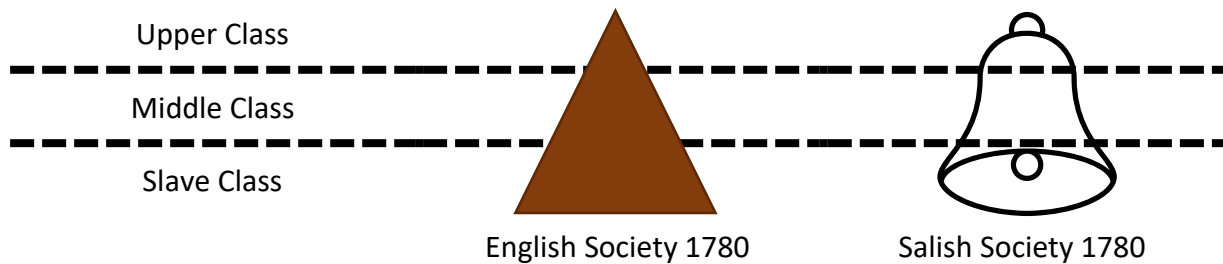


Module # 3 Musqueam pre-colonial history

A. COMMUNITY HIERARCHY

Pre-contact Musqueam society had three levels, the siem, commoners, and slaves. As in other Coast Salish societies our hierarchy did not graph as a pyramid, it was more like a bell shape, with a proportionally larger upper class, and a proportionally smaller slave class (including indentured labourers) than England or Spain at the time of first contact.



Amongst the siem there was no pre-eminent hereditary office, instead a strict kinship hierarchy prevailed. Coast Salish culture inherits equally from maternal and paternal lines, and this was reflected in the siem, with women holding equal authority. Whether man or woman, a siem's leadership role depended on their personal abilities.

Salish society is also characterized by a social fluidity. Even if a person was born into generations of a siem family, they could lose their social position through personal shortcomings. Siem held high community authority that was proportionate to their high obligations, if they failed in a way that brought dishonour, they were expelled from the family councils and publicly stripped of authority. Similarly, a commoner, or even a slave, could rise to become a siem through their individual conduct.

The siem governed through deliberation and consensus. An individual might be acknowledged as a leader in commerce, political negotiations, or war, and by consensus lead decisions in their specialty with the consent of their peers. Although women rarely fought in war, they could become war leaders through expertise in provisioning, supply chain, etc.

Commoners would affiliate themselves with the siem of their choice, with their chosen leaders' permission, adding their house planks to the leaders' great long house, or perhaps by publicly acknowledging the siem's superiority and claiming protection for a separate residence. At any rate, they engaged in commerce with the siem's approval and protection. If a commoner felt he had the economic support of enough followers he could leave and establish his own longhouse, rather like a queen bee leaving the old colony.

Slaves were sometimes born into their condition, they were taken in war, or more often, given in submission to end a war. On occasion a desperate person might give themselves into slavery, which might cynically be regarded as our ancient version of welfare. Usually, the daily life of slaves was not much different than their owners' families, the same food, the same clothes. In some communities a slave might serve as his masters' voice, giving him authority over commoners and lesser nobility. In some instances, this circumstance was known to become something of a hereditary position. If within slavery was fluid like our free society, indeed slaves could transition to become free.

B. FAMILY STRUCTURE

It is a teaching from our oldest memories that all people are from one family. In our language there is no word for cousin. Our cousins are our brothers and sisters, their children are our nieces and nephews. Our grandparents' brothers and sister and cousins are our grandparents.

Our family structure does acknowledge a kinship hierarchy whereby there is a separate kinship term for an older or younger sibling. The elder sibling claims precedence. This precedence extends to the succeeding generations. In this way the children of the elder sibling are always the senior sibling to the children of the younger sibling. For example, Nolan Charles' father and my mother were brother and sister. Because Nolan's father was senior to my mother, Nolan is senior to me and I address him as older brother, even though he is younger than me.

This extended kinship system spreads out for generations, so that today I am aware of, recognize, and communicate with family branches in other communities that stem from ancestors seven or eight generations removed. This is how we recognize we belong in family groups, or communities, whom we are descended from. As a young man I was offered a brand-new home on the beach in the community my great, great, great, great, great, great grandmother came from; so that, in the words of my relatives there, I would return home. This offer has happened to me elsewhere too, although not from as far removed a line of descent, and not with a free house.

Recognition and maintenance of kinship within the family structure is what entitles Coast Salish people to access natural resources from an ancestral area, and to claim inherited spiritual relationships and the associated rituals and ceremonies. This family relationship that extends for hundreds of miles is central to our identity. Our kinship system and family structure are not recognized in Canadian law or by the Indian Act.

