

THE TLINGIT LAND OTTER COMPLEX:
COHERENCE IN THE SOCIAL AND SHAMANIC ORDER
by
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ABSTRACT

This thesis deals with Tlingit notions about death, spirits, land otters and shamans. The linkage between these categories and their relationship to the social order are explored by examining Tlingit mythology. Particular myths are analyzed that embody the concepts and beliefs which the Tlingit used to deal with the unanswerable question: What happens when someone dies? Socially, there was a set pattern of ritual practices and a series of memorial feasts to dispense with the body and spirit of someone who died a normal death. Yet, there was an anomalous situation associated with death by drowning or being lost in the woods. The Tlingit indicated that people who died in this manner were taken by land otter spirits and could become shamans if certain conditions were met. This thesis contends that this explanatory scenario was an important aspect of Tlingit cosmology, since it provided a means of illustrating the source of shamanic power, and also of how that power was related to the social aspects of Tlingit culture. The myths dealing with land otter possession offer information about how shamanic power was attained and also provide a glimpse into the importance of the role of the Tlingit shaman as a mediator between the social and the spiritual domains.

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INTRODUCTION

"The Tlingit have no consistent set of notions which can be invoked to explain the nature of the world and the ordinary regularities of natural events that take place in it. There seems to be no developed cosmological scheme. Rather, there are various uncoordinated sets of notions that are presented in the myths, some of which deal explicitly with the origins of certain natural features or human customs, while others, in apparent unconcern with temporal sequence, take these natural conditions and social institutions as already established, while explaining the creation of others which appear logically antecedant" (De Laguna: 1974;792).

THE TLINGIT LAND OTTER THEME

The Tlingit, like all native peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast engaged in various ceremonial activities, relied on oral tradition for the transmission of knowledge, and produced visually sophisticated and highly symbolic art. The art and the mythology reflected the complex social system and the spiritual beliefs of these people. A recurring theme in their culture was the "transmutable" relationship between humans and animals. A rich mythology spoke of this relationship and of the belief that special power and strength could be obtained from animals. Both the myths and the art supported the idea that some animals had the ability to transform into humans and that some humans could transform into animals; this idea was explicit in rituals surrounding death, and especially in all beliefs concerning land otters.

According to de Laguna (1972;823), the Tlingit believed that animals had souls that were essentially like those of human beings and in myhtime, were in human form. She cites a myth

(ibid.) which explains that their present bodies are derived from the fur robes they were wearing when they were frightened into the woods or the sea by the Daylight that was unleashed when Raven, the Transformer, was putting the world into its current order. In the myths, animals could doff or change their bodies while in their homes under the sea or in the mountains and regain their original human form. They might even appear before men in this human form. Now, however, she reports that only the Land Otter has the ability to assume the shape of a person.

In response to the opening quote from de Laguna, and contrary to what she seems to imply, I would hypothesize that the common themes prevalent in Tlingit mythology suggest an underlying order to their cosmology, even though this order does not manifest in an explicit or consistent fashion. The myths may offer a contradictory reflection of social reality juxtaposed with somewhat inconsistent beliefs, but they also express ways by which these inconsistencies are brought together. According to de Laguna, the nature of Tlingit cosmology is best understood through narrative or customary acts, rather than through philosophical exposition (ibid.). Therefore, an analysis of the myths, and also of certain ritual behavior, will provide insight into Tlingit thought in spite of the apparent inconsistency of their cosmology.

Although some authors have emphasized distinctions between "sacred" and "secular" aspects of Northwest coast culture (cf. Jonaitis; 1984, Goldman; 1975, Oberg; 1973), both social and shamanic art and rituals expressed relationships between the mythic world and the present reality, as well as between the natural environment and the cultural world. The myths acted as a verbal confirmation of these relationships, expressing and carrying on their spiritual and social values and beliefs. I would hypothesize that distinctions between sacred and secular activities reflect western modes of analysis which tend to dichotomize and reify ideas and materials into discrete bundles for ease of study. In the Tlingit case, I would concur with Guedon (personal communication), that the shamanic order actually spilled over into the social order and that the social order spilled into the sacred order; I would further argue that this common zone comes into focus when one examines how both the sacred order and the social order dealt with the common problem of death.

In Tlingit thought, the dead played a very important role. Deceased ancestors were considered an essential part of the social structure. The potlatch, a series of feasts for the dead, was meant to both honor the deceased relatives and to ensure that their heirs received the crests and objects associated with them. This would in turn secure them a place in the current social order. The potlatch was essential to this transmission of social

power within the community and yet it also had spiritual connotations. This spiritual dimension had to do with the belief that some essential part of the individual existed apart from the physical body. The potlatch or memorial feast was the means by which this soul or spirit was in effect released from its' obligations among the living. The social power that had been assumed by the deceased during his/her life had ultimately come from the spirits, who were actually ancestors and/or animals. Thus the social transmission of power to an heir at a potlatch included a formal recognition of this spiritual origin. It also entailed an explicit attempt to identify the boundaries between the living and the dead, as well as the boundaries between the different human kin groups.

The relation between social and sacred elements in the potlatch was best reflected in the mythology and the artwork of the Tlingit. Both the art and the myths employed images of transformation which expressed the Tlingit belief in the power of spirits. The depiction of beings in which animal features and human features coexisted was common, and stories of animals talking or of humans living among animals were told frequently. Many of the animals found in the Tlingit environment were depicted in the myths and stories, but some appeared more often than others.

One animal that appeared with great frequency on art objects associated with Tlingit rituals and in stories was the land otter. It appeared as a primary figure on many of the charms and masks owned by shamans, and also as a secondary figure on rattles, batons, charms and masks. The Tlingit perceived the land otter as a very powerful supernatural creature which could transform at will from animal to human form. Land Otter/People appeared frequently in Tlingit myths, often providing humans with power, strength and gifts of food. Land otters were the most potent spirit helper or *yek* for the Tlingit shaman, and were said to be the first animal to approach the latter in his initiatory quest for power.

The land otter was also an animal greatly feared by the Tlingit layperson since they believed that it was capable of kidnapping a drowning person or someone lost in the wilderness and taking him or her away to a land otter village. This was a place similar in many ways to a human village and was usually reached by travelling in land otter canoes across, and sometimes even under, the ocean. If the abducted individual did not escape soon, they would eventually turn into a furry land otter. In time, they would join the ranks of the land otter people and participate in bringing in new victims to increase the land otter population. Perhaps the most frightening aspect of all this for the Tlingit was their belief that the land otter spirits they encountered were at one time human and thus had a super-animal

intelligence which greatly facilitated their kidnapping endeavors. This "kidnapping" could also take the form of land otter possession, resulting in insanity and was viewed as a situation where a person was considered socially neither dead nor alive.

In this thesis I will examine the land otter complex, in order to determine what we can learn from it about the relationship between that most important Tlingit social ceremony, the potlatch (i.e. memorial feast for the dead), and Tlingit shamanism. The thesis will focus on the land otter complex, as it seems to accommodate the anomalous category of people whose spiritual and social identities have been lost and who have thus been removed from their place in the ceremonial order. More specifically, I will argue that the land otter was used as a means of symbolic mediation between the living and the dead.

The common ground between the social and the shamanic order was the arena in which the restoration of land otter's victims took place. I contend that this process made a significant contribution to the coherence of Tlingit cosmology. In developing this argument, we will explore how the potlatch dealt with death and with the social order; we will also examine some of the pertinent themes in the mythology and describe the shaman's connection with the land otter.

METHODOLOGY

There has been little interpretative work done on the topics of Tlingit shamanism and the Land Otter theme. In order to analyze the complex relationship between the land otter, the shaman and Tlingit social order, three major sources of data are available: 1) the literature, including early descriptive texts and ethnographies as well as current interpretive writing; 2) oral Tlingit literature, including myths, texts, songs and stories collected from the natives; and 3) artifacts, which include museum notes, archival material and photographic images of the objects. This thesis will deal with the first two sources, the literature and myths as primary materials to be analysed and referenced with the aim of casting more light on the interaction of social and spiritual belief systems. The artwork, which is also a rich source of material, will be included only as an adjunct to this analysis.

This thesis is based on data extracted from historical writings and relatively dated ethnographies. It deals primarily with the Tlingit belief system associated with the latter part of the last century, and thus it is especially difficult to verify some of the observations and conjectures that will arise in this study of the land otter complex. Some of the more subtle aspects of the Tlingit belief system, such as the relationship between

body and spirit, become apparent in the early writings of Russian clergy, but even that is subject to problems inherent in their Christian perspective.

In the final analysis, the primary source for understanding the nuances of both spiritual and social beliefs of the Tlingit are the myths. The examination of Tlingit myths confirms and reiterates the observations of Tlingit culture gleaned from the ethnographies. Yet it also goes a step further because the myths juxtapose social and spiritual beliefs in a way that is not readily apparent in the ethnographies. Chapters IV and V will explore some of the elements in the myths which illustrate how this blending of the spiritual and the social ultimately work to bring about a cohesion of values and beliefs in Tlingit society and thus a degree of coherence in their cosmology.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

In Chapter I, we will examine the social foundation of Tlingit society, including the hierarchical system of ranking and the inheritance of crests and names. This chapter will introduce the hypothetical role of the idea of reincarnation as a vital element in the potlatch ceremony.

Chapter II will give an overview of the Tlingit concept of the relationship between the body and the indwelling soul or

spirit. Tlingit views on what happens to this soul upon death of the body will be examined and used as supportive evidence for their belief in reincarnation. Finally the relationship between humans and spirit helpers or *yek* will be summarized.

Chapter III will look at the nature of the shaman and his role in Tlingit society. The rules and taboos associated with shamanic inheritance will be discussed. Tlingit concepts of illness and healing (and the malevolent nature of witchcraft) will be examined as will the phenomenon of spirit intrusion.

Chapter IV will examine the belief that land otters can steal away the spirits of humans and transform them into land otters. The mythological origins of the shaman will then lay the groundwork for establishing the relationship between land otters and shamans. The acquisition of power from land otters by shamans will be explored in greater detail. Finally, the biological nature of the otter as animal, and some of its natural behaviors will be examined.

Chapter V will present several land otter myths as representative examples. The myths will be analyzed to bring out major themes and significant details, with particular attention to kinship, death and shamanism. Reference to other myths and cross-comparisons of themes will be made when appropriate.

The Concluding chapter will provide a summary view of the various elements found in the myths which indicate that there are patterns in the land otter complex which have counterparts in the potlatch. These patterns, taken as a whole, will illustrate how

the Tlingit reconciled and dealt with the issue of death. Shamanic activity, the land otter complex and the potlatch will each be reviewed in order to elicit a comprehensive model of how they all served as cohesive elements of Tlingit cosmology.

TLINGIT GEOGRAPHY AND ECONOMY

The Tlingit inhabit the coastal area of southeastern Alaska and the numerous adjacent islands. Traditionally, their territory stretched from latitude 54° 40' to about latitude 60° north. This ranges from the area around Portland Canal in the south to Glacier Bay in the north. The region is bordered by the St. Elias Range of mountains on the north and the Coast Range to the east. Due to the past submergence of the glaciated coast ranges, the area to the west is an archipelago of large islands which protect the Tlingit from the full brunt of the Pacific storm waves. The features of this coastal area are typical of submerged glaciated shorelines, with steep-sloped islands and headlands bounded by long, narrow bays or fiords. Although many small streams empty into these fiords, they are generally from valleys far above sea level, and very few large streams are found along the coast. With a virtual absence of streams that are navigable to any distance inland, the steep surrounding mountains were a hindrance to easy communication with the interior. Since the islands to the west and the jutting peninsular headlands rise

abruptly and are so densely covered in undergrowth and forests, transportation in the past was primarily by canoe along the coastal waters.

The Tlingit area, often referred to as the Alaskan "pan-handle", is the northernmost extension of what is considered the Northwest Coast. The relative isolation afforded by the mountains to the north and east imposed limits on contact with the Eskimo and Athapaskan peoples and assured the prominence of a Northwest Coast cultural pattern. This does not suggest that there was no borrowing of traditions and trading of goods with neighbouring groups. In fact, although limited, such exchange was an important adjunct to Tlingit life.

The Tlingit economy was based on fishing and sea-hunting and thus water travel was extremely important. Typical of the Northwest Coast cultural pattern, the Tlingit had a highly developed complex of woodworking, and a social system with a strong emphasis on rank and wealth. Although there were certain fundamental patterns prevalent throughout the area, there were also many variations in the economy and material culture.

CHAPTER I

TLINGIT SOCIETY AND BELIEFS

"It is through his name, and the meaning of his name that a Tlingit knows himself. His name or names indentifies the spirit or spirits, formerly animating a long line of forebears, that have come to live again in him, shaping his body or lending character to his personality" (de Laguna, 1972:790).

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Like their Haida and Tsimshian neighbors to the south, and their Eyak neighbors to the north, the Tlingit kin groups were arranged into matrilineal moieties. According to Oberg (1973:23), there were three matrilineal phratries in Tlingit society: the *Tlaienedi*, or Raven, the *Sinkukedi*, or Wolf, and the *Nexadi*, or Eagle. However, since the *Nexadi* were so few in number, they were generally grouped with the *Sinkukedi*. In any case, we may speak of the Tlingit as having two major divisions, Raven and Wolf/Eagle. Since these divisions were exogamous, the social structure that evolved entailed reciprocal ceremonial obligations with services rendered at all life crises by the 'opposite' side. Such services were repaid at potlatches or feasts when the debtors served as hosts.

De Laguna (1972:450), in her extensive three volume study of the northern Tlingit, emphasizes that the moiety was not a social group as it had no organization of its own. Rather it served to regulate the relationships between persons, especially those built on marriage, since it arranged the sibs to which each individual belonged on one side or the other. The primary

organization was the sib, or clan, which was preeminently a political as well as a social unit. The Tlingit term *kwan* referred to a regional federation of sub-clans (ie. the Stikine-*kwan* which was comprised of nine sibs in several villages along a portion of the Stikine River). There was confusion between these two social categories which resulted from the introduction of the term "tribe" by early explorers and missionaries and later, government officials who used the term in a primarily territorial sense. De Laguna tries to show how this usage did not reflect the actual situation or native thought:

"While the inhabitants of each geographical district were to some extent united by feelings of local pride, local sociability, and ties of affinity, they still did not constitute a tribe in the sense of a politically organised and autonomous group. Rather a sense of community identity took second place to the "patriotism" felt by the members of each sib for their own matrilineal kin group... Sib members recognized their common kinship even though they might be scattered in different villages in different tribal (ie.*kwan*) areas, for only a few sibs were restricted to one region (de Laguna, 1972:212).

However, confusion still exists since, on the one hand, many English-speaking Tlingit continue to refer to the sib as a "tribe" or "nation", and on the other hand official government and legal documents insist on using the word "tribe" in a strictly territorial sense. The sib was actually independent of the local community or *kwan*, though native traditions suggest a link between the unilineal kin group and the locality, the latter being the site of their ancestral house. To further clarify the linkage between territory and kinship, de Laguna looks at the composition of the sibs:

"A sib of any size is composed of several lineages or house groups (*hit-tan*), and the latter in turn may consist of a single house line or a cluster made up of "mother" and "daughter" houses. While some sibs are found only in only single tribal (*kwan*) districts, most sibs are established in several areas where they own house sites and territories for hunting, fishing, and gathering. The local segments of such a widespread sib may or may not be able to form distinct subsibs, perhaps depending on the recency or circumstances of their dispersal. On the other hand, a single sib in one locality may exhibit two (or more?) fairly independent lineages or clusters of houses, perhaps reflecting the process of splitting into separate sibs, or the incomplete fusion of two formerly distinct groups. The relative independence of these subdivisions may be seen in their historical traditions, in their sharing or exclusive use of totemic crests or other prerogatives, and in whether or not they form rival groups at local potlatches (ibid.:212).

The character of the sibs was an extremely important and jealously guarded aspect of Tlingit society. Each sib was composed of a group of individuals who were bound together by a set of particular prerogatives: a common name, a body of historical and mythological traditions, possession of territories for hunting, fishing and berrypicking, house sites and houses in the village, and by a treasure of nonmaterial rights, together with their material or symbolic representations (ibid.:451). The lineage was like a sib in miniature and had its share of common sib possessions and prerogatives as well as those to which its made exclusive claim. Both the lineage and the sib had their own particular material possessions, songs, dances, war cries and shaman's songs. These were felt to distinguish the group from other sibs and lineages. Individual members of the sib found their mates preferentially in the sib of their fathers. Cross-

cousin marriage preference was emphasized by the joking relationship between such cousins, while brothers and sisters stood in an avoidance relationship; and incest between members of the same sib or even moiety was considered a sin provoked by or leading to insanity.

CRESTS AND RANK

According to de Laguna (1972:451), the distinctions and prerogatives of the sib were strongly associated with its totemic crests. They were an important feature of the matrilineal sib or lineage. Thus members of the sib or the lineage were viewed as vital links to the "totemic" entities from which these rights were acquired in the mythic past by their ancestors. The symbolic dimension of Tlingit social life was represented by the crests and crest objects, which corresponded to the totemic symbols correlated with the divisions in the social organization. Certain crests identified the moiety, others the sib, and still others the house-group. Some, such as Raven, were used at all three levels, while others were exclusive to the sib and/or lineage.

The oldest male in a Tlingit lineage was generally the *yitsati* or "keeper of the house". The *yitsati* did not in a strict sense own the house or the ceremonial crests of the lineage, but rather held them in trust. Although he was not

officially a war leader, his words carried weight in these matters. According to Oberg (1973:30), the *yitsati* was pre-eminently a ceremonial leader, a repository of myth and social knowledge, and an educator of the young of the house-group. He carried on the trading activities of the house-group and took an active part in ceremonial labor, such as house building, feasts and burials.

