

## Module #4 Indigenous People of BC Pre-Colonial and Early Colonial Relations

### A. ANTIQUITY OF INDIGENOUS CULTURAL GROUPS IN BC

In BC there are six language families: Athabaskan (Dene/Carrier/Tahltan), Ktunaxa (Kootenai), Salishan (Coast Salish, Interior Salish), Tsimshianic (Tsimshian), Wakashan (Kwagiutl, Nootka), and Xaad Kil (Haida). Today the province of British Columbia recognizes 32 separate languages, and an additional 59 dialects within those six families. Under the Indian Act these communities have been divided into 199 Indian Bands on 315 Indian Reserves. Use the BC Assembly of First Nations interactive map to explore this diversity in detail: <https://www.bcafn.ca/first-nations-bc/interactive-map>.

Modern geneticists theorize that there are “Amerindians” and “Athabaskans” who migrated into North America as one population 20,000 years ago, and then diverged from one ancestral group into the two classifications about 13,000 years ago. We believe our Musqueam ancestors came here long before the ice age, and that various peoples followed.

The Cerutti Mastodon site in San Diego County California contains the remains of mastodon which were butchered by early humans in a way that left evidence on the bones and cobble stone hammers found at the site. Strontium/Thorium isotope half-life dating of this site produced a date of 130,700 years before present, which is consistent with Musqueam Oral Histories of an early presence on this continent.

There are other first nations who did arrive in later migrations, notably the Athabaskan migration which brought the Dene and Tlingit to what is now British Columbia. The Dene spread into what is now the United States over 1,000 years ago, and their modern identities include Navajo and Apache.

In British Columbia the oldest known human footprints are in Haida Gwaii, on Calvert Island, where footprints from two adults and a child were found around a fire pit. They were dated to 13,200 years before present by radiocarbon dating of the carbonized firewood. The lead archaeologists, McLaren and Fedji have also had success finding archaeological remains of antiquity under the ocean along the shores of Haida Gwaii, where the previous shoreline existed in the late Pleistocene geological epoch. Similarly, much of Musqueam’s ancestral archaeology is under the Salish Sea. With time and innovation Industrial Cultures’ Archaeology will eventually confirm the antiquity of Indigenous peoples in North America.

Over the millennia various Indigenous cultures have grown apart from some relatives and closer to others. Prior to colonial contact the ancestors of the Tsimshian lived with a material culture resembling their other Dene speaking relatives. They lived in underground houses and lived primarily as hunters. In time their community became established on the upper Skeena River, and then migrated to the coast where they have been established for more than 5,000 years. Their culture now resembles their coastal neighbours more closely than it resembles their linguistic relatives. They now follow a matrilineal clan system, live in long houses and fish.

## B. SHARED BELIEFS

Just as the ancestors of the Tsimshian adopted cultural practices through trade and intermarriage with their neighbours, there was a universal interchange between cultures along the coast and to the interior nations through the valleys. This had a leveling effect, establishing core philosophies with regional interpretations of shared teachings and beliefs.

Our belief system is what academics call “Animism”, meaning the attribution of a soul to plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena. Belief in Shamanic magic was universal. With a Squamish friend I learned that this belief system spreads way beyond the ocean.

As a cultural component of the 2010 Olympics, Xwalacktun (Rick Harry) and I went on a cultural exchange to Beijing where we worked on a project with two Mongol artists from central Asia, where geneticists say our Musqueam ancestors originated. During that time together we discussed our beliefs in the afterlife and the spirit world in relationship to our art, and the more we learned of one another’s’ cultures, the more we recognized.

Along with our Asian, Amerindian, and Athabaskan relatives, we believe that we are born, we die and transition to a parallel world, and then we are reincarnated to repeat the cycle endlessly. Just as at my grandparents Musqueam funerals we took the precaution not to leave a “ghost path”, so it was with my friend Lilly’s family from Mongolia.

When the deceased is carried from the house they are removed through a hole in the wall where windows have been removed. This is done as the soul follows the path the body took if they try to return amongst the living, and so instead of following their “ghost path” to a door where they could enter the house, they come up against the wall below the windows. The idea of spiritual transition between the living and the dead was universal amongst the nations here before Canada.

Just as our Asian relatives do, we send clothes and food to our ancestors and relatives “on the other side”. At Musqueam we engage the service of a x<sup>w</sup>althitha, a person with the ability to see the dead, trained from childhood on communication with the dead, who either come from a lineage with this ability, or who show extraordinary evidence of this ability.