A characteristic of this kinship system is that our endless number of grandparents, aunts, and uncles once had immense authority, and to a lesser degree today, still have considerable authority, to raise, teach and discipline you. Our traditional culture was incredibly strict compared to the individual freedoms in industrial cultures of today.

In pre-colonial times there were multiple marriages. Our ancestor qiyəplenəx^w had ten wives. These marriages were political alliances that tied together all the communities married into our family.

In our tradition the first wife would take the lead in selecting successive wives. This ensured household compatibility for political marriages. An important consideration was that the women of a family created textiles, a valuable trade item, and the cooperation of all the wives ensured successful production of textiles and other domestic commodities, notably processed foods that could be stored and traded.

Our ancestors are sacred to us. In our belief system when we die we transition to a parallel world. In that world we join our ancestors who have not yet been reborn, and there we justify our conduct in this world, and serve the family in the next world in the position we have earned there, sometimes to return immediately, sometimes to await the decision of our ancestors on our time to return. When the time is right, when we have completed our service to our ancestors on the other side, we are reborn into this world. People from cultures who do not believe in reincarnation are unaware that when we Indigenous peoples plan the future looking ahead seven generations we are not only planning for our future generations, but we are also planning for our own future incarnations. Therefore, it is important for us to come to our senses and understand the balance of the world, natural and human.

C. COMMUNITY DEMOGRAPHICS

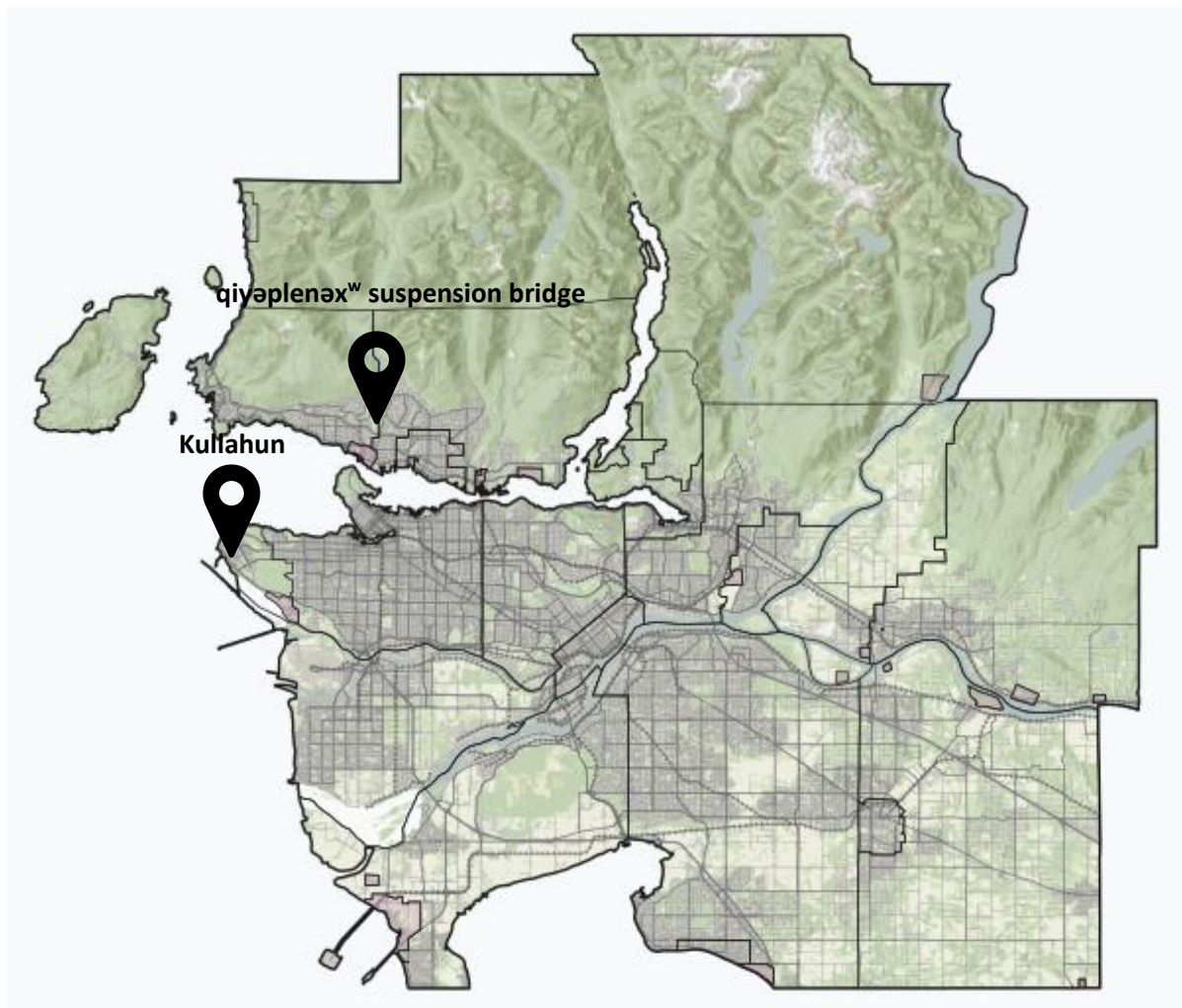
In the pre-colonial world here the indigenous lifespan was longer than the average European lifespan. Part of this demographic difference was the relative equity of the class system, which saw fewer people deprived of sustenance. The prime environmental reason was of course the incredibly high caloric yield per acre of the maritime environment, which equaled or exceeded the best yields per acre of the agricultural economy of contemporary Europe.

