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Commentary

Canoe Journeys and Cultural Revival

Bruce E. Johansen

For the state of Washington's one-hundredth birthday, in 1989, Native peoples there decided to revive a distinctive mode of transportation—long-distance journeys by canoe—along with an entire culture associated with it. Born as the "Paddle to Seattle," during the past two decades these canoe journeys have become a summertime staple for Native peoples as well as for thousands of non-Indians who follow the "pullers" in Washington, Oregon, and British Columbia, with some participants arriving (not by canoe) from as far away as Florida (Seminoles) and New Zealand (Maoris). During the Washington State Centennial celebration in July 1989, Hoh and Quileute canoes carved by traditionalist David Forlines, and skippered by Forlines, Tom Jackson, and Fred Eastman, among others, plied the open ocean for the first time in several decades.

The pullers are not purists. They may call for help from chase boats on the global positioning system (GPS); trucks follow them on shore with sleeping bags, food, and other supplies; and the US and Canadian coast guards offer help if needed. This is not your great-great-grandfather's canoe journey, but it is a revival of culture and, to some extent, indigenous languages. As such, cultural revival through reenactment of traditional practices has value. The canoe journeys (and the land-based events associated with them) might be

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compared with powwows in other areas. These also evolve over time, blending traditions with new practices. No living culture is static.

Canoe Revival in British Columbia

A few years before the canoe-culture revival began in Washington State, Native nations along the western coast of British Columbia also began to carve new canoes. They recalled legends that described a great flood that people survived by linking their canoes to a mountaintop. The canoes thus became a cultural and spiritual metaphor for emerging from the oppression that followed the immigration of Euro-Americans.

"The canoe is a metaphor for community," wrote David Neel, a Fort Rupert Kwakiutl photographer and writer who has carved his own canoe, in *The Great Canoes: Reviving a Northwest Coast Tradition*. "In the canoe, as in any community, everyone must work together. . . . The canoe is helping us to be more human again. We work for something besides income; for a few precious days or weeks we forget about the clock, live by the tides." On one occasion, 50 people of the 140-member Comox Band traveled southeastward along the east coast of Vancouver Island to Vancouver, British Columbia.[1]

The renowned Haida artist Bill Reid, working with Guujaaw (Gary Edenshaw), and Simon Dick (as well as several other people) began, during 1985 and 1986, to create the fifty-foot *LooTaas* ("wave eater"). They began by studying old canoes in museums. Along the way, they found a Haida canoe in the New York City American Museum of Natural History that had been built backward, with its bow cut from the butt of the log. They then built a model before attempting their full-scale canoe. The builders learned that the creation of a canoe took over their lives. "A canoe demands your undivided attention," said Guujaaw. "A canoe gets jealous." "This ocean is our highway, our lifeline, our bloodline," said Dick.[2]

During 1989, the *LooTaas* was used on a journey northward through the inland waterway from Haida Gwaii, British Columbia, to Hydaburg, Alaska. The Heiltsuk people traveled in a canoe from Bella Bella, British Columbia, about one hundred miles north of Vancouver Island's northern tip, to the Vancouver World's Fair, also in 1986, a distance of about four hundred miles. During 1993 canoe families from Washington State established connections with people in Bella Bella, which is about five hundred miles away. The trip took two and a half months.[3] Pullers slept on beaches or were invited into the bighouses of Native bands along the way.

Most of the canoes took the inland passage north and westward along the east coast of Vancouver Island, but the Makahs, following their ancestral route,

made the much more dangerous and demanding journey in the open ocean along the island's west coast, disregarding Coast Guard warnings. When they reached Bella Bella, emerging from savage seas and thirty-mile-an-hour winds, "they were lifted, still in their canoe, and carried by the people of Nuu-chah-nulth into the bighouse."[4]

Reviving Spiritual Bonds

Canoes became one of the central attributes of Coast Salish cultures; they were vital for the gathering of much of the people's food, social relations, and waging war. Like many maritime peoples around the world, seaborne transport framed culture and invoked deep spiritual beliefs in life and death. Canoes were sometimes used, most frequently by high-status people, as coffins on a journey to the spirit world. The spiritual aspects of canoe culture have been described precisely by Will Sarvis.[5]

