar bark, to further the wolf impression. Toolmarks can be discerned in this side area of the mask, presumably left because it would be covered by hair; but the remainder is highly polished, and there is even a subtle suggestion of eyebrow above each eye. The work is masterful in its sophistication and its restraint. In its entirety, it consists only of those elements essential to symbolize a supernatural wolf to an observer—nothing extraneous and nothing lacking.

In use the mask was worn strapped to the forehead, as in figure 2, the rest of the body being covered by a dark blanket and the face painted black, as the initiate Wolf people suddenly disrupted the calm surface of life on one special evening. Just as the supernatural comes as a shock when it intersects our mundane reality, so too the black-masked wolves coming for the novices actually broke through the wall of the house with heavy rocks and, wild and unstoppable, crawled four times around the fire, never standing up: they were real wolves, stalking real prey.[12] In the flickering firelight, with slinking black forms only dimly outlined, the simple structure of the mask must have lent a horrid verisimilitude to this invasion by the wolves. Then the fire mysteriously died out, and the novices disappeared. Only the eerie sound of whistling, fading into the forest, remained.

The ensuing initiation practices have continued to be remarkably obscure to European observers. The fact that the Wolf Ceremonial or Tlukwana, at least in part, served as a secret society even among the Nuu-chah-nulth probably aided this ritualistic secrecy. The vision quest is always essentially a private matter. Some of the disciplines practiced included fasting, bathing, sleeplessness, bloodletting, and the skewering of the body with knives and harpoon points.[13,14] some informants even compared the Tlukwana to the experience of renewal found in baptism.[15] The mid-Victorian cultural blindness of the early colonists also doubtless reinforced the secret nature of these religious practices, as exemplified by Gilbert Malcolm Sproat

Figure 2. *Nuu-chah-nulth Crawling Wolf mask, backed with cedar bark and eagle down. Worn by Mr. Roberts at Ucluelet, B.C. Courtesy Provincial Archives of Alberta, Harry Pollard Photographic Collection, 74.*

(a colonial magistrate) who witnessed a part of the Tlukwana, and called it a collection of "strange dances performed in hideous masks, and accompanied by unearthly noises."[16]

The second mask of the trilogy is the Spinning or Whirling Wolf mask (see fig. 4). It is also carved from a single piece of red cedar, but is more representational of a wolf than the first mask: large nostrils are very prominent and combine with the elongated muzzle to identify this as a wolf mask. The backward-pointing teeth are carved in an extraordinary lattice pattern, which is highly decorative and also evocative of the fierceness of the wolf's power. The pattern serves the double purposes of supporting and strengthening

Figure 3. *Nuu-chah-nulth (Ditidaht) Crawling Wolf mask, alder and copper. Collected at Clo-ose, B.C. in 1938. With permission of the Royal Ontario Museum © ROM, 939.31.58 (HN 1378).*

what would otherwise be a separate upper and lower jaw; and also of providing a window onto the world for the initiate inside the mask, who is able to see between the teeth while dancing. The eye is enclosed within a lax, black-painted ovoid form, whose empty space was probably originally fitted with a piece of lustrous abalone shell. The black, highly abstract painting on muzzle and jaw is an example of this artist's masterful borrowing of elements of the Northern form-line style. In this style, continuous and interconnected broad dark lines outline and create positive design elements, as in the eye of this example. However, this highly sophisticated and confident Nuu-chah-nulth artist has appropriated this august tradition to his own ends, as simply an abstract, organic style of flowing decoration.[17] One might also argue that the wave shapes of the black painting refer to the transformative power of the wolf, who is able to transform into the killer whale and become the wolf of the sea (the wave shape might also be read as the dorsal fin of the killer whale). And this allusion to the transformative powers of the wolf might also be seen as referring to that same power as it assists the human initiate in becoming someone new during the Tlukwana—Northwest Coast art is noted for its multiple meanings, and even playful puns (the huge, round nostrils might even be read as the air bubbles that would attend the sea wolf's descent into the water). Some truncated tufts of hair remain along the top edge of the mask, as do small holes along the back and bottom edges where the rest would have been attached. When first carved and danced, this wolf mask would have gloried in a long and full mane of hair that would have added flair and interest to the dancer's whirling movements as it spread out and whipped around during the twists and turns of the dance. Other materials commonly used for the "hair" were animal fur, cedar bark, or nettle fibre.[18]

