

**THE USE OF CATTAIL (*Typha latifolia* L.) DOWN
AS A SACRED SUBSTANCE BY THE
INTERIOR AND COAST SALISH OF BRITISH COLUMBIA**

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ABSTRACT.—The economic uses of plants are often more accessible to researchers working with actual material remains from early ethnographic and archaeological sources than are ritual uses. Nevertheless, it is clear from the ethnographic literature of the Northwest of North America that plants also served many important ritual and ceremonial functions. During the examination of two Salish wooden mortuary figures currently housed at the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, a compact, fibrous white mass was observed lodged in the back of the mouth of one of the figures. A sample of the material was identified as *Typha latifolia* L. This paper discusses the ritual uses of cattail down, particularly with regards to funerary customs, among the Coast and Interior Salish of the Northwest of North America.

Key words: cattail, Salish, mortuary rituals.

RESUMEN.—Las aplicaciones económicas de las plantas siguen siendo, a menudo, más accesibles a los investigadores que trabajan con material real de fuentes etnográficas y arqueológicas tempranas que las aplicaciones rituales. Sin embargo, está claro que en la literatura etnográfica del noroeste de Norte América las plantas también sirvieron muchas funciones rituales y ceremoniales importantes. Durante la examinación de dos esculturas mortuarias de madera de Salish, contenidas actualmente en el Museo de la Antropología, la Universidad de Colombia

Británica, se observó una masa blanca fibrosa alojada en la parte posterior de la boca de una de las figuras. Una muestra del material fue identificada como *Typha latifolia* L. Este papel pone el resultado en contexto, en que discute las aplicaciones rituales de la pelusa de la espadaña, particularmente con respecto a las costumbres funerarias, entre las poblaciones Salish de la costa y el interior de la costa noroeste de Norte América.

RÉSUMÉ.—L'utilisation économique des végétaux est souvent plus accessible que leur usage rituel aux chercheurs travaillant sur les restes matériels provenant de sources ethnohistoriques ou archéologiques. La littérature ethnographique concernant le Nord-Ouest de l'Amérique du Nord montre néanmoins clairement que les plantes ont également eu de nombreuses fonctions rituelles et cérémonielles. Au cours de l'examen de deux figurines mortuaires en bois, actuellement conservées au Musée d'Anthropologie de l'Université de Colombie Britannique, une masse blanche, compacte et fibreuse, fut observée à l'arrière de la cavité buccale d'une des deux figurines. Un échantillon de cette substance a été identifié comme *Typha latifolia* L. Le but du présent article est de re-situer cette trouvaille dans son contexte, en discutant des usages rituels de chaton, particulièrement dans le cadre de coutumes funéraires, chez les populations Salish du littoral et de l'intérieur des terres du Nord-Ouest de l'Amérique du Nord.

INTRODUCTION

Though there is some record of the ritual uses of plants in the Northwest (Turner 1982; Compton 1991), the record for their economic uses is relatively more complete (e.g. Compton 1993; Turner 1995, 1997, 1998). This is in part due to the fact that though First Nations people may have described rituals in general terms for the early ethnographers, there was a reluctance on some occasions to share knowledge about the rituals associated with specific plants. This would have been particularly true for knowledge that was owned and guarded by individual households. Later in the historic era, when ceremonial life was disrupted by drastic depopulation (Boyd 1990, Carlson 1997a) and the performing of traditional ceremonies was suppressed or prohibited outright (Carlson 1997b; Cole and Chai-kin 1990; Fisher 1992), some details about the ritual roles of individual plants were lost.

The identification of plants used to make ritual artifacts or those found in ritually important contexts (cf. Carlson 1999) is an avenue for understanding ceremonial uses of plants in the past. In particular, the identification of such plants provides information on cultural prescriptions for the appropriate plant for specific ritual contexts. Such information, in turn, provides a broader understanding of traditional ceremonial life and of the larger worldview, and may furthermore suggest new lines of interpretation and investigation.