Canoe builders possess a special gift; often, they have specialized in canoe construction for their entire adult lives. Until the recent revival of canoe culture, they were invariably male. The building of a canoe is a deeply spiritual undertaking from its very beginning, when the carver, who is under the aegis of a guardian spirit acquired from an ancestor (or from a solitary vision quest) is drawn into the forest to a specific western red cedar that is large enough, and old enough, to possess the proper grain pattern for successful carving. The carver engages in fasting and prayer, inside and outside of a sweat lodge. During this time, he avoids sexual activity and does not comb his hair, believing that doing so could cause cracks in the canoe that would ruin months of work. One such carver, Frank Allen, says that "the tree talks to you in a vision, gives you the power to be a canoe maker."[6] The carver and the tree collaborate, as the tree guides its own harvest, so that it will be felled in such a way as to protect the grain. Neel wrote that "a canoe, coming from a soul sometimes more than a thousand years old, is a spiritual being."[7]

Having located a suitable tree, the carver tests it for inside rot by using an elbow adze and chisel before the difficult job of felling the tree with hand tools. The tree is thanked for its sacrifice. Construction of a canoe usually takes parts of two years. To start with, the bark and sapwood is stripped with an elbow adze and axe, and with a rough carving, the log begins to take the shape of a canoe. It might be burned in its center to make carving easier (thus the name "dugout canoe"). The log is left to season throughout a winter so that cracks will not ruin it during the detailed carving to come. The log remains in the forest near the site of its felling for the first year, after which a team of men push it into a stream and float it to their village for the detailed finishing work

(now logs are often trucked). The bow of an old canoe may be used on a new one in order to maintain continuity.[8] Canoes had to be thin so that they would be light in weight and would not split—but not so light that they could be easily swamped in rough seas. The canoe was carved with a snub nose (which looks like an upside-down garden shovel) to make movement in water easier. Once completed, a canoe is launched with considerable ceremony.

The revived craft of canoe construction and the rituals attending canoe journeys are maintained in each Native tribe or nation by "canoe families" that put boats into the water for an annual journey that ends at the homeland of a different host nation each summer, usually during late July or early August. The canoe families meet regularly, year round, to organize the making of regalia and drums used in songs and dances associated with canoe culture. Children may take part in singing and dancing, and practice "pulling," but no one under fourteen years of age goes out to sea in a canoe. The canoe families also take part in other events that bring honor to the community and aid in reviving aspects of traditional culture. For example, canoe families have opened a local Farm Aid Concert and participated in a 2005 film festival. Members of the Muckleshoot Canoe Family also conduct paddle-carving workshops at the tribal college.[9]

Canoe Family membership is a way of life that instills a code of behavior, and as such has come into open competition with the urban gang culture that has penetrated several reservations. Paddlers vow to be clean and sober during canoe journeys, which is a way to combat alcoholism and drug abuse. The Suquamish tribe of Port Madison, Washington, has formally adapted its alcohol and substance abuse programs to include the tribal canoe journeys as "The Healing of the Canoe," a treatment model developed with medical personnel from the University of Washington.[10]

In *The Great Canoes*, Lummi elder Joe Washington described the way in which the tribal journey had rehabilitated drinkers in one family: "Drinking means nothing to my son now. All he wants to do is get in that canoe. He's out in the water, paddling. He wants to carve. He wants to know the cedar."[11] Elders and other adults reinforce clean living among young members of canoe families. The Muckleshoots, who operate a large casino and other businesses, realized the value of the regional canoe revival and now provide financial support on a regular basis to their own canoe families and those of other Native tribes and nations.[12]

Canoe Making Revived

During the first few decades after initial Euro-American immigration to the Pacific Northwest, canoe culture not only survived but also thrived with the

encouragement of the whites. "Native Americans developed a new and exciting 'racing' type of canoe that was sleeker and faster than any of their traditional designs," wrote Sarvis.[13] Competition in canoe racing flourished for a time. Native builders retained their skills until the late 1880s. By the 1920s, canoe culture was dying rapidly as the massive logging of old-growth red cedar destroyed the centuries-old spiritual relationship between canoe craftsmen and the trees. This decline went hand in hand with the increasing pressure to assimilate Native peoples by other means, such as the banning of the potlatch and forced attendance at US government boarding schools.