The most important figure in the sib was the *ankaua* or "rich man". He was the leading *yitsati* or "house-keeper" of the highest ranked house in the sib. The *ankaua* was also known as the 'big man' or *lingit-tlen*, and was usually the custodian or trustee of the sib's common inheritance. He was thus responsible for housing, maintaining and displaying the crest objects that were the sib's representation of that inheritance. He was also responsible for the group's territories, and for the allocation and preservation of its resources. He was a ceremonial leader and had the primary responsibility for the potlatches and ceremonies that established and maintained the status of his sib in Tlingit society.

The *yitsati*, as headman of a lineage, often stood as a counselor to the *ankaua* of his sib. Shamans sometimes held this position of lineage head, perhaps due to the fact that the right was passed from the elder to younger brothers in the house group. Thus, if a younger brother had chosen to follow the way of a

shaman, he might find himself suddenly immersed in the more social/political role of *yitsati*. The shaman, or *ixt*, also acted in other capacities as advisor to the *ankaua* or *yitsati*. When disputes that concerned the whole sib were discussed, the *ankaua* called the *yitsati* of the various house groups together, and they held a meeting in a sweat house. The leading *ixt* of the sib was always present and often consulted in an oracular manner.¹ Whether as a *yitsati* or as *ixt*, his opinion was highly regarded, especially in matters of warfare and the settling of disputes.

NAMES AND REINCARNATION

Hierarchical ranking was important to the organization of the Tlingit. Clans, sub-clans, house groups within sub-clans, and individuals within house groups all had their relative status. The status of individuals was generally inherited, but had to be continually reaffirmed. The potlatch or feast was a mechanism for validating this ranking in the secular realm, and crest art was a means of displaying it. The totemic spirits associated with the power of the crests were believed to have come in mythological times to bestow this power on the sib. It was up to the individuals of the sib to renew the validity of that crest's power when they inherited the right to display it.

¹ According to Olson (1961;207), a shaman accompanied all war parties; his power enabled him to tell where the enemy was hidden, and also who and how many would be killed. In these revelations he usually spoke in metaphoric or Delphic terms.

Part of the mechanism by which an individual inherited his rights was the acquisition of an honorific name at a potlatch. These names were closely associated with totemic animals and their symbols. Like the totemic crests, such names were relatively few and generally fixed in number, although new ones could be introduced on special occasions. Also, like the crests, they were sacred and used only on ceremonial occasions. But, besides these "honorific" names there were other kinds of names that were essential to the identity of a Tlingit individual. According to De Laguna (1954; 184), the Tlingit distinguished between the "real" or "ordinary" name given at birth, the "pet" name when one was growing up, and/or the "nickname" which could be acquired at any time, and the "potlatch" or "honorific" name which is ceremonially conferred by a relative who validates it by making a contribution at a potlatch. A "chief's" name was apparently such a potlatch name assumed by or proclaimed on behalf of the heir at the memorial potlatch he gave for his predecessor. A person may inherit several "real" names from different deceased relatives, thus embodying as many reincarnations (de Laguna, *ibid.*).

For the Tlingit, the birth of a child always meant the return of someone who had died, and the after-life was but the prelude to a new existence (de Laguna, 1954; 181). All deceased individuals (with the possible exception of witches and those who mistreat animals) could be reincarnated. They could choose the

parents to whom they would be reborn as long as the mother was a close relative in their own sib or in a related branch. According to de Laguna (1954:182) a person may tell a woman that he will come back to her as a child, and that she should name the baby after him. He may select one woman among his kin because of her good character or because her husband is a good provider, and forbid other potential mothers from naming a son for him because they are "no good." A person could have two or more names, and thus presumably multiple souls or spirits. In this case the person could come back to more than one woman, and each of the mothers may bear a child with one of the deceased's names.

The possession of a name or names, when several of the deceased's were given to a living namesake, made reincarnation "effective." The reincarnated individual was said to remember his previous life.² His "real" name carried with it the kin usages practiced by or toward the previous holder. This practice is illustrated by de Laguna who says that:

A mother may call a son "uncle" because he is named for her mother's brother, or a man may call his son "father" because the baby bears the name of the father's father. The former wife calls her husband's namesake "husband," gives gifts to her "mother-in-law" (the baby's mother), and helps care for the baby. The

² Stevenson's (1974:4) fieldwork suggests that the belief in reincarnation is still current among the Tlingit in Alaska. In fact, he indicates that the world's highest number of reported cases is among the Tlingit. His investigations suggest that the incidence of reported cases is influenced by cultural beliefs, but also that reincarnation occurs in families ignorant of the phenomenon or even opposed to it. Of the many cases which indicated a memory of past lives, more than half involved some kind of birthmark or physical deformity of the present personality that related to wounds or illness of the past person.

father and mother of one man gave presents to the orphaned children of their son's dead namesake, as if they were the true grandparents. In turn, the son of the reincarnated "father" calls the daughter of his father's namesake "sister" and gives her money as a true brother should (ibid.:184).

All Tlingit names (except nicknames) were said to belong to a particular sib, and some were even designated as belonging to a specific "house group" or lineage. Names could be passed out of one sib into a closely related one, either through planned reincarnation on the part of the original holder, or because a grandfather in one sib bestowed an honorific name on his son's child who belonged to another sib. In the latter case, the right to the name was confined to the child so honored, unless the name was a new one coined at a potlatch. It is not certain whether the name involved in reincarnation was in theory completely transferred to the other sib. De Laguna (ibid.:185) reports that the census records indicate that many names were shared by several sibs and were duplicated in many communities.

The spirit power of an ancestor, which was bestowed on the Tlingit individual in a name-giving ceremony at a potlatch, was believed to stay with him as long as he could uphold the honor that went with this privilege. Although it was an exclusive ceremonial name, it was only one of several possible names a person might have. Noble names were like titles, passing from older to younger brother, from mother's brother to sister's son, or from grandfather to his son's son, at the death of the senior. This did not imply reincarnation, although the prestige and any

prerogatives of the predecessor were transferred with the name. These honorific names were words or phrases referring to sib totems, to their representations as crests, to episodes in sib history, or to graves and houses paid for at a potlatch in which such names are given. According to de Laguna:

Because the individual is so closely identified with his sib and its origins, totems and crests, some names have been coined to refer to these, and so express in analogous fashion this mythical-social aspect of the self. A person's names thus not only embody or symbolize his "soul" or "souls"; they express his position in society as defined by the intersecting coordinates of maternal and paternal lines and of rank; they indicate his relationship to those sectors and the "natural" world associated with sib mythology; and lastly, they portray his own individual personality traits (ibid.:187).

Shamans acquired honorific names either when they finished their novitiate or when they obtained their first spirit helper. Thus, *Tek-ic*, as shaman, became *Lxagusa*, "Tells about War," referring to his ability (or that of one of his spirits) to see approaching war parties. A shaman's name was usually associated with a particular spirit, and thus would be inherited with that spirit by his successor, as was the name *Setan*. This was actually the name of the spirit, which was announced by the shaman while in trance (de Laguna, 1972:787). The shaman summoned and received into himself all of those spirits that served his predecessors, for a time losing his ordinary identity, and speaking in their names (ibid.;790).

Recent symbolic analyses of Tsimshian and Kwakiutl cultures suggest that the people were given to eternal names, rather than the other way around, because "the name is an institution or the soul of a corporation that exists forever" (Miller 1984:29; cf. Goldman 1975:37; Walens 1981:65; Halpin 1984; Seguin 1984:114). This interpretation of the meaning of names and naming may apply to the Tlingit as well. The valuable names inherited from the ancestors were perceived by the Tlingit as tangibles that could be "put on" in the same manner as the ceremonial regalia which they acquired. According to Olson, "those to be reincarnated go to a place no one knows where and when they come back they carry (as a bundle) under their arm that same name which is therefore given to them." The Tlingit were concerned about preventing their names from "dying out," and so they would perpetually recycle them among the living. Potlatch names, as opposed to birth and pet names, carried a certain prestige and social value, indicating the rank of its holder (Olson, 1967:48).

POTLATCHING: REMEMBERING THE ANCESTORS

Tlingit ceremonial activities, like those of other Northwest cultures, entailed a complex series of rituals which have come to be subsumed under the name 'potlatch'.³ The memorial potlatch, which followed funerals, was the chief ceremony for the Tlingit according to McClellan, although she actually distinguishes three categories of ceremonialism: feasts, "potlatches" and peacemaking (McClellan, 1954:77).

On any special occasion, feasts were held which involved the serving of food in a ceremonial manner to in-laws and relatives from the opposite moiety. These feasts could be small scale events among members of a household after a successful hunt, or grand affairs in which the entire community might participate. Often members of one moiety would feast the opposite moiety and not eat themselves in order to pay for services rendered by their guests. The tobacco-smoking party which was held just before the disposal of a corpse is an example of this kind of feast. These smaller feasts might be considered as part of a series of ritual activities that together constituted the potlatch. Reciprocity of this sort strengthened the opposition between the two sides and reaffirmed the identity of each lineage.

³ The category of 'potlatch' was created by Europeans. As Goldman pointed out for the Kwakiutl (1975:131), "There never were, at least in precontact days, such events as 'potlatches'. Rather there were specific ritual occasions commemorating marriage, death, the construction of a house, investiture of an heir", and so on. However, following the usage by other anthropologists and, in many cases, the natives themselves, I will use the term 'potlatch' to refer to a set of ceremonies which shared certain basic features.

The fundamental core of the Tlingit potlatch was the formal and public payment by members of one moiety to those of the opposite moiety. The primary purpose was to honor the dead and also the living by recompensing individuals of the other side for duties rendered, and to guarantee their "respect behavior" in the future (idib.). Individuals of high rank used the potlatch not only for the obligatory payment of funeral duties, but also to mark the completion of a new lineage house, to absolve "shame" from a physical blemish or awkward accident, to remove an insult, and to maintain or attain their full noble status. Potlatches for high ranking individuals were usually associated with the rebuilding or completion of a new lineage house, and often involved inter-village participation.

The peacemaking or "deer" ceremony was similar in pattern and ritual form to feasting and potlatching. Swanton recorded a Tlingit song (1909:412) in which Raven is married to a woman of the land otter people. He taught them the "deer" ceremony. Afterwards he came among humans and taught it to them. The crucial difference the deer ceremony and a regular feast was that it resulted in a satisfactory settlement for bodily injury or death inflicted on a member of one sib by a member of another. Afterwards he came among humans and taught it to them. According to Swanton (1908a:461), if a man died unavenged, or his death was not properly compensated for, then he could not get up the ladder that took him to *Ki'waa* (the Tlingit sky realm for heroes), but

instead would drift around with the clouds and not be available for reincarnation if denied access to that realm. The final stage in this ceremony was the exchange of hostages called "deer".¹

The memorial, or funeral potlatch was by far the most important Tlingit ceremony, and helped to maintain the social cohesion of that society right up to the present day (Kan, 1986:194). All of the major ethnographers of the Tlingit have emphasized the role of the dead and the native view of this ritual as a memorial, but few have explored the idea that its ultimate purpose was to ensure the continuity of the lineage. One exception to this is a recent analysis by Sergei Kan (1986) in which he examines the symbolism of the ceremonial objects, ritual acts and discourse, as well as the interaction and the relationships between the actors. His category of actors includes not only the living hosts and guests, but also their deceased matrilineal relatives. By treating the dead as active participants in the ceremony, he is able to illustrate the native perspective of continuity (via the idea of inheritance) as an important focus of the Tlingit potlatch.

¹ "Deer" also appear in the myths: Swanton (1908:597), tells of a village visited by land otter people who dress up and dance for their hosts in an effort to make peace with them, since their relatives (land otters) had been killed by the villagers. The guests (land otters) were all killed, the "deer" being saved for last. In Tale 31 (ibid.:139), two high-caste land otters are taken as peace hostages ("deer") to help settle a war between humans and land otters. The land otter people then come to the village and perform the peace dance. In the morning when the people wake up, they have disappeared, but the people remember the dance.

The death of a member of the matrilineal group (especially someone of high status) caused a social crisis. The subsequent wake involved a collective reassessment of the social career of the deceased and reiterated his ties with all of the members of his lineage or clan. This first stage in the transformation of the deceased into an ancestor was a period of sodality among the lineage which was united in their common grief for the deceased. According to Kan, their mourning attire underscored that unity, while deemphasizing the important distinctions and inequalities among the aristocrats and commoners, old and young, men and women (Kan, 1986:196).

Oberg's (1973:123) description of the Tlingit potlatch indicates the involvement of the shaman on these ceremonial occasions. He says that the potlatch was a four-day affair. On the first day, speech making by both sides, feasting, and dancing by the hosts took place. On the second day the visitors performed their clan dances and displayed and explained the origin of their totemic crests. The third day was devoted to theatricals and contests of various kinds. After eating and fish oil drinking contests, Oberg reports that:

Imitations of other peoples' dances and customs follow. Another important feature is the contests between rival shamans, each endeavoring to perform the most miraculous conjuring act, such as walking through fire or shooting arrows at a robe without piercing it (*ibid.*).

At the conclusion of a potlatch, the guests thanked and comforted their hosts with formal speeches, and cheered them up

by singing and dancing in their own paraphernalia. When this thanks-giving was over the hosts said that they had "put their troubles away" and that the dead chief who had been alone on an island, had been helped by the guests to return "back to the mainland". McClellan (1954:82) notes that this symbolically put him in the position of being ready to be born again, for his death had been properly "finished" and his nephew - installed as the new lineage chief and bearing the old chief's name - could take his uncle's widow as wife.

There were two important processes going on within the ceremonial activity of the potlatch. One was the desire to increase status and prestige and the other was the mortuary/memorial purpose of the potlatch. Kan (1986:201) explains that many of the actions that were aimed at raising the host group's rank and status were meant as ways of honoring their matrilineal ancestors. Whenever conflicts occurred among the participants, the names of the dead were invoked to restore peace. Kan views the "love and respect" of the living toward the dead as an ideology which allowed the living to present actions aimed at raising their status as noble and morally correct. At the same time, the potlatch was the only major opportunity for the display of the sacred crests, the performance of songs, dances and myths which embodied the history, identity and destiny of the matrilineal group.

Kan (*ibid.*) warns us that it is incorrect to consider competition over rank, status, and prestige as the only significant purpose of the potlatch as some scholars have done (Jonaitis, 1986:12; Oberg, 1973:124; Tolefson, 1976:203-234). On the other hand, he recognizes that it is a mistake to restrict an analysis to the native ideology, which emphasized commemorative aspects of the potlatch such as "dignity, sympathy, high respect for all, with the exalted chief and the poor and lowly united in sorrow and honor for the ancestors" (de Laguna, 1972:612). It is Kan's opinion that the complexity of the potlatch and its centrality in Tlingit culture and society resulted from a dialectical relationship between competition and cooperation, between the struggle for power and prestige on the one hand, and the "love and respect" for the ancestors on the other (Kan, 1986:201). The important role of these ancestors in maintaining a balanced social order must not be underestimated.

According to Kan, the relationship between the living and the dead, maintained by the Tlingit, and dramatized and reiterated in the potlatch, was that of reciprocity. The living provided the dead with food, warmth, gifts, and most importantly, love and rememberance. The dead, in return, passed on to them the valuable names and other sacred possessions and prerogatives, which were used by the living to maintain and raise their rank, status and prestige. The Tlingit believed that the dead could not only help them, but might also harm them with illness or

death, if the living did not show proper respect and help them by distributing food and other gifts at the potlatch (*ibid*).

The symbolic importance of including the deceased in the ritual exchange of the potlatch was explained by an informant of Swanton's who said that:

Whenever people had a big feast in this world and put trays of food into the fire, mentioning the names of the deceased, this food went directly up to the spirit houses. And when the people gave blankets away to those about them it was just as though they gave blankets to the spirits, for the spirits also received them (Swanton, 1908a:462).

McClellan (1954:80) emphasizes that all food eaten at a potlatch feast was consumed for the dead - not only the dead chief, but for all the ancestors of the host moiety. The names of the dead who were to receive the food was announced so that the spirits would hear. Also the name of each contributor of gifts among the hosts was called out along with that of the dead person being honored. They kept track of the amounts collected and then announced them so that "the dead will hear it" (*ibid*.). When the accumulated wealth was distributed, every bit had to be given away, since this was the only way in which the dead could receive its benefit in the spirit world.

As long as the dead were remembered by their living kin group they could participate in the potlatch. The fire was their means of communicating with the living, and through it they received what they needed in the spirit world. Those who were

remembered received warmth and nourishment from their descendants and sat close to the fire in their noncorporeal houses (Swanton, 1908a:462). Their remains were periodically placed in new grave houses or other containers and their names were passed on to their heirs. However, those who were forgotten had to move further and further away from the fire, and thus suffered from hunger and cold, while their "houses" in the cemetery crumbled. Ultimately the continuity of the matrilineal clan, which was the core of the Tlingit sociocultural order, depended upon the human ability to remember the ancestors (Kan, 1986:200).

De Laguna (personal communication, M.F. Guedon) explained that you don't need a potlatch to be given in honor of the deceased in order for their spirit to be reincarnated. The potlatch cleared the social position of the deceased so that the position could then be filled again. It also cleared the debts of the deceased so that he/she would feel free to move away. But she claims that this did not interfere with nor did it facilitate reincarnation. However, she notes that you did need a body (corpse) in order that a memorial potlatch (i.e. feast for the dead) be held. Without a body, you may still have a feast, but it is primarily an occasion to introduce an heir who has taken on the "noble" name, or a new chief as the case may be. The next chapter will deal with the Tlingit beliefs about the souls of these ancestors and how they are related, both socially and spiritually, to the Tlingit concept of the individual.

CHAPTER II

SPIRITS AND SOURCES OF POWER

"Night is the time for ghosts, spirits and animals; if man is to triumph over them he must perform the first crucial acts of ritual before raven's cries herald the approach of dawn. If he is to escape from the land of the dead back to that of the living, he must hurry and reach home before the raven calls" (de Laguna, 1972:835).