In this paper, we discuss the identification of cattail (*Typha latifolia* L.) down found in the mouth of one of a pair of Salish wooden mortuary figures.¹ We begin with a brief overview of the Salish, followed by an account of the figures that provides the context for the cattail down. A review of the ethnographic and ethnobotanical information for the Interior and Coastal Salish reveals that cattail served a variety of economic needs, but was also an important element in several

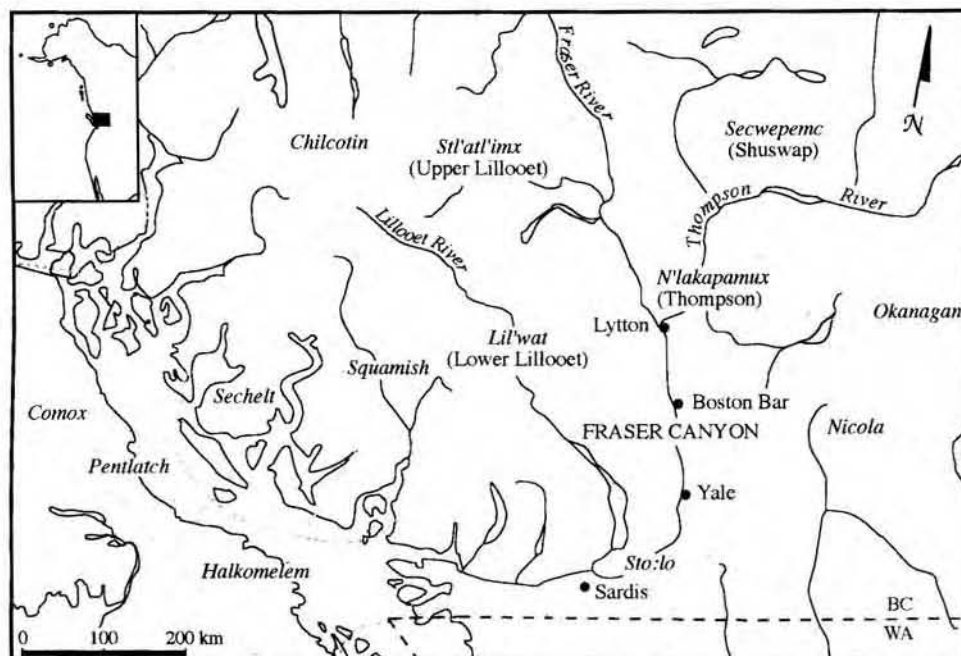


FIGURE 1.—Map of southwestern British Columbia, showing locations of selected Salish groups and places discussed in the text.

aspects of Salish ritual life. In particular, cattail down was strongly associated with traditional funerary rites among the Salish. The ritual significance of the down may be in part associated with the symbolic importance of the color white in the worldview of the Coast and Interior Salish.

THE SALISH

In British Columbia, traditional Salish territory extends across much of the southern part of the province (Figure 1). The most basic division of this territory is that between the Coast and Interior Salish, reflecting a major language division as well as cultural differences. According to late nineteenth century and early twentieth century ethnographic and ethnohistoric information, Salish social and economic organization was based on the extended family unit, several of which made up a household. On the coast, family units lived in large shed-roof plank houses, while in the interior, smaller plank houses and semi-subterranean pit-houses were used. In some areas, villages were quite large, with several hundred inhabitants. The subsistence economy was based on the collection and management of wild food resources, including fish, mammals, root foods, and berries. Political authority was largely hereditary and invested in the heads of high ranking families, especially among coastal groups. In the interior, social and political organization was more flexible, although still showing a strong hereditary component (Barnett 1955; Teit 1900, 1906). Both Coast and Interior Salish societies were semi-sedentary, with highly complex material culture and ceremonial life

A



B



FIGURE 2a.—Salish mortuary figure (UBC Museum of Anthropology, A1780).

FIGURE 2b.—Close up of the cattail down in the mouth of the mortuary figure (Photographs by J. Ostapkowicz).

based largely around the acquisition of personal spirit power (Kew 1990; Suttles 1987, 1990a).