At the time of contact our ancestors' medicine was at least the equal of contemporary European medicine. We had herbal medicines identified for the specific ailments of specific organs, we knew and prepared complex medicinal treatments for cancer, and our ancestors also practiced brain surgery. One of our important trade commodities was medicinal herbs.

Precolonial Population > 25,000

Oral Histories recall that the great earthquake of 1700 was followed by a wave of plagues; flu – to which we had no immunity, measles twice, and smallpox. Using mortality rates for these pandemics and working backwards from the census population of 1847 the pre-colonial population was approximately 25,000.

This figure of 25,000 corresponds with the minimal estimate of population generated by the theory that it takes 100 people to sustain one elite warrior in a rich, productive environment. In 1792 when the Spanish arrived we maintained Kullahun - a fort at what is now Marine Drive and Agronomy Road in UBC, another fort where the qiyəplenəx^w suspension bridge is now, seven fortified villages; Musqueam, Cesnam, Ayalmuthx^w, Snaq', Homalchinsən, Tseil-Wataugh, and a last of all – a fortified village, whose name I forget, on what is now the Barnet Highway, where our great, great, great, great, great, great, grandmother performed the water calming ceremony for the English Explorers who were there with Captain Vancouver.



The fort had a garrison and a strike force comprised of twenty fast attack canoes stationed on the beach. With a crew of 11 per canoe this would have required 220 men in their physical prime. These men were drawn from a militia manned by fit youngsters entering maturity, young men who had come to their senses, who could follow orders, think independently, and accept severe physical discipline with exceptional endurance. Assuming a garrison of 30 could be left at Kullahun, and that the other forts and fortified village were manned by age discharged militia, and physically fit but not elite warriors qualified for the militia, the approximation of 25,000 people works when calculated by this second method.

Service in the militia was a chance to prove leadership ability. In the Musqueam Indian Band office is kai stəm, a stone that was a strength testing stone and a goal. If you could lift the stone you could play the game, and if you had come to your senses, also the militia. The game was played with a snakeskin ball. Goals were scored when the ball was placed in a divot on kai stəms' head. The rules were a cross between half court basketball, rugby and mixed martial arts. Winners took the stone home. It was in our family for more than one hundred years before it was given to the band office.

Women worked in family or longhouse groups to produce textiles. Blankets were woven from mountain goat wool blended with the fleece of "wool dogs" . Fine fabrics similar to European cloths were woven from thistle fibers. The inner bark of cedar was woven into hard wearing work clothes and raingear. Textiles generated secondary industries, extraction and trade in fullers earth, natural dyes, specialized mountain goat wool and dog wool producers. Textiles were our currency, acting as units of trade. Men produced fishing and woodworking products.

D. RESOURCE EXTRACTION AND HARVESTING

Central to resource use and harvesting was the idea that the resource was a living thing with a soul. Whether the resource was fish or stone our ancient laws directed us to consider our resource with respect. The entrails and bones from land animals were never disposed of in water, nor were the entrails and bones of fish disposed of on land. When we harvested bark from the cedar tree we only took a thin strip, allowing the tree to recover and continue living.

Harvesting resources with ceremony and gratitude gave us time for reflection on the resource, and our impact on that living environment. There was a First Salmon ceremony where we welcomed and thanked the Salmon in all the nations of the North-West Coast cultural group.

We regulated our environment, we burned areas on the north shore mountains to encourage berry growth, we transplanted hazel trees, crabapple, cranberry, and wild species of plum, cherries, ginger, rice, and medicinal plants to create forest gardens. We designed and built oyster and clam beds that are still productive hundreds, even a thousand years later.