FIGURE 4. *Nuu-chah-nulth (Makah) Whirling Wolf mask, yellow cedar and human hair. Courtesy of the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, Catalog # 2.5E1543.*

This whirling, jumping dance is analogous to the moving power of the as yet untamed wolf spirit in the new initiate. For this mask was danced only after the recapture of the novice initiates by the massed villagers. The Wolves were driven back into the forest, and the dazed, snarling initiates were forcibly returned to the village. They then displayed their spirit possession in this Whirling/Spinning Wolf Dance, which embodied as well the strong, solid and curved animal lines of the mask. Susan Moogk made the point that "whirling is a movement without direction . . . pure movement,"[19] and this abstract or ideal form of movement might be presented in the ritual as a paradox—symbolizing the presence of the spirit within the material world. This was the dance that John Jewitt witnessed in 1803, describing it somewhat quaintly as "consisting in springing up into the air in a squat posture, and constantly turning around on the heels with great swiftness in a very narrow circle" while wearing "a curious mask in imitation of a wolf's head." The fact that it "continued for about two hours"[20] shows also that the dance demonstrated the warrior qualities of skill, strength, and endurance so admired in Native culture, and also shows a part of the gift of the Wolf.[21]

The third mask, the Standing or Festival wolf mask (see figs. 5 and 6), was danced in solemn, public celebration of the final taming of the Wolf Spirit. For the new initiate, having danced out his possession, was left in the protective embrace of the tribe, laden with the gifts of the supernatural, whether of a

FIGURE 5. *Nuu-chah-nulth Standing or Festival Wolf mask, cedar and twigs. Courtesy UBC Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, Canada. Edith Bevan Collection, catalogue # A8098. Photo: Bill McLennan.*

song, a dance, a tutelary spirit, new power, or a refreshing of his life. This was a time of joy and thanksgiving, reflected by the large, colorful mask. It is quite different from the other more sculptural masks, being a flat-sided, box-like construction of two thin boards joined together by a framework of light slats and rods to fit the top of the dancer's head.[22] This more secular triumphal mask displays all the colorful exuberance of the Nuu-chah-nulth art style. The painted colors are bright and varied: in figure 5 the artist has used the traditional Northwest Coast black and red, but has also added white and blue to lend the mask a festive and wholesome air. Where the previous two masks were dark and powerful representations of the mythos of death and the descent into the underworld, this large and generous figure of a brightly painted Wolf represents redemption and a rebirth into a new and more bountiful life for both the initiate and the community. It is worn not just in the concluding act of the Tlukwana, but also on public occasions when the tribe presents itself ceremonially to others,[23] as in figure 6, where Tseshaht women in the Alberni area are publicly assembled (three dancers in the photograph have been identified: Mrs. Tommy Bill, Mrs. Chayks George, and Sara Touchie).

In these examples, the typical long, pointed Nuu-chah-nulth eye is present, as is the characteristically isolated and commanding eyebrow. There is also evidence of the Nuu-chah-nulth's irreverent and playful attitude towards the Northern form-line style: the thick, form-line-like elements of red and

FIGURE 6. *Nuu-chah-nulth (Tseshaht) dancers in the Alberni, B.C. area, 1951, with Standing or Festival Wolf masks. Courtesy of the Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria, B.C. Negative # PN 5110.*

blue paint do not serve to define the structure of the design, but are entirely abstract and largely decorative.[24] The smooth, angular nature of this flat-sided mask lends itself to the characteristic geometric style of Nuu-chah-nulth design,[25,26] which can be seen most clearly in figure 5, where straight-edged areas of white, yellow, and red lend a somewhat cubist air to the work, while evoking another world through the process of abstraction. The repeated dots and dashes in figure 5 are also a common element of Nuu-chah-nulth geometric design, with deep roots in the magical practices of most Northwest Coast Natives, in which patterns of dots or dashes imbue an object with supernatural power. It is common to observe an unbroken line of carved dots or dashes along the gunwhales of Native canoes, since travelling on the ocean in a dugout craft is highly perilous, and it is sensible to provide the greatest security possible. Similarly, the dots and dashes painted on this mask cause it to participate in the supernatural world, and might be seen as power points that draw the spirit into the material world.