THE GRAVE FIGURES

The grave figure with the cattail down in its mouth is one of a pair of carvings currently housed at the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia (A1780; Figure 2a). Though both figures are clearly Salish in origin, their exact provenience, and thus specific group affiliation, is uncertain. The museum attributes them to the Stó:lō—the Coast Salish of the central and upper Fraser Valley—however, others have attributed the figures to the N'lakapamux (Thompson), an Interior Salish group² (Figure 1).

Freestanding, fully sculptural depictions of the human figure, such as the pair under discussion, were typical of Coast and Interior Salish mortuary art. Mortuary figures—depicting men, women, and *sxwayxwey*³ dancers—were carved as

representatives of the deceased, and were erected for commemorative purposes at Salish grave sites. The practice of erecting these figures in front of family grave houses and box burials spanned much of Coast and Interior Salish territory from at least the beginning of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century in British Columbia (Ostapkowicz in press). Upwards of eighty figures are known from museum collections and archival photographs (Ostapkowicz 1992), although the one under discussion here is the only example known to be associated with cattail down. Serving as memorials, the figures were painted and dressed in the deceased's clothing (Teit 1906:273).

Those responsible for commissioning the carving of the figures were likely the heads of families of high status. Teit (1900:330), in writing about the N'lakapamux, commented: "The Indians state that the only reasons for placing these figures near graves were to keep the dead relative fresh in the memory of the living; to show that the person respected the dead relative; and to let people know who was buried there, and that the dead had living relatives who were above the common people as to wealth and able always to renew the clothes of the figure." The prominence of the figures and the ceremonies surrounding their erection and subsequent reclothing, were a means through which the living expressed their status, wealth, and close link to their ancestors.

The mortuary figures discussed here display marked similarities to one another and are clearly intended as a matched pair, perhaps carved by the same artist. The larger of the two figures contains the cattail down in the back of its mouth (Figure 2b). This figure is 168 cm in height and according to the museum accession records is carved from cedar (probably western red cedar, *Thuja plicata* Donn). Strips of leather have been nailed to the head and groin area. Only traces of white paint are visible today on the chin and cheeks, but red and black pigment were observed on the figure some decades ago (Wingert 1949:136).

These figures are distinguished from most other examples of Salish mortuary art by their unusual facial carving, which invokes the *Tal* mask. Like the facial features of the figures, *Tal* masks are characterized by large, deeply sunken cheeks and eyes, an open, down-turned mouth, and bent nose. Such masks were representations of a legendary female giant (a Coast Salish version of the Kwakwaka'wakw *Tsonoqua*, an 'ogress' who was also the provider of great wealth), and their ownership was a hereditary privilege as well as a mark of wealth and prestige (Barnett 1955:170–171; Lévi-Strauss 1988:66). The masks were used during winter dances and life crises rites, including commemorative ceremonies. Barnett (1955:236) notes that the "... appearance of a *Tal* mask at a ceremony honouring a deceased father signaled the transference of that mask to his heir. Effigies of the dead were made for these ceremonies and their faces covered with the mask." We expand upon the significance of the association of the *Tal* and the cattail down below.

ECONOMIC USES OF CATTAIL AMONG THE SALISH

Common cattail is a perennial that thrives in shallow marshes, ponds, wet ditches, and lakeshores. The familiar 'cat's tail'—the brown, velvety spike located at the tip of the main stem—bears the flowers which turn into a white, cottony

fluff in the late summer and fall. The plant is harvested for its leaves in late summer, and then left to air dry (Turner and Efrat 1982:58; Turner 1998:121–123). The seed down found in the figure's mouth was likely collected in the late summer/early fall and may have been used immediately or stored for future use.