TLINGIT VIEWS OF THE BODY AND SOUL

In order to establish a connection between the Tlingit potlatch and the land otter complex, it is important to know about their belief in souls and spirits. Reincarnation beliefs were based on the idea that there are essential parts of the individual which survive after death. The potlatch was a way of ensuring that these aspects of the individual were released of all obligations to the living. The belief in land otter 'capture' of lost or drowned persons was a means of dealing with those who were not available for the ceremonial disposal of the body. Still, a potlatch was given, and at memorial feasts food was put into the water for them, not into the fire, as for the ordinary dead. The shaman, who was capable of retrieving lost souls, was the only means of rescue available to those captured by land otters. He relied on spirit helpers or *yek* to help him in this retrieval of waylaid souls. There is a connection between these *yek* and the souls of dead individuals which this chapter will explore.

The Tlingit conceived of the individual person as having three aspects: 1) the body; 2) a virtually sexless immortal

spirit or soul which is reincarnated in a series of bodies, yet leaves behind some ghostly essence with the corpse; and 3) the name or names which indicate and/or establish personal and social identity (De Laguna, 1974:758).

The body was viewed as essentially a covering for the spirit or "soul". It was left permanently behind in death or could be left temporarily while in a trance or coma. The physical body was referred to as 'me around blanket' or 'my surrounding flesh' and the Tlingit term for 'flesh' and 'blanket' are identical (*ibid.*). In mythic times, the ancestors were said to be able to don the skin of an animal and thus transform into that animal. De Laguna (*ibid.*:823) indicates that all animals could once transform into anthropomorphic form, but now only land otter can do so. In the myths the fur of the animals was seen as the blankets they wore in their earlier human form.

A succinct explanation of the relation between the corporeal and the noncorporeal attributes of the body as perceived by the Tlingit, is offered by Kan (1986:196). In his reconstruction of their theory of personhood, he indicates that the Tlingit made a clear distinction between the temporary physical attributes, which he labels the "outside" and the more permanent corporeal and noncorporeal ones, which he refers to as the "inside". The former included the skin and flesh, which were seen as the surface reflection of the social identity and the emotional state

of the person. Ceremonial garments were also considered another layer of the "outside" representation of social identity. Althought they were concerned with the appearance of the "outside", the "inside", which consisted of bones and several spiritual entities, was perceived as a more significant element that controlled the "outside" (*ibid.*).

TLINGIT ESCHATOLOGY

According to Swanton (1908a:460), the soul of a living person was called *qatuwu'* or *wa'sa-tu'wati* ("what feels"), "because when a person's feeling is gone he is dead." In the story of Kaka recounted for de Laguna (1974:749) by an informant, the shaman "loses his feeling" when he threatens the land otter people and thus cannot harm them. This may only mean a kind of paralysis set in, or more likely in the context of Swanton's definition, it may suggest a kind of symbolic death and a consequent loss of power for the hero.

Kan interprets cremation as the means of separating the polluted flesh of the deceased, which is no longer controlled by the "inside", from the pure bones. This released the noncorporeal entities of the "inside". After the cremation, the bones were "dressed" in blankets and placed inside a "house" in the "village of the dead". The spiritual entities that were released included a ghost that dwelled with the bones, a spirit which dwelled in a

noncorporeal replica of the house of the deceased in the distant *s'igeeekaawu aani*, located in the interior, and another spirit that returned to this world to be reincarnated in a matrilineal descendant of the deceased.¹ The cremation fire thus helped the spirit on its journey into the afterlife, while the fireplace in the house served as the medium of communication between the living and their departed matrikin, who consumed the food and gifts put into it by the living (ibid.).

Swanton (cited in de Laguna, 1974;749) also indicates that the Tlingit made a distinction between three categories of souls that are associated with a person. Besides the indwelling soul of the living person, after death there was one called *yu'kgwahe'yak*, or else *qayahayi*, which means "shadow" and is also the word for picture. The third category is the spirit of the dead body that was called *s'a'gi* which is also applied to the place where souls go after death, *sa'gi qa'wu ani* ("ghosts' home"). This was a happy region, elevated above the plane of this world. There was a house there called Sleep house (*ta hit*) where people rested.²

¹ Actually the Tlingit believed that a person possessed more than the three spiritual entities mentioned by Kan, but he feels that they are the most important ones. Like the rest of their cosmology, Tlingit beliefs about the spirit are sketchy and often contradictory. The information in this chapter is an attempt to form a composite illustration of their beliefs drawing from the principal ethnographic sources (Swanton, Emmons, De Laguna and Kan).

² This implies that this was not an eternal place for the soul to dwell, but rather a temporary respite in the journey of the soul after death. The ultimate goal was to be reincarnated as a result of the proper treatment of the soul by the descendants residing in the village - i.e. potlatching and passing on the name to appropriate heirs. There were techniques for insuring that a

The next higher region, known as *ki'waa* ("way up") according to Swanton, was where those who died by violence were said to go. Access to this upper region was by a single hole called *andaqe'n wul*, which was reached by a ladder. As we saw in the last chapter, persons who died by violence but were not properly avenged or compensated for in a peace or "deer" ceremony, were refused entry according to certain myths and had to drift with the clouds. Of particular interest to this present study is a third region said to be for those who had died by drowning, which was located below the plane of the earth (perhaps in the ocean since food for spirits there had to be put into the water). Witches and other evildoers went to *Yel qiwakawo* (Raven's home) where it seems that there was little chance of being reincarnated. The Tlingit claimed to have learned about all of these regions from men who had died and returned to life again (Swanton, 1908a:461).

De Laguna's explanation of the Tlingit concept of the soul's journey after death is somewhat different and is summarized in Table I. She clarifies Swanton's ambiguous description of the realm for evildoers:

'Dog Heaven' (*ketl kiwa'a*) is rather similar to Hell as we imagine it, a concept with which the Tlingit are familiar and which they call the 'place below' (*hayi*). Yet Dog Heaven appears to represent an aboriginal concept of some antiquity and is located above, not under, the earth (de Laguna, 1974:771).

particular individual would come back to a specific woman (see De Laguna, 1974:777).

There is confusion here engendered by the missionary concept of a Biblical Hell, but the Tlingit informants insisted that they had their own concept of a separate, intermediary sky realm where those who stole, murdered, committed suicide, mistreated animals or practised witchcraft would have to stay "float[ing] up into the sky and mov[ing] around with the clouds (ibid.). Reincarnation was not possible since, as de Laguna says, "the horror of Dog Heaven is due in part to the mystery that surrounds it, since no one is believed to have returned to tell about it" (ibid.).

Another point of confusion is Swanton's contention that those who died unavenged could not climb the ladder which gave access to *Kiwa'a* through a hole in the sky, *gus wul* ("cloud hole"). De Laguna's informant indicated that when a person was to die, the souls in *Kiwa'a* would know in advance, and his relatives up there would try to cover up the hole. If they were successful, the death could be prevented. When they were not successful, the person would die and enter *Kiwa'a*. The reason given for the lack of success was that "the opposite tribe (moiety) always try to open the way...They want more of the others in there" (ibid.). Presumably, the motivation for this was an assurance of receiving greater wealth as repayment for funeral services at the ensuing potlatches. This place was known about from those who had been slain and later reincarnated, most of those who went there wished to stay there because "it was a happy world from which the wicked were excluded" (ibid.).

Table 1

Tlingit Eschatology

DEATH CATEGORY	SPIRIT - SOUL - ANCESTOR (location of)	FOOD FOR DEPARTED	LEVEL OF AFTER-WORLD
Violent: war, animal accident (cremated)	Kiwa'a - Land Above (northern lights are spirits playing games) Gus Wul "cloud hole" -guarded by watchmen-	fire	above sky vault
Witches, Malefactors (often killed)	Ketl Kiwa'a -"Dog Heaven" (spirits in the air with nowhere to go) No reincarnation?	?	air
"ordinary death" -sickness, old age.	Sege qawu g'ani "ghost town" across the water or deep in forest behind village	fire	land, surface
LIVING PERSON	--<--<--REINCARNATION--<--<----DEAD		PERSON
drowned or lost in woods (body lost)	Kucda 'anika "on top of land otters' village" =smoke hole? --not dead-- Kucda Qwani "Land Otter Spirits"	water	water, below

Adapted from Lovejoy, 1984.

In all of the stories about people reincarnated from *Kiwa'a*, the returned person was either forbidden access or was sent back to earth because of some transgression of the rules there (de Laguna, 1974:772-774). This reinforces the idea that it was an exclusive and desirable place to stay. Since entry was limited to those who had died in battle upholding the valor and status of their clan, it would appear that this was a desirable goal in the cyclical process of reincarnation. In other words, Tlingit individuals seemed to be subject to a continuous cycle of rebirth until they reached the ideal status of being a hero killed in battle, at which point they could remain in *Kiwa'a* if they adhered to the rules there. Yet, there was a great deal of flexibility in this and all other aspects of the afterlife and the spirit world since Tlingit beliefs are such a juxtaposition of often contradictory statements.

It is uncertain whether those taken by the Land Otter Men could be reincarnated. De Laguna's informant illustrated the contradictory nature of this issue when he told her that "after they die as *kucda qa*, then they are reborn" and later ventured that "after two years the *kucda* (land otters) let them go. De Laguna 1972:777) notes that the names of those who drowned and whose bodies were never recovered were still given to children at Yakutat. Although this indicates a belief that the drowned were reborn, she admits that there is also a notion that these people are in some way still among the Land Otter People (*ibid.*).

SHAMANS AND SPIRIT HELPERS

De Laguna tells us that, apart from the indwelling "soul" that was associated with a person's names, the Tlingit also had a concept of a personal guardian spirit which they called '*ax kina yek*' or 'My Spirit Above'. According to Veniaminov, each person had his own *kina yek*, which always stayed with him. If the person was wicked or impure, the spirit would leave or kill them. As the Tlingit said, "If I do evil, my *ax kina yek* will slay me." In times of misfortune or sickness, however, they prayed for help "to the chief *yek* who belongs to some renowned or famed shaman" (de Laguna, 1972:813).

While these personal guardian spirits seemed to be always available to help the individual, the shaman's spirits, or *yek*, had to be invoked directly each time something was desired. There were said to be a great number of these *yek* who controlled the weather, health, success in war, and many other human undertakings. As Swanton describes:

The number of spirits with which the world was peopled was simply limitless. According to Katishan, there was one principal and several subordinate spirits in everything, and this idea seems to be represented in shaman's masks, each of which represents one main spirit and usually contains effigies of several spirits as well. There is said to have been a spirit in every trail on which one traveled, and one around every fire; one was connected with everything one did. So in olden times people were afraid of employing trifling words because they thought that everything was full of eyes looking at them and ears listening to what they said." (1908:452)

Swanton mentions the Tlingit belief that the Sun and the Moon were the abode of deceased spirits, the stars their houses, and that the Northern Lights were the souls of the dead. He also indicated that the wind, sea, bays, rivers, lakes, swamps, glaciers, hot springs, mountains and many other places were felt to contain spirits. These spirits or animating souls became the familiars of the *ixt* who sought the various powers that these *yek* controlled. De Laguna (1972:812) estimates that the *yek* must have been innumerable and might be obtained by the shamans from almost anything. However, the most powerful helpers were obtained from animals, birds or fish which the shaman encounters and whose tongue he collected to secure the power.³ The *yek* would then enter the body of the *ixt* during a seance, when he fell into a trance and uttered its' animal cry. He could also animate a piece of his paraphernalia with this power, or send it on a journey to see what was happening far away. If his *yek* was overcome by that of another shaman, the "master" of the vanquished *yek* may die. After the death of an *ixt*, his *yek* remained near the grave, ready to come to the nephew or other matrilineal relative who was destined to become the successor.

The Tlingit shaman's ability to practise his profession was based on his control of these *yek*. The first, and most important

³ Land otter tongues are felt to be the strongest source of shamanic power. As we will see in Chapter III, the shaman will ideally cut eight tongues and thus obtain eight spirit helpers. De Laguna (1954:180) claims that other men (presumably non-shamans) might obtain lesser power from one tongue.

yek sought by a shaman was the land otter. The rank and power of the *ixt* was dependent on the number of these spirits he had under his control and on his ability to demonstrate his power at public meetings and healing seances. Since mythic times, the *yek* had been the servants of the supernatural beings who controlled the forces of nature. The *ixt* acted as a mediator to balance the power and maintain control of these forces for the benefit of humankind.

Since the *yek* had to be invoked each time they were needed, the *ixt* used various paraphernalia that were essential to this purpose. When performing, he wore a series of special garments and accessories which allowed him to impersonate, in succession, each of his several *yek* that came to him. De Laguna (1972:687), indicates that this impersonation was most effective when masks were worn, but that many other items decorated with carvings or paintings representing additional attendant spirits, were also worn and felt to be filled with power. The land otter was a prominent motif on many of these objects. Some Tlingit *ixt* owned sets of masks, each of which expressed the identity of the individual *yek*. The masks were the physical representations of the *yek*. By wearing a mask, or by wearing and manipulating other special paraphernalia, the *ixt* was able to access the power associated with a particular *yek*.

Most of the Tlingit shaman's masks are realistic and many are reported to represent dead persons. De Laguna (1972;692) believes they all do, and suggests that in many cases the mask may be the portrait of a particular individual. Tlingit shamans were preoccupied with death and spirits. A frequently occurring motif on these masks is the depiction of a drowning man turning into a land otter. This process of transformation did not take place immediately for those who had been captured by land otters. De Laguna (1972;749, cf. Myth 2, Appendix I) tells the story of Qaka's aunt, who had been among land otters for some time, and was covered in fur except for her face. Qaka, who had been captured more recently, did not have much fur on his body. His still human hands and feet were bruised, and his mouth torn from the land otter's diet of raw codfish. This partial transformation from human to animal is portrayed in Fig. 1 and depicts the spirit of a drowned man as a land otter with a human countenance but heavy moustache and beard of bear fur. According to the myths cited by de Laguna (1972;749) the pursed lips are associated with a mouth full of codfish bones. Another feature on many of the masks that suggests the land otter is the occurrence of a mammalian, otter-like, slightly upturned nose that is distinctive on known land otter masks, and not found anywhere else (see Fig. 2). On some of the masks, land otters in their full animal form are depicted (see Fig. 3).



Fig. 1 Land Otter Man Mask
Emmons, AMNH E 400
A. Sawyer, Archive



Fig. 2 Land Otter Mask
Emmons, AMNH 19/873
A. Sawyer, Archive



Fig. 3. Chilkat Shaman's Mask
Emmons, FM 78147
A. Sawyer, Archive

The masks and other paraphernalia (and therefore the *yek* that were associated with them), were inherited from a maternal uncle or an older brother. Some shamans obtained new ones of their own, and in rare cases, even inherited from their father. But the usual custom was that the *yek*, each of which had a personal name, a special song, and associated regalia in the costume of the *ixt*, was passed on from one shaman to another in the matrilineal line (Oberg, 1973;17). Some of the *yek* were associated with certain sibs and were said to belong to a particular region. However, they were often used by *ixt* of other sibs in other regions. There were also spirits that belong to no sib which would aid anyone who could get in touch with them.

According to Veniaminov (cited in De Laguna, 1972;835) the *yek* or spirits associated with Tlingit shamans can be divided into three classes: 1) The Kiyegi or "upper spirits" who live in the sky and manifest themselves as northern lights; 2) The Takyegi who live "somewhere on the mainland"; and 3) The Tekyegi who are "water spirits". The Kiyegi, or spirits above, are the souls of human beings who have been slain in battle, and they appear to the shaman as fully armed warriors. The Takyegi are the ghosts who have died ordinary deaths, and they appear before the shaman "in the guise of land animals," such as the wolf, in which case it would be called a Wolf *yek*. The Tekyegi take the form of sea animals, such as whales, killerwhales, etc. "Water spirits" might also be the ghosts of those who have drowned.

Although the *ixt* was able to call on the power of his *yek* when needed, he also had to be sure that he was in control of that spirit. A prerequisite to becoming an *ixt* was that an individual possess the clarity of mind and body and the stamina to carry out the necessary rituals. He had to always be on guard against the potential dangers of an evil *yek* or a rival shaman. The fear of possession by evil spirits kept the *ixt* constantly on his guard and also kept other people in fear of him. As we will see in the next chapter, the spirits of land otters were particularly feared, and only the shaman was able to retrieve someone who had been taken away by them.

CHAPTER III

THE TLINGIT SHAMAN

"There was a man who had no arms, so Raven thought he would be a shaman and cure him. This is how the Tlingit came to have shamans. After there was death he showed them how to dance over the body placed in the middle of the floor" (Swanton, Tale 31 p.84).

THE NATURE OF THE SHAMAN

The shaman has been characterized as an individual who has control of various techniques of ecstasy.¹ According to Eliade (1964:4), the shaman is a specialist in inducing a trance state during which the soul is believed to leave his/her body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld. In this state they attain the help of "spirit" entities who will augment their powers. As we have seen, these spirits, or *yek* in the case of the Tlingit, take many forms, visible and invisible, human and non-human. This chapter will examine the social character of the Tlingit shaman and his place within the community. It will also look at the manner in which the shaman interacts with spirit helpers in terms of inheritance of power, the possibilities of witchcraft, and the dangers of spirit intrusion.

A shaman differs from a possessed person in that he, or she, controls the "spirits" and is thus able to communicate with them without becoming their instrument. This channelling of power from external forces is generally focused on healing both

¹ The literal meaning of ecstasy is to be outside of one's body as a result of a profound experience or emotion.

physical and psychological ailments believed to have been imposed on unfortunate individuals in the community. They are subject to these ailments because they have not achieved control over the potentially malevolent spirit forces.