The health and maturity of the environment in the 18th century, at the time of colonial contact was so rich as to be unbelievable now. The Salmon runs were in the millions, not just on the Fraser River, but on many rivers. My grandparents spoke of the north arm of the Fraser River being full from bank to bank with the flashing silver and blue of the Salmon runs, upstream and downstream as far as the eye could see. They said it looked like the river was so full you could walk across on the salmon. Flocks of birds that would darken the sky at noon with their numbers, and they would deafen you with the thunder of countless wings, and the cries of countless voices. What is now metro Vancouver supported deer, elk, black bear, grizzly bear, and lesser animals in profusion.

Nolan and I have ancestors on our great, great grandmothers' side, who lived as a small family deep in the forest and for a living they gathered, processed, and preserved medicines that are only found in old growth forests. They would trade their harvest to family members for venison, dried fish, furs, hides, stone knives, and luxury goods like beadwork and jewelry. The medicines they produced would be consumed, and the surplus would be traded onwards to biozones where they did not occur naturally.

Immense numbers of ducks were caught with nets at night flight, and in the fog. Cranes, geese, and swans were consumed too. Deer, elk, and bear were eaten. Nets and weirs were used to fish salmon. Spears were used to hunt sturgeon, halibut, and flounder. Clams were harvested and smoked. Porpoise, seals, and sea lion were taken to eat, and for use of their hides, and in the case of sea lions – to make heavy rope from their intestines.

By far the largest commodity and most valuable resource was salmon. Salmon was smoked in such volumes that centuries ago there was at times air pollution when the smoke from the multitude of processing fires was caught in an inversion layer. The smoked salmon would be traded for miles. Oolichan fish were rendered for their oil, another trade commodity.

There was also trade in utilitarian items like canoes and paddles, textiles, furs, stone for tool and ornament production, in seas shells for ritual and decorative use, stone beads, and rare feathers. Our ancestors spoke of traveling as far as Hawaii to trade. The Tahltan would travel to our territory, rest, and then travel to Hawaii. We shared several cultural characteristics with Mexico, which would only have been spread through trade.

E. ECONOMICS AND TRADE

Economics and trade were managed within the family hierarchy. Anyone with a particular skill was able to capitalize on their individual initiative. By allocating a partner share to helpers, an individual skill could be expanded into a larger initiative.

SMALL FAMILY BUSINESS

A simple example of this would be our great-great-grandmother's family who gathered, processed, and sold medicinal herbs. They were a family of four, a widowed grandmother, her widowed daughter, and the daughter's two children (one of whom was our great-great-grandmother). After the adults had lost their husbands in war, the two women set up their medicinal production business deep in the old growth forest.

MEDIUM SIZED FAMILY BUSINESS

Similar partnerships were established on individual and seasonal basis. Our grandparents would harvest, dry and trade butter clams. They would avoid beaches near communities where pollution could taint the clams. Although what is now called Point Grey had white sandy beaches on the south shore, before the jetties were built in the 1960's, there was too many people in this area, and they would travel to crescent beach to harvest untainted clams. The clams became an important trade item, so much so that relatives in distant communities might know little about Musqueam, other than the production of high-quality dried butter clams.

FAMILY HUNTING

Families would sometimes organize game drives. One example would be a family who would send women up a mountain slope before dawn to descend through a grazing area in an old burn. As the women descended the slope their scent and noise would flush the deer downslope in front of them. The men in the family would be waiting in ambush, having prepared fences to channel the game into the killing zone.

COMMUNITY RESOURCES HARVESTS

The apex trade commodity and food was salmon. Harvest and trade of the pre-colonial Salmon runs could drain an entire community of all labour sources. Our grandparents spoke of the smoke from fires used to smoke the fish creating pollution here when caught in summertime atmospheric inversions. We had industry in the pre-colonial days, we had industrial pollution too. The entire community would be involved in net fishing, weir fishing, butchering, drying, or smoking and packaging the seasonal catch.

Other species swarmed in multitudes not seen today. Our grandmother ʈəlʈələmat would fish Oolichans at əyalməx^w (Jericho Beach) by wading into the sea amongst the immense school of spawning fish, and then lift the hem of her long skirt out of the water, carry the fish to a basket on shore where she would dump them, and then wade back into the ocean for more. With the environmental degradation that accompanies industrial land use patterns the teeming oceans with millions of fish, and the immense flocks of birds that turned day into night are only distant memories now.

However, at one time the Thames River in England was dead. No fish at all. No spawning runs from the ocean. The generational chain of species had become extinct. Now health of the Thames is greatly restored. They have many returning species, and with global warming they even have sea horses now!