Though the rootstock and pollen of cattail were collected for food by several Interior Salish groups (Turner et al. 1990; Parish et al. 1996; Turner 1997), the plant's leaves were most highly valued on the coast and the interior as weaving material (Steedman 1930:496; Turner and Bell 1971; Pojar and MacKinnon 1994; Turner 1988, 1998; Turner et al. 1990). Indeed, among the Island Salish, cattail is considered "... probably the most important basket and mat weaving material" (Turner and Bell 1971:77). Baskets, bags, clothing, twine, cradles, nets, canoe sails, and mats were woven from the leaves and stems (see Teit 1900:188–190, for an overview of the weaving process). Woven cattail mats, for example, were used in various ways, such as for wall insulators and temporary summer shelters (Turner et al. 1990:145; Turner 1998:122–123). Cattail weavings would also be used as clothing (cloaks, robes, hats, headdresses) and would occasionally be combined with dog hair for added warmth (Barnett 1955; Curtis 1970; Turner and Bell 1971:77; Turner 1988). Teit (1900:256) also notes the use of rafts made of cattail bundles among the Nicola. Based on these utilitarian uses, Turner (1988) ranks the plant in the 'High Significance' category for the Lillooet in her Index of Cultural Significance (ICS). Elder Rosaleen George notes that cattail has the same significance to the Stó:lō of the Fraser Valley as the cedar tree (pers. comm. to A. McHalsie).

Cattail down, because it was absorbent and soft, also served a variety of everyday needs. In particular, the Coast and Interior Salish used the down as stuffing for pillows, mattresses, for wound dressing, and for infant diapers (Steedman 1930:498; Pojar and MacKinnon 1994:338; Parish et al. 1996:359; Turner 1998:123). Cattail down was also woven into mountain goat wool blankets—a point we will return to below.

RITUAL USES OF CATTAIL AMONG THE SALISH

Although cattail had several mundane uses, it also served more esoteric purposes. Among the Saanich, of Vancouver Island, cattail charcoal was used for tattooing (Jenness in Turner and Bell 1971; Turner 1998:123), a practice reserved for the wealthy (Barnett 1955:74). Tattooing and face and body painting were also practiced by the Interior Salish N'lakapamux (Teit 1930). The Songish, again of Vancouver Island, offered a mixture of burned cattail root with *Lomatium* sp. and red paint in First Salmon Rites (Turner and Bell 1971:77). Among the N'lakapamux, cattail leaves were incorporated into shamans' headdresses (Turner et al. 1990:145), and the stalks were used to weave burial shrouds in the Nicola Valley (Smith 1900:405).

There is a particularly strong association between cattail down and burial rituals of the Coast and Interior Salish. Hill-Tout (1905:137) writes that among the Stl'atl'imx (Lower Lillooet), "[t]he body was customarily washed all over, the hair combed and tied back, the face painted, and the head sprinkled with the down of bull-rushes [cattails], which was potent in checking the evil influences attending corpses."⁴ This was done by a special funerary shaman, immune to the dangers

involved in dealing with the corpse. Among the Chilliwack, a Stó:lō group of the central Fraser Valley, Hill-Tout (1978:54) noted that, "After the body of the dead person has been taken from the house the 'olia' ['the soothsayer'] would take quantities of the down of bulrushes [cattails] and spread it all over the bed on which the deceased had lain."

The connection between cattail down and the dead is further demonstrated in the protohistoric burial of an infant found near the modern town of Yale, at the northern boundary of traditional Stó:lō territory and the southern limit of N'lakapamux territory. The infant had been interred inside a copper trade pot which, together with the other copper grave offerings, led to remarkable preservation conditions resulting in the preservation of soft tissues and plant fibers. Among the plant fibres was a downy white material which had been placed, together with red ochre, around the infant's anterior fontanelle. Red ochre was also placed inside the infant's mouth. As elsewhere, red ochre is a sacred substance among the Salish, and is often found in burial contexts among the Coast and Interior Salish (Schulting 1995). The white material has been examined microscopically and is consistent with cattail down (Schulting 1992), although the absence of attached seeds precludes a definite identification.⁵ If the material is indeed cattail down, this and the fluff in the mortuary figure, represent the only known examples of ritual use of cattail down outside of ethnographic sources.