Although the basic elements of shamanism can be traced in many parts of the world, shamanism is at the same time a highly individualistic phenomenon, and thus manifests with numerous variations depending on the place, the individual, and the social situation. Northwest Coast shamanism is no exception and offers a multitude of variations on the themes of cosmic journeys, sacred healing and contact with spirit helpers. A broad survey of this complex phenomenon is beyond the scope of this current work which, as indicated, will focus rather on the particular variations within the Tlingit culture, especially as it relates to the Land otter complex.²

The specific context of Tlingit shamanism and some of its social ramifications are neatly summarized by de Laguna as follows:

The shaman is the intermediary between man and the forces of nature. He cures the sick, controls the weather, brings success in war and on the hunt, foretells the future, communicates with colleagues at a distance, receives news of those who are far away, finds and restores to their families those who are lost and captured by the Land Otter Men, reveals and

² See Grace Jorgenson's 1970 M.A. thesis "A Comparative Examination of Northwest Coast Shamanism" for a brief review of shamanism as it manifests among the coastal cultural groups.

overthrows the fiendish machinations of witches, and makes public demonstrations of his powers in many awe-inspiring ways. He is the most powerful figure in his own lineage, and sometimes even in his sib. Though his fame may have spread far to foreign tribes, he is seldom consulted when those of his own line are sick and dying, for these he cannot save. Nor can he save his own children if they are bewitched. His patients are inevitably members of another sib, often residents in another village. His professional rivals may be colleagues in any sib except his own; his most deadly enemies, like those of any Tlingit, are the traitor witches which lurk among his closest relatives (de Laguna, 1972:670).

Jim Lovejoy (1984:80) reminds us that this abstract notion of "forces of nature" is a Western interpolation and that for the Tlingit belief system these forces were viewed as spirits with which only the shaman could deal. This distinction is important since the costume of the shaman, and especially the masks, were felt to display the particular spirits that were owned by that shaman, and into which he was able to transform himself. Tlingit shamans "owned" many spirits but one that was common to all, and indeed, was a prerequisite to becoming a shaman, was the land otter spirit.



Fig. 4 "Shaman of the Taku Kwan dressed for practice,
Gastineau Channel, near Juneau, Alaska."
G.T. Emmons photo, 1888.
A. Sawyer Archive.

THE ROLE OF THE SHAMAN

According to Swanton (1908:467), Northwest Coast shamanism reached its climax among the Tlingit.³ The shaman played an important role in Tlingit society, healing both the individual and the community. The Tlingit shamans or *ixt* were respected and influential, but also dreaded, because they were believed to have great supernatural power. Often the shamans of other groups, such as the Haida, attempted to gain some of their spirit helpers from the Tlingit to increase their own potency. Swanton (*ibid.*) observed that the Tlingit shamans were generally of higher social rank than those among the Haida. De Laguna (1972:670), indicates that some Tlingit *ixt* are house or lineage heads and are often close relatives of a chief. Affiliation with other *ixt* of high rank, or even an important standing within his own lineage, might help to uplift a shaman's status, but was not a necessary or even sufficient condition for attaining his own special powers. Some *ixt* were held in high regard and demanded ample rewards for their services. This made them the allies of the wealthy and socially powerful. Yet, in spite of this, there was no indication that shamanism itself was a lucrative profession through which a person might become rich. It did, however, entail great power and prestige which often stimulated rivalries and much jealousy among shamans.

³ Olson (1967:207) indicates that Swanton's assertion must be qualified to some extent. Swanton's informant had claimed that about 1850 there were 30 shamans among the Tantakwan. Olson suggests that this was an unintentional exaggeration or that it represents an exceptional condition. He estimates that there were from five to ten shamans per tribe [qwan] of one thousand.

The Tlingit shaman, in common with his counterparts in other areas, had a vital relationship with animals. Like many other societies based on hunting, the Tlingit viewed some animals as morally, intellectually, and spiritually superior to humans. They felt that animals allowed themselves to be caught by hunters because they took pity on the weak humans. The soul of an animal was called *qwani*, which means inhabitants. This followed the same etymological pattern that was used for people; ie. *Sitkaqwan* meant "Sitka-person". The physical body of an animal was seen as a cover for its' soul or spirit. According to the myths, animal spirits, when at home, look like people and live in houses and villages like human beings. When visiting humans they could appear either as animals or as people.

SHAMANIC INHERITANCE

When a shaman died he was not cremated as were all other members of Tlingit society. Instead, his body was taken to a site far removed from the village and placed in a specially constructed grave house along with his paraphernalia. His attendant spirits, which were associated with his masks and other regalia, remained with the corpse in order to aid the shaman's own spirit in choosing a new successor.

Inheritance was generally matrilineal, with the shaman's sister's son as the prime candidate, although if there were no

suitable clansperson, the spirits could be passed to a shaman's own son (Swanton, 1908:466). The recipient was usually a relative who had come in contact with the paraphernalia or come close to the shaman's body when, as was customary, they were supervising the construction or repair of his grave house. Sometimes a successor was named by the spirits before the shaman's death, and in at least one case, they were said to have chosen a nephew who was reluctant about his succession, over one who desired it (Krause, 1956:195). According to the Tlingit, once an individual was selected by the spirits, a refusal could mean serious illness and even death. Yet, there were always those who sought out the spirits or valued their unsolicited coming as a great blessing.

Although shamanism was generally an involuntary calling, the success with which it was carried out, the number of yek involved and the power of the shaman, all depended upon himself, his courage, skill, fortitude, undeviating adherance to taboos, and finally, to luck (Laguna, 1972:670). It was important that the shaman kept himself a fit receptacle for his spirits, and in order to do this he had to maintain a strict regimen of periodic fasting, purging and sexual abstinence. Not everyone was capable of the prolonged feats of endurance expected of a shaman, but some individuals could still attain a degree of shamanic power and skills. For example, a relative or descendant may have been temporarily touched by the spirits, or a nephew may acquire some

power of his own by coming in contact with his uncle's shamanic objects, but would not pursue the necessary follow-up ritual practices and thus not receive official acknowledgement from the community. Such individuals with varying degrees of power and curing abilities tended to blur the boundary between shamans and laypersons, and also opened up the possibility of witchcraft and other forms of malicious social interaction.

DEALING WITH WITCHCRAFT

An important element in the Tlingit belief system regarding their view of illness and shamanic healing was the idea that witches could cause sickness in a vindictive and callous manner. Shamans were often asked to expose witches who were believed to be the source of such an illness. These witches were called *nakutsati* and were supposed to have learned their skills for harming others from Raven while he lived on earth. The context of witches in Tlingit society is expressed in the following description by Laguna:

The witch was feared and loathed because there was no antisocial, evil or unnatural act of which he was not believed capable: dishonesty, shamelessness, incest, mysterious powers of locomotion or of bodily transformation and, above all, corroding spite and jealousy that made him cause the illness or death of those he envied (1972:728).

These loathsome and dangerous beings were often local villagers or even relatives who were believed to have been recruited by other witches. They caused disease by obtaining

something from the person they wished to harm such as some hair, nail parings, bits of clothing or food leavings over which they performed ritual maledictions. They were also felt to be capable of injecting foreign objects into their victim's body and causing illness in that manner. Unlike the shaman, witches did not use spirit power or *yek* to help effect their manipulations, but rather relied on the properties of the ingredients or materials they were using.

In order to effect a cure of someone who was thought to have been bewitched, the shaman, with the help of relatives and his assistants, performed a variety of acts: singing, dancing, shaking of rattles, beating of drums, bodily gestures and the manipulation of his potent power objects such as charms, batons, knives and amulets. He also massaged the ailing part of the victim's body, attempted to suck out any disease-inducing object and finally, most important of all, he determined which member of the person's sib performed the witchcraft.

Krause (1956:200) tells us that the accused person, if not protected by powerful relatives, was seized, had his hands tied together behind his back, and was dragged to a secluded hut where he was kept without food or drink until he admitted his guilt, or was tortured until he died. Formerly the relatives of someone accused of witchcraft were supposed to kill him in order to avoid having such a dangerous individual in their kin group. If

someone of high class was suspected of witchcraft, his relatives would try to persuade him to cure the sick person because they were reluctant to seize and kill him. Once a witch admitted guilt, it was believed that the patient would recover (*ibid.*).

Witchcraft and sorcery accusations were made against people who were viewed as sources of social disorder. According to Gould (1973:41), the high incidence of these accusations can be linked up with the ambiguity of the flexible and highly competitive Tlingit ranking system. She maintains that this also accounts for the close alliance between shamans and chiefs in the political sphere as evidenced by these two examples:

Often there may be one sib in the community outstanding in size, wealth, and the rank of its leading chief. The most important shaman is usually his close relative, and this sib would be the most influential political factor in the community (de Laguna, 1952:6).

...in alliance with a chief he [the shaman] may regulate much social policy within the sib (McClellan, 1954:95).

Thus accusations of witchcraft may be seen as a means of resolving the ambiguity of competition for positions of social power and prestige, and the alliance of *yitsai* and *ixt* functioned to maintain social order.

SPIRIT INTRUSION

The actual healing power of Tlingit shamans was of an ambivalent nature. It could be focused on healing and helping individuals and the community, or as a result of the contact with malignant spirits, it might also focus on causing sickness and general disruption of the social harmony. Shamans were thus sometimes so dreaded that whenever a person came across a shaman's house built in the woods he: "feared he would become sick and have his belly grow large. Then only another shaman could cure him (Swanton, 1908:467)".¹

This infection by the spirit of a shaman manifested as an illness, even in one who was actively seeking spirit power. Unwilling recipients always had a hard time unless the power was accepted and controlled, usually with the help of a shaman. This condition was called '*anelsin*' ('hiding, or, it hides inside') and was conceived as something actually inside the body (de Laguna, 1972:674). According to de Laguna's informant, the condition was caused by the primary spirit of the shaman, *kucda yek*, or land otter spirit. This spirit was actively sought by the novice shaman who, in accepting this spirit intrusion, had to effect the proper "cure" which was "to go out in the woods and cut a tongue"

¹ According to Laguna (1972:674), gallstones and tumors were attributed to inadvertant or unauthorized contact with shamanic equipment. Such growths took the form of the shaman's paraphernalia which had been handled, but may not manifest themselves until years later, when they might or might not be removed by another shaman.

(ibid.) of an animal from which the new shaman derived power. Other individuals who inadvertently encountered a shaman's grave or his paraphernalia were subject to '*anelsin*', but since they were not actively seeking the power, the condition manifested as gallstones or tumors, which may not show up until years later.

No one would eat anything near the grave house of a shaman for fear of becoming seriously ill, or even dying. Whenever anyone passed near a shaman's grave in a canoe, he would lower food and four pieces of tobacco into the sea and offer a short prayer (Swanton, 1908:467; cf. Olson, 1962:211). A similar action of placing food into the sea for individuals who had drowned, and thus been 'taken' by land otters, reinforces the connection between shamans and the latter.

There was great danger involved in approaching a shaman's grave house or in touching his paraphernalia for those who were not authorized to do so, or for anyone who was not ritually prepared. Only select members of the opposite moiety were allowed to build or repair a shaman's grave house, while a potential successor could only supervise. One of de Laguna's informants stressed that it was dangerous to go near such a place "because something gets in you and makes you die soon. You have to prepare, get ready, to go near, by keeping away from women, and not eating for four or eight days." This same informant guessed that this affected Indians because they believed in it,

but not Whites because they "don't get scared" (de Laguna, 1972:674).

One of the effects of the fear caused by native beliefs in the power of the shaman was that the equipment which was placed in his grave was never touched except in respect by a sanctioned caretaker or by a hopeful successor. Chapter IV will explore the social and psychological implications of this fear, the Tlingit beliefs about land otters and some of the characteristics of the animal itself.

CHAPTER IV

PERCEPTIONS OF LAND OTTER

"It was believed by all the Tlingit that those who were drowned turned into Otter men, hair came out over the body, the arms shortened into the otter's fore paws, a small tail appeared, and they ran wild in the world about the sea shore. When people were upset in their canoes on the water these spirits assumed the appearance of their friends and came to them offering assistance, but in truth they only wished to cause them to drown and have them become as themselves" (Emmons, Field Museum, Note 77884).

THE POWER OF LAND OTTER

This chapter will look at the connection between shamans and otters and also examine how some of the traits of the otter may have led to this association. Like many of their other Northwest Coast neighbors, the Tlingit believed that land otters or *k'ucda*, had the power to transform themselves so that they looked human and to possess or "take away" the minds of people who succumbed to their dangerous enticements. Symptoms of this possession were dizziness, fainting spells, bleeding at the nose, spontaneous singing and aberrations in social and psychological behavior. Land otter possession could cause a person's death if not cured by a shaman.

Any Tlingit who died by drowning or any other means by which a body was not recovered, was believed to have been taken by land otter people or *k'ucda qwani*. These *k'ucda qwani* appeared in the guise of friends or relatives who led the drowning or lost person back to their village and then offered him or her food or sexual favors. Unless these unfortunates were rescued by a shaman

before eating or partaking of sexual liaisons, they would in turn be transformed into land otters. Only a shaman could "see" a person in this "crazy" state and thus be able to rescue them. He would do this by holding a seance to communicate with the spirits just as he might when healing a sick person. While singing, he would put food into the water or into the fire as was done for someone who has died. According to Swanton (1908:364), the fire served as "a medium of communication between the two worlds" that of ordinary people and that of supernatural beings, while water was used to communicate with people who had drowned. Symbolically, the food was transferred to the "captured" person so that he would not have to eat the food of the *k'ucda qwani*. Just as a dead person might be brought back to the realm of the living by reincarnation, one who was possessed in this manner may also be returned from the realm of the *k'ucda qwani*. But the shaman had to work fast, before the lost human became irrevocably committed to the other world. Only shamans were able to survive land otter possession. Some actually sought the state of possession in order to call upon the power of the animal, either by song, by wearing a mask, or by other psycho-sensory means.¹

¹ The effects of drumming, chanting and other methods of repetitious sensory stimulation are known to induce trance states which may facilitate the 'inner' journey a shaman takes in order to effect a cure or contact a spirit helper. The sound of the drum acts as a focusing device for the shaman. This creates an atmosphere of concentration and resolve which enables him to sink deeper into trance as he shifts his attention to the inner journey of the spirit (Drury:1982:8).

LAND OTTERS AND SHAMANS

The connection between land otters and shamans is reflected in the Raven cycle of Tlingit mythology. Raven was a trickster and a culture hero who set the world into its current state. Raven determined the habits of the land otters as he had done with the birds and fish and other animals. At one point in Tlingit mythological time, there was a great flood which Raven avoided by hanging onto a cloud.² When the waters subsided, Raven, being exhausted, fell back to earth. Fortunately, he "landed" at sea in a bed of kelp. Here he was aided by land otters who took him safely to shore. Swanton has this to say about the character of Raven's rescuers:

Although apparently harmless, the land otter was dreaded more than any other creature. This was on account of his supposed supernatural powers, fondness for stealing people away, depriving them of their senses, and turning them into land-otter-men (*ku'cta-qa*). As they lived at various points along the shore, these land-otter-men were called *qa'tu-qa* ("men-inside-of-points"). When a person was in danger of drowning, canoes would come to him (or her) and the people in them would say, "I am your friend," i.e. "clansman" and take the person home. After that he became like them, but was called a land-otter-man. (Swanton, 1908:456).

² In Tlingit mythology Raven's uncle was said to be the Controller of the Flood who unleashed the waters upon the world. He is sometimes confused with *Nas-caki-yel* or *Raven-at-the-Head-of-Nass*, the owner of Daylight, and may indeed be the same mythological figure. *Nas-caki-yel* was, in a way, the creator of Raven since he wished for the latter to be born that he might take Daylight to the people. Raven went around the world apparently finishing the job of creation, which *Nas-caki-yel* had begun. He told people and animals what they should do and, in part was the instrument of the Creator, a transformer and a bringer of culture. At any rate, it is probable that Raven was visiting him (them) in the sky realm when the flood was set upon the world.

Raven of course had no fear of becoming a Land Otter Man because he himself had given the land otters their shamanistic gift of transformation. During his travels after the flood he had returned to visit the land otter and said to him:

"You will live in the water just as well as on the land. He and the land otter were good friends, so they went halibut fishing together. The land otter was a fine fisherman. Finally he said to the land otter: "You will always have your house on a point where there is plenty of breeze from either side. Whenever a canoe capsizes with people in it you will save them and make them your friends." The land-otter-man (ku'cta-qa) originated from Raven telling this to the land otter. If the friends of those who have been taken away by the land otter get them back, they become shamans, therefore it was through the land otters that shamans were first known." (Swanton, 1909:86).

The mythical land otter used the skate, an ocean-going ray found in Alaskan coastal waters, as a canoe. The mink, was referred to in the myths as an assistant to the land otter-man and was used as a paddle. De Laguna (1972:754) records an account where minks are represented as the children of a drowned woman by her new husband, the chief of the land otters. In another narrative mink are portrayed as the slaves of the land otters. Although at one level this seems contradictory, mink beings slaves in one account and nobility in another, it illustrates that animals also had a system of ranked order.

When the land otter men came to "rescue" a drowning person, they were seen as ordinary people in a canoe. The person was told that he was being taken 'home' although, in the mythic reality, this meant the den or 'house' of the land otter people.

Those who were able to escape, either with help from a relative among the Land Otter People or from shamans back in their own village, were able to become shamans themselves. A typical account of this form of shamanic initiation is found in the myth of the first Tlingit shaman, Kaka. As Swanton relates in his abstract of the myth, Kaka:

"was taken south from Sitka by the land otters and sent back again by the husband of a woman who had been carried off like himself. What they used as a canoe was a skate, and they kept him covered all the way. After a time one of his friends heard him singing in the midst of a fog, but they could not get near him until they had fasted two days. Then they found him lying on a log with blood running out of his nose and mouth. They brought him home, and he became a great shaman" (Swanton, 1909:420; cf. Myth 1, Appendix I).