Often, elaborate scrollwork is carved along the tops of masks, as can be seen in figure 6. When such curved abstract design elements are present on the top of a creature's head it denotes the spirit, meaning that the wolf depicted is not ordinary or natural, but rather represents the Wolf Spirit. A great deal of twisted cedar bark ordinarily depends from the crown and back of the mask,[27] but figure 5 is graced by a flow of long, bunched twigs. White eagle

feathers and down are woven into these tops, and piled between the two sides of the mask, symbolizing the calming and the transformation of the Wolf Spirit. Sometimes the top tier of the mask consists of a rotating wooden contrivance controlled by strings that explodes clouds of eagle down among the spectators.[28] This was a welcoming of the tamed Wolf Spirit, a grateful acceptance of the gifts given and received.

It is clear that although we now experience these Native carvers' works as art, it was not the maker's intention to create an object for aesthetic appreciation or reflection. Rather these wolf masks are in some way communal tools or devices that serve as the engines of a people's group spiritual dynamics, that mediate their collective inner life. It might be helpful to ponder an analogy between the Nuu-chah-nulth wolf mask and the Christian altar:

> the altarpiece mediates between two worlds, that of the saint and that of the seeker. One does not view the altarpiece, one prays before it, and the space it implies reaches out to encompass the seeker. In the altarpiece it is not necessary that the eye be deceived; it is only necessary that what it sees be legible . . . and stand as evidence for the kind of intervention one seeks.[29]

This cursory survey of an important cultural phenomenon such as the Wolf Ritual/Tlukwana of the Nuu-chah-nulth necessarily distorts the reality of its place in the worldview of the people involved. In fact, the Tlukwana was the major, all-inclusive ceremonial structure of the Nuu-chah-nulth:[30] there were Initiation Tlukwanas, Potlatch Tlukwanas, Naming Tlukwanas, and others, including regular religious meetings of the Wolf brotherhood. Eugene Arima observed that in the usual Tlukwana,

> a novice was taken to the ancestral home of his or her lineage where ceremonial privileges were learned so that they could be claimed and displayed upon return with attendant potlatch distribution of gifts to witnessing guests. In this way the tlukwana was a major means for transmitting hereditary rights and maintaining the ranked social system.[31]

The very word *Tlukwana* can be traced to the Kwakwala root meaning "to find a treasure,"[32] and the treasure found was, of course, that mystic, priceless pearl of knowledge of the supernatural: the fruit of the spirit quest and the eternal gift of the returning hero, be it Buddha, Prometheus, or the triumphant Wolf Warrior emerging strong and holy out of the depths of the primal forest.[33] In the same way that medieval Europeans turned to the Church for meaning and structure in the seasons of their lives—to celebrate birth, coming of age, marriage, death, and burial, for the metaphysical worth of being in the world—so did the Nuu-chah-nulth turn to the Wolf Society and the Wolf Ritual too. The Tlukwana ritual was the Nuu-chah-nulth's mass and communion; the Tlukwana House was their cathedral; the Tlukwana gave the Nuu-chah-nulth a place in the universe: a home. According to Martha Black, "the Tlukwana—in Ditidaht, Tlukwali—is the highest spiritual practice in

Nuu-chah-nulth ceremonial life. . . . The Tlukwana is awesome and sacred. It is what governs our society. Going through it changes your life."[34]

Since first contact with Western European cultures in the late eighteenth century, this sense of their powerful and integrated place in the world has been taken from the Nuu-chah-nulth. Contact with whites has been disastrous for them. Although no reliable data exists, it is usually estimated that fifty to ninety percent of all Northwest Coast indigenous people died from such imported European diseases as smallpox in the early nineteenth century.[35] The Nuu-chah-nulth were no exception. Even their internecine warfare for resources was made more deadly by the introduction of modern weapons, so that their population experienced a precipitous decline from both inner and outer changes.[36] As to their actual physical home,

> in the 1880s the Department of Indian Affairs, without native surrender of any land, allocated for the Nootka tribes small reserves based largely on village sites and fishing stations then in use. Tribal territories and many land resources used in the recent past were not given reserve status. The total area of all the Nootka reserves was 12,200.25 acres.[37]