The association of the ochre and the down with the head of the infant is significant given the spiritual importance of the head in Northwest Coast societies (e.g., Cybulski 1978). In Northwest Coast rock art, for instance, the head is almost always larger and more detailed than representations of the body (Lundy 1983) and modification to the head, through head deformation, facial tattooing, and the wearing of labrets were used to mark membership in social groups (Suttles 1990b). Specifically, Barnett (1955:221–222) notes that among the Coast Salish, the soul was "taken to be the vital quality of the heart or head . . ." and makes reference to a Saanich shaman retrieving a lost soul and placing it into the patient's head. That similar concepts prevailed among the Interior Salish is apparent from Teit's (1900:363) comment concerning the N'lakapamux belief that the soul was supposed to leave the body through the frontal fontanelle. It is reasonable to suggest, then, a scenario in which the spirit of the deceased, leaving the body through the fontanelle, was purified by passing through materials such as cattail down and ochre. The placement of the red ochre in the Yale infant's mouth could be viewed similarly, since this is where the breath—or life force—leaves the body, and may provide another parallel to the placement of cattail down in the mouth of the mortuary figure.

The ritual importance of cattail is further highlighted by its connection with particular places which are considered sacred. This is clearly illustrated by the Halkomelem place name *Xatsuq'* (*Xaxa*, sacred, spiritually potent; *sage'*, cattail), for a lake in the Fraser Valley (Hatzic Lake) which supports extensive stands of cattail. The association of cattail and sacredness in the place name may refer in general to the fact that cattail is used in sacred contexts. However, the fact that at least two other locations within Stó:lō territory where cattails grow are dangerous and off-limits to those who are spiritually unprepared (but are used by Indian doctors on spirit power quests), suggests particular patches of cattail may

be sacred (Keith Carlson, pers. comm. to D. Lepofsky, 2000). Cattail collected from such locations may have residual spiritual power in them, and may have been the source of down which was used in mortuary and other rituals, while cattail destined for more prosaic uses could have been gathered from other, less dangerous, locations.

DISCUSSION

Among the Coast and Interior Salish, purification, or the 'cleansing' of the deceased was an important aspect of mortuary rituals. *Sxwayxwey* dancers, for example, would be called in to 'wash' the corpse (Barnett 1955:217), and normally a year after burial, they would again be hired to 'wash' the mortuary figure (Barnett 1955:220). Barnett (1955:217) notes that the cleansing rituals involving the *sxwayxwey* and surrounding the burial "... did not differ from that employed for 'washing' a pubescent, a newly named adult, an infant, a dancer initiate, or any other individual assuming a new social position." Occasionally, figures bearing the *sxwayxwey* mask would be permanently erected at the burial sites of families who had rights to the masks—a long term, public affirmation of the family's good standing and their accordance with the proper ritual observances. The use of *skowmidgeons*—supernatural creatures most akin to fishers (a large member of the weasel family)—was another important aspect of mortuary cleansing rights, and representations of these creatures would often appear on mortuary figures and posts (Ostapkowicz 1992).⁶

The various Salish groups considered several plants to be important in cleansing ceremonies and used them in rituals surrounding an individual's death. According to Hill-Tout (1978:34), Squamish and Lillooet "... burnt cedar (*Thuja gigantea*) [stet] as well as salal-berry (*Gaultheria shallon*) branches and whip the whole dwelling with boughs, particularly that part where the body lay, to drive away the presence of death, sickness and ghosts, all of which are supposed to linger there." Spruce boughs (*Picea* sp.) are placed both at the head and under the bed of the husband or wife of the deceased as a protective measure against sickness and death, and food is eaten off these boughs for a month after the funeral (Hill-Tout 1978:35). Among the Coast Salish, the body of each participant in a bereavement ceremony was cleansed by smoking branches, while those who were in direct contact with the body (undertaker, coffin-maker, pallbearer) washed with various herbs after the completion of the ceremony (Barnett 1955: 219). The N'lakapamux also used Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii* [Mirbel] Franco) during rituals for the bereaved (Turner et al. 1990:58). In sum, various plants were vital to the fulfillment of a number of important, highly ritualised events, and through the associated actions natural materials were transformed into spiritually potent substances.