After relating the story of Kaka to Swanton, his informant, Katishan said this about the belief in Land Otter Men:

This story of Kaka is a true story and it is from him that the Tlingit believe in shamans' spirits (*yek*). If the friends of those who have been taken away by the land otters get them back, they become shamans, therefore it was through land otters that shamans were first known. Shamans can see one another by means of the land otter spirits, but others can not (*ibid.*).

The land otter *yek* was the most common and powerful spirit acquired by shamans. They were believed to have some connection with the weather, perhaps because drownings, when they made their captures, most often happened during storms. De Laguna (1972:746) cites a 1939-40 report by Harrington that about one fisherman per season drowns at Yakutat. If one person per settlement is an average, then the total number of drownings all along the coast would be a significant figure.

De Laguna (1972:744) was told that the reason land otters wanted to take human beings was because people had killed them, and they wished in this way to obtain new members of their families. Thus they tried to catch anyone whom they found alone. Also the land otters wanted to get even with people for "killing so many of them to make blankets" (*ibid.*). Yet, de Laguna was told that in the old days, the Tlingit did not hunt land otters, eat their flesh, or even use their pelts. Their aversion to land otter fur was attributed to the belief that if one had anything of an otter about one's person, this would facilitate capture by Land Otter Men (Swanton, 1908a:536, cf. Appendix I, Myth 2).

Opposition of human beings and land otters is suggested by a story recounted by Swanton (1909:141; cf. Appendix I, Myth 2). It tells how four boys from Klawak were captured by land otters when their canoe overturned. In revenge, the people made fires at the dens of the land otters and killed all but a few. After the surviving land otters had made war on the people, sending illness and injury by means of their poisonous arrows made of spider crab shells, peace was finally made.

Crab shells were desired by land otters for another purpose. One of de Laguna's informants suggested that the reason land otters followed a canoe that seemed to be in distress was that they were looking for the back of crab shells to serve as drums. According to Krause's version of the "Land-Otter Sister", this

transformed woman told her brother that "nothing had as high a value among the Land Otter people as the shells and mandibles of crabs because they make dance rattles of them. That is why the Land Otter people always tried to rescue drowned Indians in the hope that they may get crab shells and mandibles from them" (Krause, 1956:186, cf. Appendix I, Myth 10).

Crab shells are actually found at land otter holes as indicated by Gavin Maxwell, who says that: "There is a lavatory at every otter hole, and the excretement (which is known as spraint, and has no offensive odor, being composed almost entirely of crunched fish bones, or in the case of shore-living otters, of fragments of crab carapace) often forms a high pyramidal shape..." (quoted in De Laguna, 1972;745).³ Although crabs form an important part of the coastal-dwelling land otter's diet, it is the symbolic importance of the carapace as a drum that is significant, since drums are recognized as the shaman's medium of communication with the spirit world (Swanton, 1909;412, Drury, 1982;8). In the land otter spirit domain, drums might be viewed as their means of communicating with the human world, which to the land otter people might be seen as a realm of spirits.

³ A contemporary Tlingit carver indicated that he retrieves from these piles of excretement, operculateum which is the shelly plate in gastropods such as mollusks that closes when the animal is retracted (personal communication from James Lovejoy). These were traditionally used as teeth in land otter masks according to Emmons (unpublished notes, AMNH B 410). For an example of these shells being used as teeth in a land otter mask, see Fig. 3.

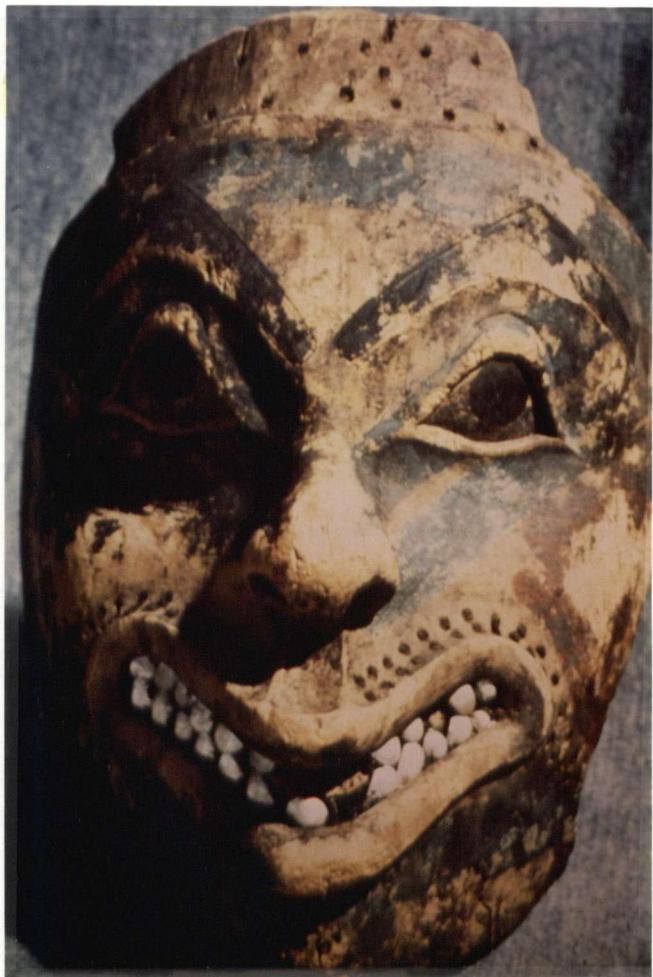


Fig. 5 Drowned Man Turning Into Land Otter
(Note the operculeum shell teeth)
Emmons, AMNH E 410
A. Sawyer Archive

THE POWER OF SHAMANS

People in training to become shamans were expected to take bird and animal tongues. Ideally, a shaman would go off into the forest eight different times during his life so as to collect that many sources of animal spirit power. The number of spirits encountered indicated the level of power achieved by the shaman. The land otter was usually the first animal to appear to a novice shaman. Other animals, or additional land otters, could also be encountered on subsequent retreats. Land otter power was thus available to any shaman, regardless of his sib or lineage, or inherited spirit powers. All shamans cut land otter tongues, which were seen as their greatest source of power. Some of the other animals whose tongues might be collected included brown bear, wolf, eagle, raven and owl.

During his eight day vigil in the woods, the young shaman and his assistant(s) would drink salt water, fast and eat devil's club, a powerful purgative and emetic. This internal cleansing of the body was accompanied by regular bathing in cold water in order to achieve greater strength and stamina in preparation for the power he was to receive. When a sufficient state of purity was thus achieved, a bird or animal (preferably an otter) would come to the shaman and die of its' own accord at his feet. As Krause tells us:

The land otter goes directly to the would-be shaman who, as soon as he sees the spirit, stands still, and exclaiming four times a loud "oh" in various pitches, kills him. As soon as the land otter hears this sound

he falls on his back and dies, with his tongue extruding (1956:195).

The shaman would then cut off the left side of the otter tongue and wrap it in a bundle of twigs. This powerful amulet was called a *skutch* and was felt to contain the power of that shaman. It was kept hidden in a safe, dry place for if anything happened to it, the shaman could loose his senses or even die. According to Krause (*ibid.*), if the shaman is lucky "he will get a land otter in whose tongue is contained the whole secret of shamanism."⁴ This statement indicates the great importance attached to the land otter tongue and suggests that it is the repository of not only the power but also the knowledge of the shaman. De Laguna (1972:836) explains that the spirit or *yek* obtained from an animal is its soul. In certain cases, it appears that the soul of a dead person has entered the body of the animal and become its 'inhabitant' as a temporary stage in becoming the *yek* of a shaman, which is achieved when he cuts its tongue. In other cases, the spirit comes directly to his "master," for there are shamans who received power without cutting tongues (*ibid.*).

⁴ According to Swanton (1970:446), breath was considered the primary life requisite by the Tlingit. The land otter tongue was thought to be most efficacious in healing breathing problems, and was considered the most powerful medicine a shaman could have. Land otters have a very distinctive "breath call" which they will make when surprised by the sudden appearance of a stranger in their midst. They also have a particular whistling sound that is used as a warning signal. Their frequent chattering was interpreted by the Tlingit as the otters' means of communicating with each other.

There were many variations in the basic procedure involved in securing shamanic power. Although the details varied in accordance with the individuality of the shaman and the particular circumstances under which he either inherited or decided to seek his power, the standard procedure is neatly summed up in the following anecdote Olson collected from one of his informants:

One of the shamans among the *Tanktakwan* was *Gaanisten* of the *Hashittan* clan. He wished to acquire all the spirits which the famed shaman *Nuwat* had had. When all these had come to him a male land otter appeared to him in a dream and told him to cut off its tongue. The spirit told him in this dream that the land otter would meet him. One day they (his helper and he) saw three land otters following their canoe, diving like porpoises. One of these came to rest and floated up, dead. They took this one to a cave and cut off its tongue. That night its spirit came to *Gaanisten*, gave him a song, and told him the otter's name, *Gakkahwan* ("face of frost"). He was usually called by this name afterward. The two men returned to their camp and fasted for four days, drinking salt water during this time. (This was to make the shaman pure, so that the spirit would remain with him.)

Among other spirits which *Gakkahwan* (*Gaanisten*) has was one from his uncle's uncle. But only three spirits were strong in him: *gautuye'keh* ("spirit in the drum") *kusawuka'h* ("skinny man," mink), and *gakahwan* ("face of frost," otter). But these were so strong that when one of them entered him he nearly fell down (Olson, 1961:212).

When a potential shaman was going through his novitiate, his helpers, who were called *ikthankau* played a very essential role in the quest for power. They were traditionally his youngest nephews on the matrilineal side which ensured that the power of the shaman would stay within the matriclan. If no nephews were available, the *ikthankau* could be members of the shaman's sib, although they were not necessarily of the same house or lineage.

They had to wait on him in much the same fashion as attendents of a "deer" would care for the hostage-ambassador in a peace ceremony because of the taboos restricting his activity.⁵

The *ikthankau* made sure that the novice adhered to all of the proper purification rituals during his initial retreat in the woods. Many shamans had one special assistant who was closely associated with him and who generally accompanied him on later retreats in the wilderness in which the shaman would attain new spirits or consolidate his powers. The assistant could become a shaman himself. He could care for the shaman's paraphernalia, or be sent to fetch it, since such dangerously power-charged objects were usually cached outside the house and the village. Another assistant usually beat the drum during seances, although "all of his people", that is all of the men of his own house or sib, assisted the shaman by singing his song and beating time, thereby strengthening his powers (de Laguna, 1972:670). The *ikthankau* had to fast and abstain from sexual liaisons and adhere to other restrictions imposed on the shaman since it was felt that a violation of these strictures when cutting a tongue while seeking power would result in the violator becoming mentally unbalanced or terminally ill.

⁵ Swanton (1908a:451) reports that the reason a person who is sent as a peace hostage is called a "deer" is because a bear once met a deer in the woods and expected it to fight him, but it did not. The man who brought in the "deer" in a peace ceremony sang a grizzly-bear song, so that the "deer" would not be troubled. The "deer" was likened to a bear's head, which was always treated with great respect after the animal was killed. Since the bear was an animal frequently associated with Tlingit shamans, the relationship between the deer and bear can be likened to that between the shaman and the animal whose spirit he was seeking on a power quest.

LAND OTTER PEOPLE

Although Land Otter Men were generally considered to be inimical to human beings, there were particular cases where they were said to help their own relatives. For example, Kaka (a shaman's young nephew who had disappeared and was taken by land otters) was helped by his dead aunt (who had lived among the land otters for a long time) to escape from there and return home. This is similar to the Tlingit belief that relatives in the Land of the Dead assisted their kinsmen to return to the living. Also drowned persons were believed capable of visiting their living relatives and bringing them luck.⁶ Such persons might have become shamans if they had been able to escape from the Land Otter People soon enough. At any rate, they still seemed to be able to acquire supernatural powers and presumably to help those who did become shamans.

De Laguna (1972;747) tells us that those who visited the home of the land otter spirits perceived it to be like their own home, and the inhabitants as ordinary human beings. Marriages took place and children were born. Ties of kinship were recognized between land otter people and human beings. Among the Land Otter Men there were chiefs or rich men and slaves.

⁶ An informant of De Laguna's was given good fortune by her dead mother and father who appeared to her in her dreams. Another informant whose son had drowned was said to have seen his ghost in human form. In Angoon, De Laguna was told that the recently drowned might return to visit their village, and cited an instance which occurred while a potlatch was being held (De Laguna, 1972; 748)

Peace ceremonies concluded wars between land otters and human beings and both sides could potlatch each other (Swanton, 1909:142-44).

For the Tlingit there was therefore an equation between drowned human beings and land otters which is best summed up by de Laguna who says that:

In the last analysis, it would seem that the transformed Land Otter Man (*kucda-qa*), the "ghost" or revenant of the drowned person (*yukwqaheyagu*), the "soul" of the land otter (*kucda-qwani*), and the shaman's land otter spirit (*kucda yek*) were all actually or potentially one and the same entity, that which one ordinarily encounters in its animal form or fleshy "clothing" as a land otter (*kucda*). (1972:748).

OTTERS: THE ANIMAL

Marjorie Halpin (1981:217) indicates that, prior to the European introduction of the monkey, the land otter was probably perceived as the most human-like animal in that environment. The sea otter had a prestigious place in Tlingit society as a bringer of wealth during the period of the fur trade until it's near extinction in the nineteenth century. However, it is the land otter that occupied a prominent place in the belief system of the Tlingit. Particular attributes of the land otters lead to the perception that it has the ability to create a symbolic bridge uniting human and animal. It was seen as an ambiguous figure which had the ability, like the Tlingit themselves, to function well both on the land and in the water.

Land otters can remain underwater for long periods of time and are very fast swimmers. They are very much at home in the water both on the surface and underneath. Just as the Tlingit had to travel through the water in order to hunt and gather their food (mainly fish and sea mammals), the otter was believed to travel in his canoe (ie. a transformed skate or a log) to gather the souls of humans. In emulation of the otter, and perhaps with his help, the shaman was able to travel to mythic realms in order to get, and then to use, special powers for healing, which included the ability to retrieve lost souls.

Land otters are generally riverine animals with many of the same playful and human-like qualities of their cousin, the sea otter.⁷ Although they live primarily in and near rivers, they also frequent the ocean, especially in areas where there are many islands to provide shelter from the open water. Thus the Tlingit speak of them as living along the seashore "inside of points" as was indicated in the myth. The relationship between the otter and the shaman is reaffirmed by the fact that the ideal spot for a shamans' gravehouse was also on an isolated point or promontory jutting into the ocean. Like the shaman, who would periodically disappear into the woods to practise austerities and

⁷ The land otter or *lutra canadensis* is also commonly known as the river otter. In keeping with the usage in the ethnographic documents being employed here, the term land otter will be used. The scientific name for the sea otter is *enhydra lutis* and both of these animals belong to the family known as Musteliade.

seek power from his spirits, the land otter has the habit of appearing and disappearing mysteriously. It can run on land almost as fast as a man, and in the water it can hold its breath for a long period of time which enables it to cover long distances underwater. Thus it sometimes seems like it has appeared out of nowhere, and if threatened, can vanish very quickly.

The land otter is one of the few social animals in the Tlingit environment which stays together as a family unit for an extended period of time and engages in cooperative activities. Also it belongs to one of the few species in which both adults and children play and frolic together. Otters can often be seen in groups sliding down riverbanks into the water or running and cavorting along the beach or in grassy meadows. Their playful nature and the exuberance with which they pursue their daily tasks of fishing and food gathering suggests a very strong social orientation among family groups. The fact that they were excellent fishermen, maintained strong social contacts, and seemed to have their own means of communication, must have contributed to a Tlingit perception of them as living a life similar to that lived in a Tlingit village. The next chapter will explore some of these parallels and similarities as they manifest in the mythology.

CHAPTER V

MYTHOLOGY AND TEXTS

"Myths cannot be separated from actuality. They serve many purposes and are part of the total culture. They have many meanings and operate on several different levels of meaning. What might be difficult to acknowledge openly, such as immoral behavior, can be handled satisfactorily by myth. There are often many versions of one myth, and every version can be authentic and therefore relevant" (Harris:1974;IV).

TLINGIT MYTHS AND TALES

Mythic time, in which Tlingit narratives take place, is qualitatively different from the continuous and irreversible time of everyday existence. Eliade (1961;58) reminds us that myths take the listener out of his sense of time - the individual, chronological time, "historic" time - and project him into a "paradoxical instant which cannot be measured because it does not consist of duration". Some of the Tlingit myths deal with the origin of natural features and social customs, and the apparent lack of concern for temporal sequence which de Laguna noted in the opening quote on page one of this thesis is accounted for in part by this notion of mythic time. Myths are not concerned with the chronological structuring of natural conditions or social institutions. They embody compacted information about those conditions or customs which are pertinent to the culture of the people who are telling them. The non-temporal quality of myths is best summed up by Levi-Strauss who says that:

A myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place long ago. But what gives the myth an operational value is that the specific pattern described is timeless; it explains the present and the past, as well as the future (Levi-Strauss, 1963;208).

Tlingit myths and stories are the primary source of information about the spiritual significance of the land otter. Analysis of the myths is crucial to understanding the social significance of Tlingit beliefs about land otters, death, power, transformation, and reincarnation. Tlingit myths sometimes recounted historical traditions or personal experiences but they always drew from beliefs about spirits, human/animal transformation and life after death. Cautionary tales and stories with a moral, as well as heroic exploits and tales of the origin and history of the sibs were an important aspect of the education of Tlingit children. According to de Laguna (1972;838) much of their knowledge was not only transmitted but also formulated through stories. These narratives were used to explain the Tlingit conceptual schema and the values of the social and moral order were acted out and expressed verbally (*ibid.*).