Another important shared belief of Animism is that a spirit and a person can interact and become intertwined, like spirit dancing. Sometimes they enter a positive symbiotic relationship, sometimes the relationship is parasitic and unhealthy. Within the immense diversity of shared culture there is considerable leeway for interpretation of the relationship with a specific spirit for a specific person. A warrior might see a spirit guide who was a past warrior, or maybe a grizzly bear or killer whale, as a positive relationship; a healer might see that relationship as negative and destructive, preferring as a spirit guide a medicinal tree or sea creature.

Shaman of great accomplishment as healers, even to this day, draw patients from thousands of miles away. It is certain that this also occurred in the past. It is no doubt how our ancestors heard of, sought out, and received instructions in brain surgery from Mexico. The idea of a universal family with a shared culture was a pillar of pre-colonial Indigenous nations throughout the Americas.

### **C. MARRIAGE**

As a young man I was taught my genealogy going back for seven generations. I was taught that I could never court or marry any relatives descended from my family tree. Given that my relatives who are descended from the seventh generation, my great-great-great-great-great-grandparents, are now dispersed over many reserves for hundreds of miles, there were limited options for marriage.

In consideration of this circumstance, in pre-colonial times there were mostly arranged marriages. The elders of two respective families would come together to reminisce family histories and ensure eligibility for the proposed match. Once that possibility was confirmed the prospective groom would propose an appropriate gift for the bride's parents. The bride would bring, along with her personal effects, her share of house planks, her loom and textiles, and the sacred songs and rituals she had inherited from her lineage.

A wealthy bride would have her share of house planks made into a raft, and her possessions would be displayed on the raft, and she would be paddled to her new home in a canoe towing the raft. A very wealthy bride would travel in a separate canoe paddled by her brothers or slaves, accompanied by family and retainers. Poor brides would make do as best they could; yet even if they walked to their new home and carried their possessions in a basket, their rights in the marriage were not diminished.

Sometimes marriages wouldn't work out. Sometimes a bride or groom would decide on their own to end the marriage, sometimes a family would decide the marriage relationship was disrespectful and intervene to end the union. This situation might see the divorce play out in different ways.

A proud woman from a noble family would have her slaves publicly strip her house planks from her in-law's longhouse, raft them up, call her entourage together, pay witnesses to her proclamation of divorce, and scatter wealth to the onlookers, before she was escorted home. If the family decided to end a marriage they would travel to their relative's new home to hire witnesses, proclaim the divorce, and carry away the wronged family member.

The marriage would be blessed in different ways, depending on the family lineage. Some families would bless the union with masks and associated rituals. Other families might bless the union with Shamanic song and ritual. As marriages often brought together partners from diverse communities, some unions were blessed by all the ceremonies and rituals from both sides of the family.

As with all public ceremonies witnesses would be called. There would be an even number of witnesses, usually four in number. One from the brides' community, one from the grooms, and two others would be invited to attend and take the news home to two relevant communities, perhaps where some one's grandparents or other prestigious family members came from. Although our ceremonies were outlawed by Canada, they were continued in secrecy, and these ceremonies and their modern interpretations continue today in an unbroken chain from the time before the Winter Without End (the Wisconsin Glaciation).

### **D. INTER-TRIBAL WARS**

Musqueam at one time entered a marriage alliance north of here with the Pentlatch people of the Tsable River, on what is now called Vancouver Island. Together our families defended the Pentlatch interests on Quadra Island to control one of the principal routes of the Salmon run. This brought our ancestors into direct conflict with the Kwagiutl of Yaculta and Cape Mudge. Over several lifetimes there was a series of military expeditions to control this area. Musqueam involvement grew to the point where my Kwagiutl relatives today have forgotten about the Pentlatch, and speak only of Quadra as a Musqueam outpost.

Eventually trade routes decided the outcome of this conflict. Before government expeditions from the Spanish or British monarchies arrived in what is now BC, there were independent fur traders who arrived from Boston, after travelling around south America to get here. They began their trade on the west coast of Vancouver Island. The Boston traders brought muskets and gun powder, which they traded for sea otter pelts. Sea otter pelts were worth more than their weight in gold to the Chinese imperial court. The Boston traders would trade a musket, powder and shot for a pile of sea otter pelts the height of the musket muzzle.

What they didn't tell their new trading partners was that they would soon introduce a quota system, and if the indigenous traders didn't meet the quota, their villages would be shelled by shipboard cannon. This led to a great war in the Salish Sea as those communities with muskets expanded their sea otter hunts into neighbouring territories to protect their communities. We didn't have firearms yet. In the end the Pentlatch were wiped out, our great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather was killed, and we had to retreat to our stronghold in the fortress behind the qiyəplenəx<sup>w</sup> (Capilano) suspension bridge.