This meant that the formerly vast territories of the Nuu-chah-nulth, which covered over half of Vancouver Island, as well as much of northern Washington state, were reduced to a few poor acres around identified village sites. It was as if an upper-middle-class European with a large mansion situated on a generous, spreading acreage were suddenly confined to one small corner of his own garage. James Waldram observed that although after first contact Natives filled roles such as fur trapper or oil merchant that were useful to white mercantile colonists:

> over time, the European's need of the Indian became less and less, to the point where the Indians themselves were valued primarily for what they possessed, their land, and other resources . . . a series of treaties with the Indians saw the Aboriginal peoples surrender over half of Canada in return for promises of economic development.[38]

In concert with this wholesale theft of Native land, the European colonizers engaged in a deliberate policy of cultural imperialism or ethnocide against aboriginal social and spiritual organizations, as well as Native languages and cultural identities.[39] Indian residential schools opened across British Columbia in the nineteenth century served as gulags for several generations of Nuu-chah-nulth children. They were isolated boarding schools to which families were obliged by law to surrender their children.[40] Children were usually imprisoned there for up to eleven months of the year. All aspects of Native culture were forbidden by the white educators, including language, foods, dress, dances, and other traditions. Randy Fred reported that his father "was physically tortured by his teachers for speaking Tseshaht [a Nuu-chah-nulth language]: they pushed sewing needles through his tongue, a routine punishment for language offenders."[41] Native people in effect had their culture and communal

identity stolen from them in the same way that their lands were stolen. Several generations of Native children grew to adulthood knowing little of their own culture and unable to communicate with their own families.

Native spiritual practices such as the Wolf Ritual were condemned and delegitimized by Christian missionaries, both on the reserves and in the residential schools. Christianity, the official state religion, was promulgated as the only true faith; Native religious practices were decried as pagan, primitive, and inferior; and missionaries lobbied the government to legislate against them. The potlatch system itself was banned in 1884, and this double-pronged attack on Native society resulted in the almost complete cultural destruction of the Northwest Coast aboriginals: "as far as the survival of [Nuu-chah-nulth] art was concerned, for all intents and purposes the tradition was lost."[42]

One all-embracing social problem that resulted from the Nuu-chah-nulth's territorial and spiritual homelessness was widespread alienation and anomie among the people. They were alienated from white society through the politics of oppression,[43] and from their own culture by generations of racist conditioning in the residential schools. The result for the individual was a pervading sense of meaninglessness in life and a continuing existential crisis.[44] The doubly homeless Native people reacted to the absence of social traditions, stability, and identity in their lives with alcoholism, physical and sexual abuse, suicide, crime, delinquency, depression, and dependence. On many reserves, "most people survive on welfare, unemployment insurance or a pension, and the unemployment rate is 90%."[45] The Canadian Junior Indian Affairs Minister has compared the current disaffected state of reserve-bound Native youth to that of Palestinian militants in Israel: "If you see kids in an impoverished native village, with three generations of welfare behind them and no hope for the future, they're even moved to perhaps that most horrible statistic of despair, which is youth suicide."[46] The territorial or physical homelessness and alienation that the contemporary Native person experiences is being addressed in Canadian courts through land claims processes.[47] These legal proceedings usually result in some repatriation of traditional lands, as well as monetary compensation for the First Nations involved. But the aboriginal peoples themselves must address their spiritual and social rootlessness.

Nuu-chah-nulth culture and tradition might be more resilient than was thought. Joe David, a renowned Tla-o-qui-aht carver, began a series of "renegade masks " in 1997. These are Wolf and other masks that refer to the time of the banning of the potlatch, when families and houses would hold illegal ceremonies in isolated areas to avoid arrest and imprisonment. In the words of Tla-o-qui-aht elder Winifred David,

> I was in the boarding school when the potlatch was forbidden, when they didn't want that anymore. But I know we used to go out during the holidays, we had summer holidays. There's an island way out in the Pacific, right at the mouth of Barkley Sound, and we would go out there, it's called Village Island. The whole of the two reserves in Port Alberni went down there for the summer. The men would go out fishing and the women would dry fish. No white man ever came there,

> so they did have their potlatches and feasts. It didn't stop them when they were out there. Nobody could stop them because there was no policemen around.[48]