Gradually Native peoples adapted to new technology during the twentieth century and started using boats made of planks that were powered by outboard motors. The old canoes were nearly gone, except in museum exhibits and photographs, when Emmett Oliver of the Quinault Nation came up with the idea of the Paddle to Seattle, after he had retired as supervisor of Indian education with the Washington State Superintendent of Public Instruction during the early 1980s.

Oliver was raised during a time when money was scarce. He had a tough childhood, but he was an outstanding athlete, which helped him to move on to Bacone College in Oklahoma, where he played a variety of sports. After many years as a schoolteacher in Shelton, Washington, Oliver was a teacher and counselor in California, as well as the director of Indian Education at the University of California, Los Angeles. During the 1970s, he returned to western Washington as supervisor of the Indian Division in the Office of Minority Affairs at the University of Washington.[14] Oliver obtained permission to remove a cedar log from a national forest from the US Forest Service, which then located, harvested, and donated an old-growth cedar log for the first modern canoe in Washington State. The log was trucked to the Quinault Reservation, and Oliver found a carver to create the first craft for the modern Tribal Canoe Journey, which brought together a few Native peoples from the Washington coast, the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and Puget Sound.

Oliver traveled around the northern and western coasts of the Olympic Peninsula, talked up the idea of reviving canoe journeys, and ended up enlisting thirty Native nations and tribes. Coastal peoples paddled from the ocean shore, through the strait, to Seattle. The event grew, and with it a cultural revival in canoe construction, canoe society structure, traditional clothing, drums, songs, and even languages, as pullers were welcomed ashore as honored visitors according to traditional protocols. The first Paddle to Seattle concluded at Shilshoe Bay and Golden Gardens Park alongside Puget Sound, about six miles northwest of downtown, with singing, dancing, and a salmon feast.

The canoe revival quickly stimulated an interest in Native history and culture. Museums and private contractors bought canoes for display. Some

art centers donated use of their land for carving. The United Indians of All Tribes in Seattle provided covered carving space near its ceremonial grounds. Each year increasing numbers of people, Native and non-Native, watch the craftsmen work. Some Native peoples, such as the Makah, from the westernmost tip of Washington State, contributed canoe-carving knowledge that they had retained for whale hunting. At the same time, for the first time in seventy years, the Makah revived their whale hunt, using traditional ocean-going canoes.

The canoe-culture revival also began a restoration of the entire spiritual dimension of paddling, "including prayers in log felling, blessing of the fallen log, recognition and appreciation for the unique spirit of each canoe, spiritual communication between wood and human, the sacredness of canoe travel as 'moving over water and through time, and a stress on the importance of personal purity,'" wrote Sarvis.[15]

A Formidable Task

James M. Fortier directed *Pulling Together* and *Gathering Together*, two Muckleshoot-sponsored documentary films about the canoe journeys, which illustrate the scope of the undertaking.[16] Pulling involves much more than assembling some paddlers and putting a canoe in the water. The journey requires appropriate clothing. Air above the waters is cool to cold, even in summer; the water, into which pullers are sometimes swamped, is even colder. Life jackets, tents, and sleeping bags are required. A support boat (actually a moderate-sized yacht) is required, which is an investment of tens of thousands of dollars, along with a support truck to haul food, camping gear, and other provisions.