Our boundaries were restored by qiyəplenəx<sup>w</sup>, our great-great-great-great-great grandfather, who called in our allies and countered our lack of firearms by using night fighting, ambush, and the tides and currents our enemies did not know to restore our boundaries. This renowned warrior fought in seven major campaigns in his lifetime. You will learn more of him in a future module as the last great lawgiver to our nation.

We also fought our Cowichan relatives for təqətinəs in a war that lasted generations. təqətinəs was the summer camp that controlled the salmon runs along the South Arm of the Fraser River. qiyəplenəx<sup>w</sup> concluded this long conflict by taking the war across the water into their territory. The hostilities were concluded by the Cowichan offering qiyəplenəx<sup>w</sup> two high born noble sisters as brides, thus bringing our Cowichan relatives into our family, and so permitting their use of təqətinəs as kin.

The last great inter-tribal war we fought was beneath the walls of Fort Langley. The Kwantlen were attacked by raiders intent on controlling trade. Our scouts had noticed the fleet travel up the South Arm of the river, and had reported to Steləx<sup>w</sup>, qiyəplenəx<sup>w</sup>'s home at Musqueam. From there the militia were mobilized, and we saved our kin from Kwantlen. Nolan and I have a great-great grandmother from there, who married into our family shortly thereafter. War in pre-colonial times was resolved with marriages in place of treaties. Family bonds brought security. With the arrival of colonial powers, war soon changed.

#### **E. COLONIAL CONFRONTATION IN BC**

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For a comprehensive timeline of Indigenous colonial relations go to the Union of BC Indian Chiefs web site at, [ubcic.bc.ca](http://ubcic.bc.ca). What is now BC was one of the last places explored by colonial powers. Initial relations were friendly. In 1789 the Spanish built a fort in Nootka Sound. In 1792, first the Spanish under Galiano, and then the English under Vancouver, explored the Salish Sea. (When the Spanish moored off Ulksen [Point Grey] our Musqueam ancestors went aboard the Spanish ship and they taught each other songs. Our Elder brother Henry Charles travelled to Spain to commemorate this with the Spanish Admiralty a few years ago.) In 1793 Alexander MacKenzie reached the Pacific Ocean in Nuxalk territory; after that, things began to deteriorate. Below are select highlights of subsequent colonial confrontations.

1803 Maquinna seizes the vessel Boston in Nootka Sound

1808 Simon Fraser violates Nlaka'pamux women, steals a canoe at Kekait, and avoids arrest for theft by the Musqueam militia sent by our Musqueam great-great-great-great-great grandmother.

1811 Vessel Tonquin captured at Clayoquot after ship captain assaults chief.

1828 James Douglas captured and released in Carrier territory

1850 Newitti Village destroyed by Royal Navy

1851 Haidas capture American Vessel Susan Sturgis

1852 Cowichan crisis – gunboat dispatched; 2 Cowichan men hung

1855 - 1857 In Washington State the Haida and Tlingit conducted raids from British and Russian territory culminating in the Battle of Port Gamble where the raiders were dispersed by the USS Massachusetts. A party of 100 Tlingit warriors (and some Haida?) had threatened the town of Steilacoom, which had become the first incorporated town in Washington state in the previous year. Negotiations after the battle on cooperation of BC and Washington State to oppose First Nations from Russian claimed territories continued for several years, with international consequences.

1858 Fraser Canyon War; BC vs Nlaka'pamux – started by rape of Nlaka'pamux women by gold miners. Execution of these miners by Nlaka'pamux was second such incident. Three separate white miner militias formed. Unknown casualties on both sides. The distribution of smallpox contaminated blankets was approved by Governor Douglas to end the war.

1863 Lamalcha: Colony of BC and Royal Navy vs Lamalcha – initial Royal Navy landing party repulsed, subsequent hostilities resulted in small settler casualties and many Indigenous casualties and the destruction of Lamalcha village. The Indigenous leaders were hung in Victoria after a show trial.

1864 Chilcotin War: Alfred Waddington led a survey crew from Bute Inlet towards the interior. They raped a Tsilhqot'in woman and were executed for this crime. Eventually five Tsilhqot'in were tried and executed by the colony of British Columbia for the murder of 19 Whiteman. The province of British Columbia and the city of New Westminster apologized to the Tsilhqot'in for the executions in 2021.

1864 Ahousat Villages destroyed by gunboats

1864 Vessel Kingfisher captured in Clayoquot Sound

1865 Fort Rupert Village destroyed by gunboat