Although much of the Tlingit oral tradition was centered around explaining the origin of sib prerogatives, such stories were not told at potlatches when these prerogatives were displayed. Mythic information was understood by the people who knew the myths already from repeated tellings at less formal times. Myths formed the background for oratorical allusions, for songs and for the dramatic dances that might accompany them. The masks, charms and other paraphernalia of the shaman were symbolic representations that were fully understood and

appreciated only if the tales associated with them were already familiar. Therefore, any attempt to understand the Tlingit shaman and the land otter which was depicted so often on their gear, is incomplete without an examination of the myths associated with them.

Although there are similarities between the world of spirits (including animals' souls),¹ and that of men, the myths also emphasized the elements of contrast and opposition to the everyday human world. According to de Laguna (1974;835), night was the time for ghosts, spirits and animals; if man is to triumph over them, he must perform the first crucial acts before the raven's cry announces the dawn. If a person was to escape from the land of the dead, he must hurry home before the raven cries (*ibid.*;776). When land otters assumed human form, they resumed their animal shapes before the raven called.

In the land of the dead many kinds of reversals were encountered. Ghosts could not hear a shout, but they interpreted a yawn or a sigh as a loud noise. In the home of land otters and other animal/people, only wet wood was to be used for a fire; dry wood would not burn. Yet, in spite of all the contrasts and reversals, the world of myth was essentially a social domain in

¹ According to de Laguna (1974;823), animal souls were called *qwani* or *qu-hani* which means 'inhabitants of', since they were conceived of as being inside of the creature's fleshy body. These terms can also be translated as 'people' as, for example 'Fish People' (*xat qwani*) or 'Mussel People' (*yak qu-hani*).

which humans, animals and spirits continually confronted each other and gave or took power, wealth and status, governed by laws that were parallel to those found in the everyday human world.

In order to further establish the relationship between the shaman and the land otter and to understand better how both were related to the social domain, I have examined a corpus of 32 myths which contain references to land otters. Of these 8 were collected from the Haida, 2 from the Tsimshian, and the other 32 were Tlingit in origin. The similarity of themes, and the use of Tlingit names and geographical locations in most of the myths suggests however that they were all Tlingit in origin. Each of the myths has been summarized with pertinent details and actions listed in point form in Appendix I. This selection of significant details was useful for extracting the major themes which will be examined below. It was also helpful for comparing and cross-referencing frequently occurring actions in the myths. Appendix II contains the complete text of all the myths that are referred to in this chapter.

THE LAND OTTER MYTHS

There are four major scenarios that recur in the myths about land otters: 1) a man, often named Kaka, is taken by (or sometimes goes on his own to) the land otters and upon his return becomes a shaman (cf. Myths 1, 2, 6, 9, 11, 24, 26, 28, 33, Appendix I); 2) a shaman dies, usually symbolically, but sometimes actually. He/she goes to the village of animal/people, either to rescue someone or to heal someone of high rank, and returns with many gifts or spirit helpers (cf. Myths 2, 8, 22, 24, 29, Appendix I); 3) land otters are killed by humans (cf. Myths 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 12, 13, 26, 28, 29, Appendix I); and 4) a man is helped by a deceased sister who brings food for him and his family in a time of famine (cf. Myths 3, 4, 5, 10, 23, 31, Appendix I). In all four types of myths, kin relationships play an important role. The giving of gifts and the receiving of power is also important in most of the myths. In two of the myths, episodes of potlatching between the land otter people and humans take place (cf. Myths 12, 29), while in many of the others there is an exchange of goods and/or a bestowal of power in a manner similar to the way such actions are enacted in a potlatch. Examining these four scenarios brings into focus various motifs or themes found in the myths, including shamanic acquisition of power, death, healing and the crossing of boundaries.

The first myth to be examined is listed as Myth 2 in Appendix II and it comes from Swanton's Tlingit Myths and Texts, 1909. This myth was an excerpt from a series recounted to Swanton by an informant at Wrangell who gave details about the shaman Kaka. Swanton reported that Kaka was a name "well-liked by the land otters" but he did not explain whether the name was given to many who became shamans or to one man whose story was told many times. The context from which this version was taken was a series of incomplete fragments of a larger cycle of myths about Raven, who in his customary role of Transformer, had been setting the world in order and teaching the animals and the people how they must conduct themselves.

The importance of relatives, particularly maternal relatives, is evident in this myth. When Kaka was first lost at sea, land otter people came to him looking like his "mother or his sister, or some other dear "relation" (i.e. people of his own sib) and it was only when Kaka decided that he has been 'lost' to his true relatives that he succumbed to the land otters. When Kaka arrived at the land otter village he was given advice by an aunt whose husband was the chief of the land otter people. This husband ultimately helped him escape at his wife's bidding. To describe this aunt, Swanton used the term *axa't-has* which he translated as "marriable woman of the opposite clan" (1908b:528; cf. de Laguna, 1972:480), thus suggesting that Kaka

was in line for inheriting from the land otter chief and possibly marrying his wife if he died. De Laguna (*ibid.*) indicates that it was the duty of a sister's son to marry his mother's brother's widow and also to assume responsibility for that uncle's funeral. He was assisted in the funeral duties by members of his lineage who also would benefit from his inheritance. What Kaka actually inherited was the power to become a shaman and the two land otter people became his spirits as indicated in the myth when Kaka finally returned from the land of the land otters:

After they got him home they heard the spirit saying far down within him: "It is I, Old-land-otter-spirit (Kucta-kocanqo-yek)". This was the name of the old woman who first told him what to do. The next spirit was The-spirit-that-saves (Qosinexe-yek). He sang inside of him the same song that the land otters sang. It was his spirit's song and has many words to it (Swanton, 1909; cf. Appendix II, Myth 2).

In the myth, the land otter chief was afraid of Kaka learning his people's secrets so he covered him up while helping him escape. He was afraid of losing his power to this young man and thus found it expedient to send him back to live among his own relatives.² What he said to his fellow land otters was that: "If this human being sees all of our ways and learns all of our habits, we shall die.." (Myth 2, Appendix II). This fear may be a reflection of the Tlingit conception that if you pass on your

² According to de Laguna (1972:480), a wife would be friendly to a husband's nephew, going out camping and fishing with him. In fact, informants from Angoon confirmed that a nephew could sleep with his maternal uncle's wife, a situation liable to result in jealousy as indicated in the Raven myth cited by de Laguna (*ibid.*). This may explain why the land otter husbands were so helpful in returning Kaka to his village.

knowledge to others, you will eventually lose it.³ Yet there was also an exchange of knowledge going on since, in the myth, Kaka has learned that there are shamans among the land otter people who have a language of their own, and also he has been taught by them how to catch many halibut with a special fishhook.

If we recall the idea of reincarnation, we can see a similar process going on here. Kaka had, in effect, brought these two souls who had been lost among the land otters, back into the realm of humans, albeit as spirits. Because he was of fine character and in control of himself (i.e. not "crazy") Kaka acted as a conduit to allow these spirits to exist again among humans rather than being himself lost in the realm of the land otters as happened to others of lesser character. According to the myth, "Kaka was so strong-minded a fellow that they felt they could do nothing with him, so they let him go and became his spirits" (*ibid.*) In a similar way, individuals who inherited names at a potlatch had to express their good character by showing that they could influence people and thus amass wealth which was subsequently given away to ratify their new status. This was done also to nurture their deceased ancestors and therefore show them proper respect.

³ This is probably related to the fact that there was a tendency for the elderly, rather than the adults, to teach young children many of the necessary life skills and to pass on to them knowledge and awareness of social etiquette. They had passed the prime of their life and were giving to the next generation before they passed on themselves (personal communication, M.F. Guedon).

There is evidence that a shaman's spirits were encouraged to return to the shaman's heir in the same way that dead relatives were enticed to reincarnate back into their lineage (de Laguna, 1974;777-78). Olson reports that at the funeral (i.e. memorial feast) of a shaman his kinsmen would gather outdoors while the sib chief called on all of the shaman's spirits by name, asking them to enter the new shaman by saying, "Don't give up staying with your masters!". He also reports that the spirits may come unbidden, sometimes appearing to their new master in a dream. These were spirits that had belonged to his sib ancestor and were now looking for a new "home". (Quoted in de Laguna, 1974;677).

Kaka received more than knowledge of spirits and information about fishing; he gained actual spirit helpers which would assist him in his new occupation as shaman. He acquired not only the spirits of his land otter aunt and uncle, but many others as well:

All the birds that assembled around him when he was floating upon the sea were also his spirits. Even the wind and the waves that first upset him were his spirits. Everything strange that he had seen at the time when the land otters got possession of him were his spirits. There are always sea birds sitting on a floating log, and from Kaka people learned that these are shaman's spirits (*ibid.*).

Before he could return home with these spirits, Kaka and his living relatives had to fast and their houses had to be ritually cleansed. After he finally got to his home, Kaka shared the

songs of his spirits with his relatives, for in a sense, these spirits also belonged to them. In the myth, Kaka's spirits called his relatives "my masters" (cf. Myth 2, Appendix II). These relatives would help him to sing the songs during his shamanic performances and thus participated in maintaining the strength and power of the shaman and, ultimately, of the community.⁴

Death was a prominent feature in most of the myths. Three levels or degrees of death were portrayed in these myths: 1) symbolic death, 2) "crazy" death (i.e. possession), and 3) actual death. All versions of the Kaka myth entail at least a symbolic, if not an actual account of Kaka's death when he was either taken by land otters or returned by them to his village. In all of these cases he was considered dead, although it was often described as a coma-like state. Yet Kaka was always ultimately revived and renewed, usually with the help of purification rituals performed by his relatives. So not only did he receive spirits and the power to become a great shaman, but he was bestowed with the greatest gift of all, life.

In two of the myths (Myth 2 & 7), death is supplanted by a state of craziness. In Myth 2 a "foolish" man who had lost his

⁴ Note that, contrary to the custom of influencing spirits so that they remain within the matriline, Kaka inherits from both his maternal uncles and his uncle's wife sib. This is another example of the discrepancies found in myths which contradict the normal social order (in the Tlingit case, matrilineal inheritance being the norm).

wealth and his family while gambling, went off into the bush and lived like a wild animal. His friends would not look for him because they considered him crazy and said that he was dead. However, he gained special powers from a grouse and became rich and powerful again. One day he was "captured" by land otters and eventually became a great shaman. This transformation of a "crazy" person into a productive and powerful individual epitomizes the Tlingit shamanic undertaking. If a person can get past the craziness and potential danger of being lost, both socially and physically, he gained access to sources of power. Strength came from the ability to withstand the temptations of land otter spirits who enticed their "guests" to eat their food or have sexual relations with them (the latter was particularly improper since as we saw earlier, the land otters usually first appeared in the guise of mothers or sisters). By not succumbing to the land otter people, and with the support of his living relatives, the person returns with the special powers available from the land otters such as the ability to catch many fish or to ensure success in warfare (Oberg, 1973;19).

There were also stories about shamans who died in order to travel to the spirit realm to heal someone there or to ensure a food source for the people. When the shaman travelled to the spirit realm in this manner he was often accompanied by his *yek* who protected and helped him on his journey. The following myth segment illustrates how shamans ensured food resources:

Once there was a famine among the people of Alsek river. There were two shamans there, one of whom began singing to bring up eulachon, while the other sang for strength in order to obtain bears and other forest animals.

The first shaman's spirit told him that if he would go down the little rapids he would see great numbers of eulachon. So he dressed up next morning and went straight down under the water in a little canoe. That night, the other shaman's spirit came to him, saying that the first shaman would remain under water for four nights; that he had gone into a house where there were eulachon, salmon, and other fish and had thrown the door open.

At the end of four days they hunted all around and found him lying dead on the beach amid piles of eulachon. As soon as they brought him up, all the eulachon that were in the ocean started to run up river, and everyone tried to preserve as many of them as they could (Swanton, 1909;64).

As in the myth of Kaka, stories about shamans who "die" in this way usually involve a return to the world of the living with a gift of food or other material abundance. In some of the variations of this myth, the source of food brought back by the shaman is a reward for healing someone of high rank in the "village" he has just visited (Myth 24, Appendix I).

In many of the myths there are incidents where land otters are killed by humans. In some cases the land otter was explicitly described as a 'former' human who had been "captured" by land otters. In Myth 6 a man captured by land otters was restored from his "wild state" by the help of a shaman and certain ritual cleansing practices of his relatives. He then became an expert halibut fisherman, having learned this skill

from the land otters. But his restoration to human form was apparently not complete, for he could only eat raw food. When he was enticed by his relatives to eat some cooked halibut, he died (Swanton, 1909;188).

In another myth, a land otter man was killed by hunters who had just eaten the flesh of another land otter. After killing the land otter man, they went "crazy". This reflects both the moralizing aspect of myths in which humans who treat animals improperly were duly punished, and also the potential danger of contact with land otters by humans who were not prepared (i.e. non-shamans). It is found as Myth 7 in Appendix II and comes from Swanton's *Tlingit Myths and Texts*, 1909. The myth is an excerpt from a series of incidents said to have happened near Cross Sound. It illustrates the dangerous potential of communication between land otters and humans, but, typical of situations in which humans were not properly prepared for such an encounter, and/or mistreated animals, the land otter won out. After they killed the land otter man by throwing him into the fire, the men started to "wriggle from side to side and act as if they were crazy; and when anyone went to that place afterward he would act in that same manner" (*ibid.*).

The fourth major motif found in the land otter myths is the giving of food, and thus power, by land otter people to their human relatives. This situation is illustrated in a myth which

stressed kin relationships to an even greater extent than the Kaka myths. It is Myth 5 in Appendix II and comes from Swanton's *Tlingit Myths and Texts*, 1909. The story was about a man from Sitka and how he and his family overcame the burden of famine with the help of his sister, who had been "captured" by land otters. Although the story was told from the perspective of the man, the title "The Woman Who Married a Land Otter" indicates the importance of the sister's role and also of her relation to a land otter man.

According to de Laguna (1972:481) strict rules of avoidance were used to separate grown brother and sisters and also all grown members of the opposite sex in the same moiety. Yet, as indicated in the myth above, there were affectionate ties between them that were expressed in terms of gifts of food. When food was scarce in the springtime a sister was expected to have put away things (food) for her brother and "when things get severe, you have to feed him precious stuff" (*ibid.*:484). A woman's husband might be jealous of her giving away food, but he could not interfere. In the case of the land otter husband in the myth there was an abundance of food available to him and his fellow land otters, thus suggesting that they had access to special powers for gathering food. In fact, several of the Kaka myths indicate that magical halibut fishing hooks were given to him by land otters for the benefit of humans (cf. Myths 2, 6, 22 31 in Appendix I). Yet, there is also a transgression here since the wife of the land otter helped her human brother and in doing so

breached an important taboo because she and her brother talked to each other. Brothers and sisters were not supposed to be alone together or to communicate in any direct way, according to de Laguna (*ibid.*).

De Laguna's informants made it clear that it was shameful and considered an insult for a man to speak or joke with a moiety sister. If he did so it must be by way of his wife or some other "safe" relative. Yet in Myth 5 there is no indication that the man's wife or anyone else was available to intercede. The sister spoke directly to him several times. According to de Laguna:

If they broke this rule, they would go crazy. They would be tied up for witchcraft. A girl when they (she) mature and are not ashamed of anything—that shows she's a witchcraft (de Laguna, 1972;483, my emphasis).

We have already seen that there was an equation between being crazy, being dead and being taken by land otters. Since the latter two cases are quite explicit in this myth, the transgression may be forgivable for the sister, but presumably the brother's guilt is offset only by the fact that he returned with a large quantity of food for a presumably hungry village.

The importance of food in abundant supply is integral to the Tlingit system of potlatching. The fact that land otter people were sometimes suppliers of food in times of famine placed them in a position of givers of wealth. Yet the land otters were also

held in great fear and awe because the price to be paid for the bounty they offered was the dislocation of a person from their home village. If the person was capable of getting away from them (i.e. if his/her relatives could obtain the services of a shaman) then the person was not only a potential shaman, but might also become a provider of food. In one myth a man who is helped by his dead sister became a great chief as a result of the abundance of fish which her land otter husband provided for him. In fact the myth relates that he was able to give ten potlatches as a result of this help, a prodigious feat rarely achieved by any Tlingit (Myth 31, Appendix I).

As we have seen, all four of the major scenarios examined in the land otter myths had shamanic or spiritual overtones. The spiritual journey of the shaman was highlighted in some of the myths, and death was a prominent factor in many of them, affecting both humans and land otter people. In various myths, respect for the dead and the importance of giving were primary elements. Power was associated with both death and giving. Indeed, giving something away during a potlatch is explicitly interpreted as "killing" it since it then goes to one's relatives. Death is conversely a kind of giving away - nothing is ever lost absolutely (personal communication, Guedon).

When a person was taken by land otters, he died, in one way or another. But by not succumbing to that death and returning

from the land otter realm, he was able to become a shaman and also received great power from the experience. That power was often manifested mythically in the form of a fishhook or club that would provide an abundance of food. Thus power is equated with death in the myths in two ways. One way is that a person who proves himself to the land otters is rewarded with instruments that will kill animals which provide food for people. The other way is that anyone who dies and then returns from the land otter realm, is automatically endowed with power in the form of spirits and/or food, as long as he and his relatives ascribe to the proper cleansing rituals (Cf. Myths 1, 2, 5, 9, 11, 16, 24, 26, 31, Appendix I). To be able to leave the land otter village and return with gifts and other resources, indicated that a person had great strength and an ability beyond the norm.