The Tribal Canoe Journey is neither a race nor a contest, although it is something of a feat of physical endurance. It is a social event that brings various Native peoples into contact with each other. Several thousand people (from the various Native peoples, as well as tourists) often follow the journey on land. This group of people joins the pullers and support-boat crews at designated stops for feasting, dancing, and ceremonies. Hosting even one meal at a single stop is a formidable task, as hundreds of pounds of salmon must be grilled. Pulling a canoe about two hundred miles over the course of several days between southern Puget Sound, through the Strait of Juan de Fuca, to the coast and back is an arduous task that involves stamina and teamwork for as long as ten hours a day. A "skipper," who stands in the back of the canoe using his paddle as a keel or a rudder in order to maintain direction, leads the pullers. First-time pullers are called "babies." Pulling in a unified way requires

teamwork. Pullers who do not coordinate go nearly nowhere. Conditions can range from nearly flat water and warm, clear weather to chilly days with fog and roiling seas that can dunk pullers in the cold saltwater and leave them wondering where they are going, even with modern conveniences such as support boats with GPS.

Other problems sometimes ensue. During the 2003 journey, drunken vandals poured beer and urinated in some of the canoes at Hollywood Beach, near Port Angeles, on the northern Olympic Peninsula. A healing ceremony was performed to restore the spirit of the canoes, which their canoe families regard as sacred, living beings. The Muckleshoots had two canoes in the 2003 journey, *Grandmother*, named for a member of the tribe, and *Eagle Spirit*, so named because an eagle was sighted soaring while the canoe family was searching for a name.

The healing ceremony revives one aspect of canoe culture. The revival also includes protocols for entering other Native people's territory and for leaving it. Generally, a crew requests permission to come ashore, having had a long, difficult, tiring day without food. Protocol calls for the pullers to approach the shore, explain who they are (usually with details about how they have become cold, wet, and hungry), and ask permission to come ashore. The hosts grant permission. The host village welcomes them and invites the pullers to come ashore. They pull their canoes to the beach where they remain until the crew is ready to pull out again. In recent years, the landing ritual has been refined to fit cultural antecedents—speaking at least some words of a Native language and teaching young people to act in a mature and respectful manner.

The Sea Is a Tough Master

Canoe culture teaches respect for ancestors' survival skills to city-bred youth. During one of the earliest canoe journeys, a man had disappeared off the Pacific Coast. As teams of paddlers rounded Neah Bay at the conjunction of the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the ocean and then headed south toward Quinault, they saw an object in the water. Upon closer inspection, they realized that the object was the body of the missing person. They notified authorities, and the decaying corpse was taken into custody. The discovery of a body in the ocean was disturbing and was discussed at length by many of the canoe families.

Paddlers who navigate canoes from the relatively calm Puget Sound must learn quickly how to navigate outside of local bays and rivers in the open saltwater ocean. The Strait of Juan de Fuca contains winds, rip currents, and waves that can easily swamp a canoe.

Canoe culture also forges bonds between generations. Elders often are happy to share knowledge that they had thought might die with them, especially with young people who are learning how to get along with others and how to stay clean and sober during journeys in which they represent their people. The young people also learn how to deal with conflicts that arise from living in close quarters and pulling canoes for hours at a time, day after day. Elders are available to meet with young people at sharing times and encourage them to get along and participate in a responsible manner. The whole exercise empowers the young and old alike.

Joseph Andrew "Jerry" Jack, sixty-eight years old, a hereditary chief of the Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nation tribe in Gold River, British Columbia, died July 22, 2006, after the Makah canoe in which he was paddling capsized in rough water west of Dungeness Spit, in the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Jack, who drowned, has been the only fatality at sea during more than two decades of Native canoe journeys. Jack was paddling with a six-person crew in the Makah canoe *Hummingbird*. The other five pullers were rescued; three of them were hospitalized with hypothermia but recovered. Jack's paddle was carried to Seattle on a Makah canoe at his family's request. He was a second chief, a position he inherited from his grandfather, said Colleen Pendleton, Jack's eldest daughter. The second chief is the "keeper of the beach," who greets and feeds visitors.