Though the Salish used several plants in funerary rituals, cattail down seems to have held particular importance. It is now apparent that the down was used in several aspects of mortuary rituals: it was strewn over the place where the deceased had lain prior to burial, it was sprinkled on the head of the deceased in preparation for burial, and it was placed in the mouth of grave figures. The

recurrent association of down with the head, a focal point of the human body, mind, and spirit in Salish belief systems underscores its ritual value.

Another significance of the cattail down in this particular case is seen in its conspicuous placement in the mouth of a *Tal*. Both the *Tal* and the down are instruments of cleansing, yet the mask would be ineffective in cleansing rituals without the use of what Suttles (1987:104) calls the 'ritual word'. Indeed, the ritual word was at the heart of cleansing rites, charging the instruments used during these ceremonies with efficacy. Wearers of the *Tal* masks presumably had associated power songs, or specific ritual words, that were private and used only during important events. Hence, the placement of the cattail down in the mouth of the mortuary figure may be interpreted as emphasising the power of the spoken word.

The underlying theme linking cattail down and concepts of death, the after-world and spiritual cleansing may be the symbolic potency of the colour white. Tepper (1994:75), in outlining the importance of colour among the N'lakapamux, points out that different colours are associated with "... abstract concepts usually linked to a system of religious beliefs". Teit (1930:419) recognized the symbolic importance of colour among the N'lakapamux, and drew attention to the white as a 'spirit' colour, linked to "... ghost, spirit world, dead people, skeletons, bones, sickness, coming from the dead". The white down of cattail, associated as it is with burials and burial figures, hints at such a symbolic association.⁷

In addition to its links with the ritual aspects of death, the colour symbolism of white has overarching associations with status and spirituality. In Salish society, items made of white wool were often highly valued elite and ceremonial objects. For example, white blankets made from mountain goat wool or wool shorn from dogs actively bred for their white pelage, were highly treasured items (Schulting 1994). Cattail down was sometimes woven into these blankets as well (Barnett 1955:119; Gustafson 1980:69). Furthermore, such blankets were a prominent aspect of funerary rites, being used to wrap the dead (Barnett 1955; Schulting 1994), again suggesting a concern with purification. Mountain goat wool was also incorporated into shamans' or ritualists' rattles and other items used during cleansing rituals. Initiates of certain secret societies would wear headdresses of cascading mountain goat wool (see Kew 1990: Fig. 1), as would individuals receiving their new names (see Suttles 1990a: Fig. 10). Ritualists attending ceremonies would weave wool into their hair (Barnett 1955:153), and goat wool and other white material, such as "down" (origin unspecified), would be sprinkled onto the hair of a young girl daily during the seclusion following her first menses (Barnett 1955:151). N'lakapamux shamans would dance with eagle down in their hair (Teit 1900:363), and *sxwayxwey* dancers' regalia was covered with white swan feathers and down.⁸

Cattail down seems to differ from the other white, sacred substances, in that it was relatively abundant and easy to acquire. However, we know nothing of the collection of cattail that was intended for ritual purposes. The collection of this material may have been restricted to ritual specialists, who collected the down in particular ways, possibly only from specific stands which were appropriate for ritual use (such as *Xatsug'*). Alternatively, any cattail down may have been appropriate, and only its inclusion in rituals transformed it into a sacred substance.

Redcedar boughs used in ritual cleansings might be another example of a common plant that is transformed during ritual performances.

Materials such as white cattail down were, at least in part, visual indicators of the status of the ritual practitioner (mediating between the spirits and the realm of the living) or of the supernaturally vulnerable initiate or patient. The link between spirituality and higher moral, social, and economic status is a prominent feature of Salish society (Hayden and Schulting 1997; Suttles 1987). For the Salish, as with many cultures, the ability to out-perform ordinary community members in the observances of what are regarded as the proper rituals both confers and justifies the high standing of certain families (cf. Owens and Hayden 1997). In the case of cattail down, the connection with the elite was made in several ways: it was part of a larger ceremony that included the carving and erection of a large mortuary figure, the hereditary right to carve a *Tal* mask (with its wealth connotations), the clothing (and periodic reclothing) of the figure, and presumably a relatively elaborate graveside ritual.