By entering the realm of the land otters, the shaman or the shaman-to-be tests his strength and stamina and even his courage by facing these spirits which are viewed with such awe and fear. Qualities such as physical strength, moral character and a sense of social etiquette are essential to surviving among the land otters. Shamans who journey to the land otter realm on a mission of healing or to attain greater power, usually equip themselves with prophylactic agents such as devil's club, blue hellebore or urine. This protects them from the influence of the land otters (de Laguna, 1972:746). When a non-shaman ventures into this realm after being "saved" by land otters, he must rely on help

from his relatives, who may be either among the land otters or among his living kin group, if he wishes to get away. His land otter relatives (sometimes prompted by a shaman hired by his kin group, cf. Myth 2, 6, 11, 26, 28, Appendix I) help him to escape, and his human relatives set the stage for the return to his home. Without this support, he was destined to remain among the land otters just as the spirit of a human who has died must remain, cold and hungry and far from the fire in the spirit world (Swanton, 1908a:462). With this support, he was able to become a shaman and thus maintain control of the land otter spirits.

An underlying theme in the myths was that access to the sources of power is determined by proper behavior in both the social and the spirit realms. Ultimately, the power that makes wealth possible came from the spirit domain (ie. dead ancestors) or the realm of land otter people. By upholding correct values, treating animals properly and showing respect for the dead, the non-material realm of the spirits could be made to provide material abundance. But only people who had contact with the spirit realm, or even better, had visited it themselves, could muster up the necessary strength and power to continually access this source of abundance. Connections with land otter spirits, or relatives who had been taken by them, was the primary way of initially obtaining this reserve of power (cf. Myths 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 23, 24, 26, 31, 33, Appendix I)... By becoming a shaman, and thus using his spirits, the individual was assured of ongoing

access to this source. The rest of the community assured their success by having a shaman within the lineage group who would intercede for them by making such endeavors as hunting, fishing or warfare successful (Oberg, 1973:19). The myths served to reinforce these beliefs, and to indicate how and why this power was available to the shaman for the benefit of the community.

All four scenarios in these stories about land otters involved a potential breach of taboo, either against incest (i.e. an implied relation or improper behavior between a man and his sister or moiety sister, cf. Myths 2, 3, 5, 11, 13, 23, 31, Appendix I), or against the mistreatment of animals (cf. Myths 2, 3, 7, 11, 24, 26, 28, Appendix I). More generally, they implied a potentially dangerous coming together of realms that were usually considered best separated by the Tlingit (i.e. brothers/sisters, humans/animals, nature/culture, death/life. However, each of these binary categories had an inherent linkage binding them together; brother and sisters were bounded by blood, humans depended on animals for food, culture is not possible without nature and death is inevitably linked with life. Yet, social customs dictated that a distinction between them must be maintained.

In the myths, the main character generally encountered a situation that threatened to collapse the boundaries that kept these categories distinct. Unless the heroes avoided breaching

the taboo, they were absorbed by the wildness and thus taken out of the human social order by land otter possession which was the same as being "crazy" or dead.⁵ If they showed strength of character and proper respect for the customs, they overcame death and returned with even greater strength. Otherwise they became land otter people and were destined to remain separated from their human kinfolk. The land otter myths thus illustrated both proper and improper behavior and reinforced acceptable conduct by positive and negative examples respectively.

⁵ According to Professor Halpin, the equation of land otter possession with a state of mental disorder and even death may have some bearing on a physiological condition associated with drowning or other situations where a person is subject to prolonged exposure to cold. Hypothermia is a condition where a person's body temperature becomes abnormally low and one of the symptoms is amnesia and/or distorted mental perceptions. If this state persists, death is inevitable. Yet, if a person were rescued from the water by friends, or if they had great stamina and strength, they could survive such an ordeal. However, they would likely have a distorted perception of what had happened, if they remembered it at all (personal communication, Marjorie Halpin).

CONCLUSION

SHAMANS, LAND OTTERS AND SOCIAL INTEGRITY

"Man does not stand apart from nature: in the Tlingit mind there is no dichotomy between the human moral world and a nonmoral world of natural forces, inanimate phenomena and dumb brutes. Mans essential self or spirit is identical in essence with the spirits or souls of animals, birds, plants, rocks, and winds, and as they can or could at times assume human form, or perhaps once possessed it, so some men have the awful power of appearing in animal guise, or may suffer this transformation. Man acknowledges his moral obligations towards these other selves in the world about him. He speaks to them and they to him. He fears their powers, greater than his own, yet relies upon their conformity to the common law and upon their reciprocal goodwill for his happiness and goodwill (de Laguna, 1972;836).

DEATH: THE INDETERMINATE DETERMINATION

Burridge (1979;151) claims that the most significant confrontation with truth and reality among traditional societies, is death. Experiencing the death of another or thinking about one's own death, lead to, first, repugnance and opposition, then to acceptance. However, he indicates that in that initial opposition lies the seeds of that which may transform the traditional order. Death predicates life as often as it follows (*ibid.*). Yet, death itself is the ultimate in inconsistency, since we generally don't know when to expect it, or what it really means. In order to accommodate to the uncertainty of death, most societies develop an explanatory scenario for what happens after death.

Tlingit eschatology, like their cosmology (of which it might be considered a part), was inconsistent and even illogical on the surface from a cartesian viewpoint. Yet, they were very precise and specific about what happened when someone died. The body,

when available, was subject to very particular rituals, and a series of potlatch feats were held at appropriate intervals. Human spirits were divided into three parts after death, one of which could be reincarnated in as many as four different people (de Laguna, 1972;780). There were four different places the spirits might go, depending on both how they had lived their life and on how they had died.

The afterlife of those who had died normal deaths can be described in some detail, as we saw in Chapter II. However, the fate of those who drowned or were lost in the woods has received confused and conflicting interpretations. In a sense they had not died because they were believed to have been taken ("captured" or "saved") alive by Land Otter Men and transformed into beings like their captors (de Laguna, 1972;766). Although they were said to live among the Land Otter People, they were in another sense considered dead. This ambiguous situation is further confused by the lack of clarity as to whether these unfortunates were available for reincarnation, as those who died normal deaths were.

De Laguna (1974;777) reports that when informants were asked about people who drowned, they were vague about whether they were available for reincarnation or not. However, if we follow the logic of the myths (cf. Myth 2, Appendix II), there was a form of reincarnation available to people who have been

transformed into land otters; they became the spirits of the shaman and thus assumed a new role in helping to preserve Tlingit society.

The concept of reincarnation suggested that the deceased individual was, under normal circumstances, available for reincorporation back into Tlingit society. As a result of the proper care and treatment of the corpse and the consequent practise of "feeding" the dead and remembering them at the potlatch, certain aspects of the deceased had an opportunity to return, at least symbolically, when his name and associated prerogatives were passed on to a successor. An actual return was possible when his spirit was reincarnated back into the lineage, after an announcing dream or some other sign that a certain person had returned (de Laguna, 1972:776).

THE POTLATCH: DEALING WITH DEATH SOCIALLY

The Tlingit potlatch or feast for the dead was a primarily social affair which served many purposes. As we saw in Chapter I, there are several types of feasts, but the one we are mainly concerned with here is the memorial feast. At one level it served to increase the status and prestige of the host group, while at the same time it honoured the matrilineal ancestors and emphasized the opposition of the matrilineal kin group to the paternal kin groups and in-laws (i.e. between siblings and cross-

cousins). Thus it was an opportunity to display crests, perform songs and dances and to tell stories, all of which expressed the social identity of the lineage group.

The act of dying removed the individual from the social order and placed him or her in the transitional realm for the spirits of the dead. The liminal nature of the period between the funeral and the potlatch was clearly expressed by the notion that the deceased had not yet found a permanent place in the "village of the dead", while at the same time the lineage had not yet been released from their mourning taboos, and were still indebted to their "opposites", who had helped them during the funeral (Kan, 1986:197).

In the final analysis, it appears that the ultimate purpose of the potlatch was not merely the release of the deceased from their obligation to the living. It also ensured that the essential attributes of that person's ancestral spirit was passed on within the lineage group. This in effect maintained continuity of the lineage and ultimately of Tlingit culture as a whole. The land otter does not appear in the potlatch ceremony; its ambiguity would not be welcome in a context celebrating order.

MYTHS: DEALING WITH ANOMALOUS DEATHS

We have seen how, in the myths, there was a linkage between death, power and material abundance, often mediated by shamans and land otters. When the shaman received power from the land otters, he was able to effect greater control over life and death (ie. by healing and/or retrieving lost souls). We have also seen in the myths how land otter people often helped relatives in times of need, especially famine. I have pointed out how this is similar to the way in which relatives in the land of the dead assisted their kinfolk to return to the land of the living (cf. Tales 31 & 46; Swanton, 1909). These myths illustrate how land otter 'relatives' could help a potential shaman return and thus exercise his new power among the people. Given the Tlingit assertion that these land otter people were all once human (de Laguna, 1972;836) and my hypothesis that becoming helping spirits was a form of reincarnation, these 'relatives' had a vested interest in helping their visitor escape. This would give them limited access to the world of living people again.

When the shaman returned from the realm of the Land Otter People, he brought with him knowledge about healing, fishing, hunting, etc., actual devices that would help him in these tasks, or the end product itself (i.e. food, fishhooks or lost souls of those who were sick). The importance of this shamanic power to the social realm is illustrated in the myths, particularly those

that drew the connection between material abundance and spirit helpers from the land otter realm (Cf. Myths 1, 2, 5, 9, 11, 16, 24, 26, 31, Appendix I).

LAND OTTER: DEALING WITH DEATH SPIRITUALLY

Just as the potlatch provided a means of passing on power, authority and wealth, and thereby reaffirmed the boundaries of the social order, the land otter complex, as seen through the myths and the shaman's rituals, provided a continuity of the special kind of power wielded by the shaman. A layperson would inherit names which had prerogatives associated with them that gave him access to certain status, prestige and resources (i.e. property). The shaman inherited spirit helpers (land otters being primary candidates) which offered him a different kind of status, prestige and also the ability to ensure the renewal of food resources (Swanton, 1909;64).

Thus the common ground between the social and the shamanic order resided on two separate but related levels. On the material level, abundance of food and other life-sustaining necessities was ensured by the provision of help from the spiritual level. This help, as manifested through the shaman, also feeds back into the maintenance of social continuity by providing life-sustaining powers of a more subtle nature (ie. curing illness and retrieving lost souls).

Where the potlatch denied the ambiguity of Tlingit cosmology and celebrated death as a means of continuity, the land otter myths affirmed this ambiguity by expressing the possibility of a disintegration of the social order. The shamans were able to mediate between the human society and the spirit realm because they were able to go beyond the social order and with the help of their land otter spirits, restore the very disruption they had caused.

So, in effect, there were complementary forces at work in Tlingit society which nourished both the physical and the spiritual needs of the people. The common ground between those forces was occupied by the land otter complex because the power of the shaman came from that mediating factor in the Tlingit belief system. The land otters mediated between life and death because it was from them that the shaman learned to overcome death. The inconsistency of death, especially drowning, was made consistent by the existence of a land otter realm. The lost body (and soul) had somewhere to go and, if conditions were right, something to gain. If there had been no land otter people, there would have been some other similar notion structured into their cosmology to help ensure the continuity and coherence of the Tlingit universe.

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APPENDIX I

SUMMARY OF LAND OTTER MYTHS

TLINGIT MYTHS & TEXTS - J.R. Swanton 1909

Myth 1 Tale 5 Kaka: p.28

Kaka has two wives - saved by Land Otter woman w/two husbands
Land Otter sinew as charm - turned Kaka into Land Otter
Underwater journey for Kaka - covered by a mat
Land Otter people must hide in woods during daylight

Myth 2 Tale 31 Raven: p.80

Land Otters posing as relatives
Dog skin used and bones hang from apron to frighten Land Otter
Shamanic spirit possession as a form of reincarnation:
"the shaman who is possessed by him dances in the same manner"
Land-Otter people have their own shamans and their own language
Land-Otter people meet on an island near Sitka every year
Canoe journey with head covered - Land Otter want to keep secrets
Land Otters hide in dens after coming ashore
Retrieval of body - brought delight to Kaka's friends
Master/slave: *yek* call the shaman's relatives "my masters"
Kaka's aunt's land otter husband is afraid to let him learn their
secrets - this would cause the Land Otters to die
Strong mind resists Land Otter - Kaka did not believe that Land
Otter is stronger than people, thus they had no control over him
Spirit possession - Kaka was 'saved' by two spirits, thus he sang
their songs - i.e. inherited from his Land Otter 'uncle'
Kaka's spirits were all around - wind, waves and sea birds
Sea birds sitting on a log are shamans spirits.
Land Otter spirits a medium of communication
-allows shamans to see each other from afar.
p.139
Loss of wealth > loss of wife > becomes like a wild animal
Foolish people were equated with dead people
Drowned person has "strength like that of a shaman"
-uses it to 'get' other people
Four boys 'taken' (drowned) by Land Otters
-they did not want to return when the people went after them
Warfare between land otters and human beings
Mishaps, boils and pimples caused by Land Otter arrows
Land Otter (high-caste) equated with "deer" (peace hostage)
Land Otters dance the peace-making dance
Bitter root in water renders Land Otter unconscious
Animated shaman's rattle and belt select patient to cure
Shaman cures high-caste Land Otter by removing invisible arrow
Spirit of clams as cause of sickness
clams look to the spirits like human beings
Shaman creates sandbar on which he is rescued
Shamans and belief in spirits diminish Raven's importance

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SUMMARY OF LAND OTTER MYTHS

Myth 3 Tale 6 THE LAND-OTTER-SISTER p.29

Man forgets about his drowned sister
Land Otter sister brings him baskets of food
Land Otter nephews come to help their human uncle
Land Otter nephews put halibut on their uncle's line
Man's children begin to grow tails - stopped by Land Otter aunt
Land Otter called bad weather good and good weather bad
Fire threatens Land Otter nephew's tails/clothes - they leave in anger as they feel mistreated by their human uncle
Land Otter nephews use their tails to carry new canoe to water
New canoe carries an abundance of food back to village

Myth 4 Tale 7 THE LAND-OTTER SON p.29

Famine period - ate only shellfish and food from low tide line
Land Otter son takes pity on poor and hungry parents
gives them devilfish for halibut bait
Land Otter son communicates by whistling - hides his face
Land Otter son puts halibut on father's line
Land Otter son hides in the woods at daybreak -before raven calls
Land Otter son eats only raw fish
Land Otter son fades away as parent's canoe nears their village

Myth 5 Tale 45 THE WOMAN WHO MARRIED A LAND OTTER p.187 Variation of Tale 6

Famine and hunger for a man and his three children
Land Otter sister brings food for them
Land Otter nephews help man finish his canoe
Takes his three children to visit the land otters
Protects himself with blue hellebore in water
Children begin to grow tails - he chops them off
His sister says he has stayed too long - must leave
When leaving he sees 1-o holes instead of painted houses
Returns to his village with an abundance of food

Myth 6 Tale 46 THE LAND-OTTER'S CAPTIVE p.188

Survivor of capsized canoe decieved by Land Otters -taken south
Land Otters take in a female land otter at every stop
Coverd man with mat during journey
Land Otter aunt in ground hog robe has two Land Otter husbands
who help him return to his own village
People of the village capture him with dog bones on the rope
Man restored from his wild state by cutting head w/ dog bones
Man learned halibut fishing from the Land Otters
Man ate only raw fish and meat - died when he ate cooked food

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Myth 7 Tale 18 VARIOUS ADVENTURES NEAR CROSS SOUND p.47

Land Otter communicates with men by whistling
Hunters went crazy after eating a land otter and then killing a land-otter-man by burning him
Crazy equated with death

Myth 8 Tale 27 THE ALSEK RIVER PEOPLE p.64

Famine among the people
Two shamans singing - one for eulachons, the other for animals
First shaman goes under the water in a canoe to bring fish back
Land Otter spirits talking inside of two menstruant women
Menstruant woman enfeebles the power of a shaman's spirit
Land-Otter-Men were invisible
Disrespect of Land Otters cause a great avalanche and flood

The Tlingit Indians - Aurel Krause 1979

Myth 9 Kaka p.197

Shaman is wrapped in a mat, tied w/otter strap & lowered in sea
Bladder of a land otter marks the position of the shaman
He is found in four days, hanging from a cliff
Kaka has two wives - one faithful, one not
Charm of otter sinew causes Kaka to drown - taken by Land Otters
Kaka falls in love with the chief Land Otter's two daughters
Kaka's aunt helps him to return to his senses by removing sinew
Kaka's Land Otter uncles help him to return home in canoe
Uncles become land otters at daybreak, remove Kaka's tongue and thus obtain the powers of a shaman
Kaka's unfaithful younger wife falls thru smoke hole
commits suicide as a result of her shame

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SUMMARY OF LAND OTTER MYTHS

STORIES ABOUT LAND OTTERS - F. de Laguna 1972

Myth 11 THE STORY OF KAKA p.749

Kaka's jealous wife puts land otter sinew in his ear
Kaka is taken away by Land Otters
Kaka's relatives gave a great feast for him
The Land Otters dragged him under three rocky points near Sitka
Kaka marries a young Land Otter woman
Kaka's aunt removes the sinew from his ear
Kaka's mouth is disfigured from eating codfish bones and heads
Kaka has no feeling in his body when he threatens Land Otters
Land Otters return Kaka - travel by night only
Kaka's shaman uncle sent a spirit to get him back
When Kaka shows himself in his village, people go unconscious
Iron nails are used on a clothesline to catch Kaka
Kaka would not eat the food offered by his family

Myth 12 THE GIRLS WHO HAD LAND OTTERS AS LOVERS p.750

Two adolescent girls are confined for one year
Holes in trees are Land Otter holes - girls sit on holes
Land Otter spirits try to enter the girls -
repelled by devil's club
Relatives of the girls "kill" a slave for Land Otter
Land Otter send two slaves (mink) in return potlatch
Land Otters try to drown the people in mud
People set fire to the Land Otter holes with pitch
[holes = top of land otter's village]

Myth 13 TWO LITTLE BOYS RESCUED FROM LAND OTTERS p.751

Two boys are lost and meet their "mother and sisters"
(ie. Land Otters posing as relatives)
Shaman suggests that one will be found in a hole under a tree
says they should use a dog to find him
After 3 days the youngest is found - he has messed his pants
After 7 days the other is found - both were unconscious
Shaman revitalizes them and drives away Land Otter spirit
"coming to alive again" = reincarnation?