"We don't say died—we say went home. He went home doing exactly what he wanted," said Colleen, who lives in Neah Bay, on the Makah Reservation. "He lived and breathed tribal journeys." Following Jack's death, the US and Canadian coast guards increased their vigilance during the canoe journeys. "The U.S. Coast Guard is ready to assist tribal leaders and event organizers to ensure this important maritime journey is always carried out in ways that are meaningful, enjoyable and as safe as possible," said 13th Coast Guard District commander Rear Admiral Richard Houck.[17]

The Makah Host the 2010 Tribal Canoe Journey

The 2010 Tribal Canoe Journey, hosted by the Makahs, included eighty-six canoes. It began July 9 with canoes setting out from their home ports for Neah Bay, on the Makah Reservation, at the very northwestern tip of Washington State, arriving there on July 19. About ten thousand people were pulling, providing support, or watching the journey. The "Paddle to the Beginning of the World" ended as Neah Bay swelled to several times its usual population for nearly a week of feasting, dancing, and singing by members of more than fifty Native nations, tribes, and bands from July 19 through July 25.[18]

In another aspect of revival, the Makah Reservation added infrastructure (including a new gym, new access ramps to the beach, and an expanded senior citizens' deck) to host the event with an eye toward improvements that will be useful for many years. "During the canoe journeys, we're able to build things that are long-lasting within our community. It's like the world's fair or the Olympics—we took that same kind of idea and did that here, making some infrastructure improvements," said Crystal Denney, the tribal journey's coordinator. The revival of culture infuses every Native community that hosts a canoe journal as well: "It's helping to revitalize and reinforce a culture that's already pretty strong," Denney said. "Hospitality," she added, "is a big portion of our culture."[19] Awaiting the first canoe landings, roughly one hundred Makah women danced in a line on the beach, inviting onlookers seated on bleachers, on logs, or in the sand to join in songs of welcome.

After formal greetings on the beach, each canoe family told stories, accompanied by songs and dances in a large tent on the Neah Bay High School football field from 10 a.m. to midnight each day. A street fair with eighty-two vendors surrounded the football field. The *Peninsula Daily News* characterized the event as occurring in "a carnival-like atmosphere."[20] Under the direction of Makah Joe Jimmicum, volunteer cooks and young helpers attached filets of three hundred large coho and king salmon onto large skewers and cooked them over an open flame near the landing site. Drums accompanied Native songs and the occasional beat of hip hop music.

Rob Ollikainen of the *Peninsula Daily News* reported that "the summer breeze blowing off Neah Bay on Monday was the last obstacle for 86 canoe teams at the end of the 2010 Tribal Canoe Journey. Each canoe looped in front of a sun-splashed beach, which was packed with several thousand onlookers, in a four-hour landing ceremony. The canoes then anchored to a rope about fifty yards offshore to prepare for the traditional protocol. A member of each canoe team asked the Makah for permission to come ashore, as is tradition." Joe McGimpsy, who welcomed each canoe on the public address system said, "We're glad you're here. Thank you for your journeys here today."[21]

Makah teacher Maria Parker Pasqua greeted the pullers in each canoe in the Makah language, followed by translation into English by Tribal Chairman Michael Lawrence. "On behalf of the people of the cape, I am honored for your presence," Lawrence said from atop a longhouse replica. Ollikainen reported,

> Tribes from the Pacific Coast of Washington, including the Quinault, Quileute and Hoh, followed the Makah tribe's Parker family escort canoe to the staging area at 3:30 p.m. Next came canoes from inland, including the Lummi, Suquamish, Nisqually, Nooksack, Muckleshoot, and Tulalip. A Jamestown S'Klallam canoe made its initial pass about 3:45 p.m. Three Lower Elwha Klallam canoes—including

> the "Pink Paddle" healing canoe intended to raise breast-cancer awareness—arrived shortly after 4 p.m. The Salish canoes came ashore at 6:45 p.m. "It has been an honor to travel in your sacred waters," said Phil Charles, skipper of the Lower Elwha Klallam Lightning canoe. Rose Wilson, a 14-year breast cancer survivor, asked the Makah for permission to land before a puller in the Pink Paddle released four pink balloons.[22]

With a touch of modernity—pink paddles and balloons—we are reminded of the wonderfully elastic nature of culture, even in the midst of an historical revival. The Tribal Canoe Journey thus revives culture while sustaining and improving modern Native life in the Pacific Northwest.