One meaning implicit in such recollections of Native elders is that there is an unbroken thread of occupation and identity for many Nuu-chah-nulth people in the land itself. Although much might have been lost, much remains. Traditional carving and painting was all but forgotten during the past two centuries, but "one aspect of traditional Westcoast craftsmanship remained viable without interruption. This is weaving, and Westcoast women have continued to create basketry of great charm from a combination of cedar bark and swamp grass."[49] The cure for the alienation of homelessness and the emptiness of having no cultural identity might be found in these surviving fragments of art and ritual. Young artists are recovering Nuu-chah-nulth art and tradition by examining collections of historical artifacts in museums around the world. Young people are rediscovering traditional dances, songs, and myths today through a similar process of turning to their surviving elders for guidance. For Tim Paul, a Hesquiaht artist,

> it is a nice feeling to know that within some families all of this rich history is very much alive. The very positive result is we can still create many new sculptures, headdresses, masks, and with nature as it is today still compose new songs and furthermore still relate all this to a place and give it a name because it is na-nig-sa, our grandparents.[50]

And for Tla-o-qui-aht artist Joe David:

> These gatherings [Tlukwana] would be enough to satisfy the curious child with generous and powerful glimpses of a great beauty. Mom and Dad, Uncle and Auntie sang and danced sounds and movements that were hypnotic and sense expanding. Where once the night's starry universe was about the grandest thing anyone could ponder, there was now the harmonious explosion of our men's songs and the graceful and effortless dances of the women. We thrilled to witness the transformation of our parents into demi-gods. And again there were no explanations. It was simply life, our lives! Just as no one was expected to explain the rising or setting sun, the wonder and power of our elders was just life.[51]

So celebration of the Tlukwana or Nuu-chah-nulth potlatch has never been entirely interrupted. Only a few people might practice the more esoteric spiritual aspects of the Wolf Ritual, such as the individual vision quest, today, but the public, communal functions of the Tlukwana have remained. Wolfgang Jilek observed that "since about 1960 the revived cult dance movements . . . become foci of native identity and carriers of a pan-Indian message, serving psychosocial healing functions for the individual and the collective under the direction of skillful ritualist leaders."[52] Thus the passages of life are

still ritualized in the potlatch today: births and deaths, naming and coming of age, the inheritance of rights and privileges, and more recently wedding anniversaries and school graduations. Alan McMillan noted that:

> belief systems, ceremonial practices, rules for tracing descent, and other basic aspects of Nuu-chah-nulth life seem to have survived the tumultuous years of rapid change relatively intact. Even political groups that had lost their independence survived as ceremonial units within the larger polities.[53]

These remaining ceremonial structures are clearly the communal repositories of genuine strength and power. They have always provided a home for the hearts and spirits of the Nuu-chah-nulth. Scott Schnell makes the point that "ritual has been acknowledged as an important form of social practice, especially as it is employed by subordinated peoples to demonstrate their opposition toward a dominant ideology."[54] This is the ground and the energy which the Nuu-chah-nulth will use to forge a new positive Native identity and reality. As recently as 1994, for instance, the Tla-o-qui-aht remodelled the former Tofino Residential School into a resort lodge named Tin-Wis (calm waters), that now generates over three million dollars in revenue annually for their nation.[55] And Katherine Jacob states that the Nuu-chah-nulth are:

> teaching their own language in independent schools, and making their heritage a focal point even in their economic endeavours. The Ahousat, the largest Nuu-chah-nulth nation, are integrating their cultural teachings into a series of guided trail walks from their island village through old-growth forest and along the shores of the Pacific. Along the way, a hereditary chief explains their culture, recounting legends, introducing medicinal plants, and pointing out ancient trees. The Huu-ay-aht nation are respecting their past by starting stream rehabilitation to return their territory to the rich resources they had before logging operations destroyed salmon spawning streams.[56]

The Nuu-chah-nulth are a people who have always seen their best reflected back to them in the sacred circle of the creatures and the spirits of the world. The treasure to be found in the Wolf Ritual might now have changed. In precontact time, it was supernatural power and a deeper connection to the world; today the treasure might simply be that holistic sense of place and power in the world that was lost through conquest. In the rebirth and the dancing of the Tlukwana today, the Nuu-chah-nulth might be reconstructing both their social order and their sense of self. They might be recreating their home.

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