Myth 14 A BOY RESCUED FROM LAND OTTERS p.752

Boy is taken by Land Otters who look like his parents
Shaman sings and puts food on the fire to save the boy
- seal oil, seal fat, bear oil and dried fish
Boy sleeps w/ Land Otters - they look like parents in daytime
Boy gets stuck in the Land Otter hole - relieves himself there
Land Otter are afraid of his body wastes

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SUMMARY OF LAND OTTER MYTHS

Family finds the boy - he is crazy and afraid of his sister
until the shaman cures him

Myth 15 NEXINTEK RESCUED FROM LAND OTTERS p.752

Boy disappears while fishing on a gravel bar
People searched thru the woods with pitch torches for him
Shaman follows the boy's tracks
Land Otters dragged him beneath the roots of a tree
but would not touch him because he defecated on himself
People carved his face on a big tree where they found him

Myth 16 LDAXIN AND THE LAND OTTERS p.753

Seal hunter is delayed by storms and camps on an island
At night he sleeps under his canoe - hears his parents
whispering/whistling (like Land Otter)
Tries to shoot his gun but hands go numb and he gets dizzy
Shaman sends his spirit to protect the hunter
The man's uncles pay the shaman to 'cleanse' him when he returns

Myth 17 THE DROWNED WOMAN p.754

Man was trapping mink, fox and land otters
Finds two footprints on either side of a trap and a garter on it
His wife says it belonged to her mother who died in a canoe upset
She dreams that mother is married to a Land Otter and has
two mink children

Myth 18 A GIRL CAPTURED BY LAND OTTERS p. 754

Twelve year old girl disappeared - stolen by Land Otters
Search party heard people, but found only land otter tracks

Myth 19 SMALL BOYS SAVED BY DOGS p.755

Canoe load of 'relatives' becomes a log when dogs start barking
Boy is talking to his 'uncle' but when dogs run and jump on him
he turns into a land otter and runs away

Myth 20 TWO BOYS LOST IN THE WOODS p.755

Boys lost in the woods are saved because they had an ax and saw

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SUMMARY OF LAND OTTER MYTHS

Haida Texts and Myths J.R. Swanton 1905

Myth 23 THE STORY OF HIM WHOSE SISTER BROUGHT FOOD FROM L-O
A man leaves town w/ wife and two children to make a canoe
His sister, who was taken away by Land Otters in the woods
brings them food
Her Land Otter husband turns the canoe over -then brings it out
They paddle to the Land Otter village following her directions
They lived there a long time while finishing the canoe
At night they were in the roots of a tree- by day it was a house
One of four Land Otter hunters is killed because he forgot to
cover his knees while in a canoe
Land Otter brothers-in-law help finish canoe
Land Otter sister gave them directions home - told them not to
talk about Land Otter village
When child speaks well of Land Otter village they find themselves
back until finally she forgets and they get home

Myth 24 STORY OF Tc!aawu'nk! p.58 (Tlingit name and story)

Child in cradle becomes shaman surrounded by crows on beach
Blamed for deaths so he went w/grandmother to live outside town
Became a great hunter and provided for village during famine
Gains shamanic power by going underwater tied to a rope
Sees the bottom of a Tlingit island and a shaman's house
Youngest of four nephews immune to Land Otter because
he urinates in bed
Tc!aawu'nk! and youngest taken by Land Otters to heal their chief
With a drum, rattle and some urine he travels in the bottom of
the Land Otter canoe, covered with a mat (nephew also)
Land Otters cleaned canoe by twisting about (ie their fur was wet
Travelled under the water, through the kelp strands
His animated rattle leads him to the house of the sick Land Otter
chief's son - Land Otter people had pretended he was elsewhere
His people had speared a white otter - it was the chief's son
Tc!aawu'nk! removes a bone spear from Land Otter then returns it
Nephew beats the drum with his head from a distance
When he slept, the house became the roots of a tree
Tc!aawu'nk! rewarded with many elk skins and grease
He sprays the Land Otter shamans who make fun of him
with urine and hellebore
Clams spurted water at him (see Laguna for clams as sickness)
He asks for two magic halibut hooks as payment
Removes the spear and is given the hooks by reluctant Land Otters
When he is returned, the hooks, elk skins and grease disappear!

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SUMMARY OF LAND OTTER MYTHS

Haida Texts J.R. Swanton 1908b

Myth 26 QAKA p.523

Qaka had two wives - the elder put Land Otter sinew in his ears because she was jealous of the younger
Collecting cedar bark, he see his young wife (but she is really a Land Otter)
Land Otter fools Qaka into the forest rather than to the sea where he had wanted to go
She leads him to Land Otter village where he meets an aunt who tells him about the land otter sinew
Land Otters went for food at night - Qaka gathered wood
Aunt collected dry wood -fire went out so she was treated badly
Aunt is fastened with pitch and partly turned to stone
Qaka collects dry wood -fire keeps burning when Land Otter shake their wet fur to dry off
Qaka eats fish with Land Otters -has a hard time with the bones
Qaka is given away as an exchange gift for a chief's daughter
Qaka meets another aunt here who is bound w/pitch and part stone
Qaka travels on and meets another aunt who has two Land Otter husbands, one young and old
His aunt tell him his wife's trick - her husbands will return him
They travel by night -in the day Qaka is left with a fire while the uncles become otters in the woods
On the last night they go along the bottom of the ocean
They leave Qaka at a cliff near his village
A canoe with four men come near but only the one in the bow will paddle towards Kaka - they go back to tell the village
Qaka see a sparrow thru hole in blanket - he is invited to visit a chief under the ground - parts the grass and enters
He meets another aunt who also asks "Why do you do this?"
Again the Land Otters go for food at night Qaka collects wet wood
Qaka pierces a blue bag with a bone- it is the scent bag of the chief otter - Qaka is sent away
He goes to a bay and lies down on the root of a tree/floats away
He dies and floats close to his own village on the log
People see a flock of seabirds in the air around him
Two old men say it is Qaka (a chief's son) but can't find him
When they purify the house and fast on salt water for two nights they are able to locate Qaka
Qaka's dead body is put on the roof of the house for four days
Qaka comes back to life and becomes a great shaman
His old wife returned to him - the young one married someone else

Myth 27 Ldjan and Guk'a'na p.535

Four hunters stranded on a rocky island
The three did not share food with Guk'a'na - left him there alone

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when they were rescued by a canoe
Canoe of Land Otters appear and offer water and to help him -
he refuses help because he fears them
Canoe of Ocean-People offer to help him - he refuses
He is finally rescued by his own people who come in a large canoe

Myth 28 THE MAN CARRIED OFF BY LAND OTTERS p.545

Qaka jumped from his canoe into the water to join the Land Otters
His wife went back home with her three children for help
An old woman in the Land Otter village advises Qaka to get wet wood for the Land Otter's fire
Qaka controls when the Land Otters can come out of the water
Qaka worked for the Land Otters like a slave
Qaka gets a spoon from the old woman and eats the chief's food
The Land Otters beat Qaka with their tails
Qaka tries to run away with their scent glands, but they make the doorway small and he is stuck
Qaka is found by four friends who cut the roots away from him
Qaka and his people plan to kill the Land Otters with fire,
urine & hellebore
They poured urine in the den holes, lit fires and clubbed Land Otters as they came out
They skinned the otters and tried to sell the skins to the whites
in their "Otter Canoe" (steamboat "Otter")

Myth 29 A SHAMAN AT QAIK p.597

A shaman prophesizes the coming of a canoe -
One standing in the middle of the canoe is dressed as a shaman
The people in the canoe sing a song in Tlingit language
When they came ashore the canoe became a rotten tree
These were the relatives of Land Otters killed by the villagers
The visitors dressed themselves and danced and sang for the hosts
In the morning the villagers killed the Land Otters as they came out of the house by clubbing them
At last the "deer" (i.e. peace hostage) came out but did not die from their clubbing so they cut off his head
They left the bodies of the Land Otters on an island

Myth 31 The Man Who was Helped by Land Otters p.449

Dead woman provides food for a man and his family (crab shells)
-she goes back to her grave-box during the daytime
Dead woman is married to a Land Otter
Her Land Otter husband helps the man finish his canoe
and catches many fish for him
Man becomes a great chief as a result of having so much fish
-he is able to give ten potlatches

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TSIMSHIAN MYTHOLOGY Franz Boas 1909

Myth 32 THE OTTER WHO MARRIED THE PRINCESS p.166

A chief's daughter refuses to marry her cousin
 She goes in a canoe to collect ferns with other women
 At night she is chilled in spite of her aunt's fire
 The prince arrives and builds a bigger fire - she is still chilly
 A friend of the 'prince' calls for rain - it floods the camp
 She accepts a ride home in the prince's canoe
 The two are covered by a mat while they travel
 She arrives in a strange country (Land Otter village)
 The canoe becomes a drift log after they get out
 Mouse Woman tell her to throw her ear-ornaments into the fire
 Mouse Woman reveals that the Land Otter prince has married her
 because she would not marry her cousin
 She gives birth to a child and is cast out by her mother-in-law
 She tries to drown her baby Land Otter, but to no avail
 As he grows up, the Land Otter child provides food for her
 Mouse Woman directs her to kill the Land Otters, and she does
 Meanwhile, her aunt has returned home and discovered she has not
 The chief calls all the shamans who say she was taken by Otters
 Little Otter goes to look at his grandfather, the chief
 Otter offers to take his mother home on his back to the mainland
 On the way they make sandbars (with handful of sand) to rest upon
 She and little Otter are welcomed back to her village
 Otter provides much halibut and other food for the village
 Chief gives a great potlatch for all the Tsimshian
 Chief asks the other villages not to harm little Otter
 One village was not present - men from it killed little Otter

Myth 33 LAND OTTER p.345

Man claims he would never yeild to Land Otters
 He and his sister capsize in a canoe
 He sees a fire moving away from him, but makes his own
 A canoe arrive and he throws the paddles into the fire
 they become mink
 The people in the canoe disappear and it becomes a drift log
 A woman come to his fire and offers him fish and seaweed
 He refuses food from his Land Otter sister - then accepts
 After a month, he is rescued.

Myth 2 (Swanton, 1909 Tale 31) KAKA:

The first man captured (or "saved") by the land otters was a Kiksadi named Kaka. The land otters kept coming to him in large canoes looking like his mother or his sister, or other dear relation, and pretending that they had been looking for him for a long time. But they could not control themselves as well as he, and at such times he would discover who they were and that their canoe was nothing but a skate. Finally, when Kaka found that he could not see his friends, he thought he might as well give himself up to the land otters. Then they named him Qowulka, a word in the land otter language now applied to a kind of fishhook which the halibut are thought to like better than all others. Nowadays, when a figure of Qowulka is made, it is covered with a dog skin, because it was by means of a dog skin that he frightened the land otters, and they also hang his apron about with dog bones. The shaman who is possessed by him dresses in the same manner. From Kaka the people learned that the land otter affects the minds of those who have been with them for a long time so as to turn them against their own friends. They also learned from him that there are shamans among the land otters, and that the land otters have a language of their own.

For two years Kaka's friends hunted for him, fasting at the same time and remaining away from their wives. At the end of this period the land otters went to an island about 50 miles from Sitka and took Kaka with them. The land otter tribes go to this place every year. Then an old land-otter-woman called to Kaka: "My nephew, I see that you are worrying about the people at your home. When we get to the place whither we are going place yourself astride of the first log you see lying on the beach and sit there as long as you can." And her husband said to him: "Keep your head covered over. Do not look around." They gave him this direction because they thought, "If this human being sees all of our ways and learns all of our habits, we shall die..." On the way across the land-otter-people sang a song, really a kind of prayer, of which the words are, "May we get on the current running to the shore."

The moment they came to land the land-otter-people disappeared and he did not know what had become of them. They may have run into some den. Then he ran up the sandy beach and sat on the first log he came to, as he had been directed. The instant his body touched it he became unconscious. It was a shaman's spirit that made him so.

By and by Kaka's friends, who were at that time hunting for fur seals, an occupation that carries one far out to sea,

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suddenly heard the noise of a shaman's drum and people beating for him with batons. They followed the sound seaward until they saw thousands and thousands of sea birds flying about something floating upon the ocean a mile or two ahead of them. Arrived there they saw that it was a log with Kaka lying upon it clothed only in a kelp apron. The people were delighted to find even his body, and took it into their canoe. He looked very wild and strange. He did not open his eyes, yet he seemed to know who had possession of him, and without having his lips stir a voice far down in his chest said, "It is I my masters." It was a shaman's spirit that said this, and to the present day a shaman's spirit will call the shaman's relations "my masters."

The old woman that saved him and told him to sit astride of the log was his spirit and so was her husband. The log was the spirit's canoe. This woman and her husband had been captured by the land otters long before, but Kaka was so strong-minded a fellow that they felt they could do nothing with him, so they let him go and became his spirits. They could not turn him into a land otter because he did not believe that land otters are stronger than human beings.

After the people had brought Kaka to a place just around the point from their village, he said, "Leave me here for a little while." So most of his relations remained with him, while two went home to tell the people who were there. They were not allowed to keep it from the women. Then they made a house for him out of devil's clubs and he was left there for two days while the people of the town fasted. They believed in these spirits as we now believe in God. Before he was brought home the house and the people in it had to be very clean, because he would not go where there was filth. After they got him home they heard the spirit saying far down within him: "It is I, Old-land-otter-spirit (Kucta-kocanqo-yek)." This was the name of the old woman who first told him what to do. The next spirit was The-spirit-that-saves (Qosinexe-yek). He sang inside of him the same song that the land otters sang. It was his spirit's song and has many words to it.

All the birds that assembled around him when he was floating upon the sea were also his spirits. Even the wind and the waves that first upset him were his spirits. Everything strange that he had seen at the time when the land otters got possession of him were his spirits. There are always sea birds sitting on a floating log, and from Kaka people learned that these are shaman's spirits. It is from his experience that all Alaskans - Tlingit, Haida, even Eskimo and Athapaskans - believe in the land-otter-men (kuctaqa) By means of his spirits Kaka was able to stand going naked for two years. This story of Kaka is a true story, and it is from him that the Tlingit believe in

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shaman's spirits [yek] (Swanton, 1909:138).

Myth 7 (Swanton, 1909 Tale 18)
VARIOUS ADVENTURES NEAR CROSS SOUND

Four men went hunting by canoe one autumn to a place called Watas!ax, where they encamped. By and by one of the party, on going to his traps, found a big land otter in one of them. He took the bough of a tree, twisted it around the land otter's neck, and carried it home. He did not know what it was. As he dragged it home it went bouncing along behind him and at every bounce something whistled behind him. Arrived at camp he began to skin it. Then he said to his brothers, "Go and get your pot ready to cook it," but, when they began to cut it up to put it in, something whistled. "That is just what I heard on the way," he said.

After the pot had boiled and they had begun to eat, something began to whistle in tree near by and threw a rock down. They threw one back and soon rocks were flying back and forth. It was a great thing to fool with. By and by the men said, "You might cut our faces," so, instead of throwing rocks, they seized long pine cones and threw these back and forth all night. Towards morning the being in the tree, which was a land-otter-man, began to hit people, and they on their part had become very tired. Finally they tried to get him down by lighting a fire under the tree where he was sitting. When it was burning well, all suddenly shouted, and he fell into it. Then they threw the fire over him, and he burned up. But when they started for the beach to go home, all wriggled from side to side and acted as if they were crazy; and when anyone went to that place afterward he would act in that same manner.

Myth 5 (Swanton, 1909 Tale 45)
THE WOMAN WHO MARRIED A LAND OTTER

A man at Sitka had three little children who were crying with hunger because he had nothing to give them. His sister had been captured by the land otters after having been nearly drowned. Then he said to the little ones, "You poor children, I wish your aunt was living." Sometime afterward that same evening he heard a load set down outside, and going out to look, he saw a

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very large basket filled with all kinds of dried meat, fish and oil. The sister he had been wishing for had brought it. Then this woman herself came in and said, "I have brought that for the little ones. I will be right back again. I live only a short distance from here. We have a village there named Transparent Village (Kanaxa-dak-an). You must come and stay with us." The man said that he was making a canoe and had to finish it, but she replied, "Your nephews are coming over, and they will finish your canoe for you."

After the food that his sister had brought him had given out she came to him again with more and said, "I have come after you now. Bring your little ones and come along. I see that you are having a hard time with them."

So her brother prepared to go. Before he started he got some blue hellebore (s!ikc), which he soaked in water to make it very strong and bitter, and finally his sister's boys came, fine-looking young men who were peculiar only in having very long braids of hair hanging down their backs. In reality these were their tails. He showed them where his canoe was so they could go to work on it, and, after they had completed it roughly, they pulled it down for him.

Then the man started off with his family, and, sure enough, when he rounded the point what appeared to him like a fine village lay there. The people came out to meet him, but his sister said, "Don't stay right in the village. Stay here, a little distance away.

The people of that place were very good to him and gave him all the halibut he wanted, but he always had the blue hellebore by him to keep from being injuriously affected. They were also in the habit of singing a cradle song for his youngest child which went this way, ""The tail is growing. The tail is growing." Then he examined the child, and in fact a tail was really growing upon it, so he chopped it off.

Finally the man's sister told him that he was staying there a little too long, and he started back toward his village. As he went he looked back, and there was nothing to be seen except land otter holes. Before they had appeared like painted houses. Then he returned to his own place with all kinds of food given him by the land otters.

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