Notes

1. David Neel, *The Great Canoes: Reviving a Northwest Coast Tradition* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 2, 99.
2. Ibid., 23, 36, 39.
3. Ibid., 4–6, 126, 131.
4. Ibid., 131.
5. Will Sarvis, "Deeply Embedded: Canoes as an Enduring Manifestation of Spiritualism and Communalism among the Coast Salish," *Journal of the West* 42, no. 4 (2003): 74–80. Sarvis includes an impressive bibliography of canoe-culture revival in his references. Some of the titles include Bill Durham, "Canoes from Cedar Logs: A Study of Early Types and Designs," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (April 1955): 33–39; Bill Durham, *Indian Canoes of the Northwest Coast* (Seattle, WA: Copper Canoe Press, 1960); Emmett Oliver, "Reminiscences of a Canoe Puller" in *A Time of Gathering: Native Heritage in Washington State*, ed. Robin K. Wright (Seattle: Burke Museum and University of Washington Press, 1991), 248–53.
6. Sarvis, "Deeply Embedded," 75.
7. Neel, *The Great Canoes*, 6.
8. Ibid., 5–6.
9. For more detail about the Muckleshoot Canoe Family, see http://www.muckleshoot.nsn.us/services/community-services/muckleshoot-canoe-program.aspx (accessed September 9, 2011).
10. For more detail, see http://www.ncaiprc.org/files/Healing%20of%20the%20Canoe%20the%20Community%20Pulling%20Together.pdf (accessed September 10, 2010).
11. Ibid., 125.
12. Lisa R. Thomas, Dennis M. Donovan, Robin L. W. Sigo, Lisette Austin, and G. Alan Marlatt in collaboration with the Suquamish Tribe, "The Community Pulling Together: A Tribal Community-University Partnership Project to Reduce Substance Abuse and Promote Good Health in a Reservation Tribal Community," *Journal of Ethnicity in Substance Abuse* 8, no. 3 (2010): 283–300.
13. Sarvis, "Deeply Embedded," 77.
14. The material related to Emmet Oliver has been taken from an unpublished manuscript compiled by Willard Bill Sr., who served as Muckleshoot tribal historian until his death in 2008. The author of this article is completing the work begun by Bill at the request of the Muckleshoot Tribal Council.
15. Sarvis, "Deeply Embedded," 78.

16. *Pulling Together*, directed by James M. Fortier (Auburn, WA: Muckleshoot Indian Tribe, 2004); *Gathering Together*, directed by James M. Fortier (Auburn, WA and Pacifica, CA: Muckleshoot Indian Tribe and Turtle Island Productions, 2007).

17. Vanessa Renee Casavant, "Canoe Victim's Personal Paddle to Be Carried in His Honor to End of Journey," *Peninsula Daily News* (Port Angeles, WA), July 28, 2006; Vanessa Renee Casavant, "U.S., Canadian Coast Guards Offer Help with Future Canoe Journeys," *Peninsula Daily News* (Port Angeles, WA), July 27, 2006, http://www.peninsuladailynews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2006607270305 (accessed February 5, 2011); "Frederick 'Sonny' Woodruff: Quileute Elder Who Helped to Start Canoe Journey Dies," *Peninsula Daily News* (Port Angeles, WA), September 30, 2009, http://www.peninsuladailynews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2009309309983 (accessed December 20, 2010).

18. Leah Leach, "Makah to Welcome 100 Canoes Today," *Peninsula Daily News* (Port Angeles, WA), July 19, 2010.

19. Ibid.

20. "Neah Bay Packed and Prepared for Arrival of Tribal Canoe Journey," *Peninsula Daily News* (Port Angeles, WA), July 20, 2010, http://www.peninsuladailynews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2010307209994 (accessed February 5, 2011).

21. Rob Ollikainen, "Makah Welcome Tribal Canoe Journey to Neah Bay," *Peninsula Daily News* (Port Angeles, WA), July 20, 2010, http://www.peninsuladailynews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2010307209995 (accessed January 30, 2011).

22. Ibid.