Cattail was thus at once a useful practical source of material for a variety of purposes, as well as having a series of more symbolic associations with death, purity, and social standing. The use of its seed down during life crises rituals, sprinkled on the head of a young girl during her puberty rituals or the head of the deceased during the cleansing of the body for burial, emphasized the individual's changing status—from child to woman, from man to ancestor. Cattail down marked and helped to facilitate the change. It was a means of cleansing the individual, thereby preparing their spirit for the journey ahead; in addition, it helped to protect the living from the uncontrolled and dangerous influences attendant upon the corpse.

This example of an economic/symbolic dichotomy is not unique for (or to) the Salish. Many plants, in many societies, present the same complex relationships. Our task is to try to understand and appreciate both ways of viewing the world.

NOTES

¹ The identification was based on the morphology of the fluff as well as the attached seeds.

² The most widely accepted version states that they were collected ca. 1893–1930 by G.H. Raley, a missionary and teacher in the Sardis area in the central Fraser Valley. According to this account, they were found after a massive flood washed them ashore (though the presence of the cattail down in the mouth of one of the figures casts some doubt on this scenario).

In an account by J.S. Matthews—the founder of the Vancouver Archives and an archivist there until 1970—the figures were found at a grave site between Boston Bar and Lytton, B.C., within the traditional territory of the N'lakapamux (Thompson). According to Matthews, around 1930, the figures were loaned by the Parks Board to David Spencer, Ltd., for display purposes. Spencer did not return them to the Parks Board, but gave them instead to G.H. Raley, whose collection of artifacts was later purchased by H.R. Macmillan (Vancouver City Archives, IN.N.63.P.115). An archival photo taken by Mr. Harold Escott in 1925, and referred to by J. S. Matthews, shows the figures standing in front of a forested backdrop. Escott indicates that he found the figures '... in a shed in Stanley Park' [Van-

couver], and set them out to photograph before returning them back to the shed. This would indicate that the figures may not have been in the Raley collection at this time, and suggests yet another version of events.

The University of British Columbia Museum purchased the mortuary figures in 1948 (UBC Museum accession records).

³ The term *sxwayxwey* has come to refer to both the characteristic Salish mask with protruding cylindrical eyes as well as the associated dances and ceremonies that feature this mask. Different names are recorded for various *sxwayxwey* masks (see Suttles 1987:109–111), which are distinguished by additions of bird or animal heads in addition to the frequently seen round collar and/or a crest of feathers. Such masks and dances function as instruments of cleansing.

⁴ The common name “bulrush” is often used interchangeably with “cattail”. True bulrush (*Scirpus* sp.) does not produce a fluffy seed head.

⁵ The morphology of the down alone is insufficient to distinguish among the many species of plants which produce seed fluff (Cathy D’Andrea, pers. comm.).

⁶ Jenness (1934:73) notes the myth related to *skowmidgeons*, and how they had the power to ‘wash away the tears’ of the bereaved: “Later Khaals changed some members of this group into fishers, and said to Seleeptim: “These animals will comfort you in generations to come. They shall be your *çxwte’n*, a solace to drive away your tears. When a child dies, or some dear kinsman, you shall kill two, four, or even six fishers, dry their skins, and store them in safety. Then you shall utter the prayer that I will now teach you, and they shall wash away your tears.”

⁷ The white berries of snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus* L.) are often associated with the dead. In several languages on the coast and interior the berries are given names like ‘corpse berry’. For instance, the berries are referred to as ‘the saskatoon berries of the people of the Land of the Dead’ in one Stl’atl’imx story (Pojar and MacKinnon 1994:70).

⁸ Numerous northern Northwest Coast peoples incorporate eagle or swan down into various ceremonies. During certain dances, the headdress is filled with down and when the dancer tilts his head, he causes the down to fall to the ground. Holm (1990[1982]:86–7) notes that the down incorporated into such headdresses was “. . . shaken out and scattered by sharp movements of the dancer’s head, then swirled and drifted around him and over the assembled watchers. Following headdress dances, the floor of the house was covered with drifts of white down”. Again, there is the connection between the sacred, the colour white, and the head.

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