

Culture #1 The Bella Coola

Environment: North west coastal region of Canada

Location: Bella Coola BC

Subsistence: The Bella Coola - or now known as the Nuxalk (noo'hawk) were predominating a fishing, (salmon - olachen for oil) hunting and gathering society.

They were skilled in trading and advance in weaving and carving of jade and cedar goods especially Totem building. Long houses and house on high stilts were built. (Baker p.25)

Ethnographic Present - 1880's

Social Structure - Clans

Patriarchal Chiefdom - Rank and status achieved genealogically and economic competition through gift giving.

The inherited ancestral name and privileges handed down from mythical animal settlers. These ancestors had been sent to populate the region by a mystical being - Alk'ntam..

An inherited name had to be maintained economically viable through gift giving. The abilities of the family to give gifts was a way to achieve status and maintain rank. This was done through ceremonies during potlatch.

The society consisted of a predominately male hierarchy, both men and women had status through their ancestral clans.

3 secret societies (which seemed to consist of both chiefs and commoners) commoners, slaves.

Of the two secret societies

The Sisawk were the legislative component of the band maintaining the names, dances, songs, masks, etc.

The Kusiut society was believed to be in intimate contact with the mythical beings during ceremonial season.

Members of this society perform dances which they do on the behalf of and receiving the power of the being performed. The third the A'alk had by 1948 merged with the Sisawk - adding their songs.

The singing of songs validated clan exclusive rights and privileges, and were sung by specialists.

To be a specialist one had to have both an inherited rank and natural abilities.

Women would both dance and partake in a background choir type role.

The ability to sing was so important to the ceremonial life that special rituals were given to infants to bring them musical aptitude and accomplishment. The children would practice in yearly plays to help them become more skilled.

World View Ideology - basic values

Things are done in patterns of 4 - reflecting original 4 animal spirit helpers. The Eagle, Bear, Whale, and Raven. Religious beliefs are unique to the individual and are derived from ancient stories. There are two upper worlds and (possibly) 2 lower worlds, which are reversed images of the physical world. There is also a under water world. (BC Heritage Series p.22)

Sounds and movements made by the animal spirit ancestors or sounds of nature are equally important and incorporated in their songs as were the stories and dances.

The rise of music in the Bella Coola culture came from "one esoteric and exoteric" (Jeness p. 37)

The first was from a visit by a mythical being or animal that could have also passed on shamanistic

power.

It is believed that a shaman gains his powers from a mythical female - she gives her/him four songs, a name and healing powers.

Songs themselves can also possess powerful healing abilities - when given by a mythical being through mystical experiences.

Body of Material on music in this culture

It is believed by one writer, that the esoteric value of a shamans other worldly experience and the song being 'thrown into his body' as no different than Beethoven's statement that his 'canon' 'came into his head'. The ceremonial pattern is one of the singers are taught song by 'their tutelary spirits'. (Jenness p. 40)
Secular style songs were not.

Songs would also be inherited and some recomposed. Inherited songs provided status, but could be lost, if there was no one to carry on the name.

There are 10 categories of songs 5 are ceremonial. These should be considered the classical songs. The Headdress, mourning, Kusiyyut Dance, Entrance, and Hamatesa Song.

Chief Dance (60 sec. play)

Dancing songs used at ceremonies would often mimic animal movements.

The other 5 which are also communal and not ceremonial include: Love songs are more the 'popular' often composed by men consist of praise for the beloved. Love songs by women to entertain other women and are mostly to make fun of the man.

Gambling songs to assist in good luck and wear down the opponent.

Gaming are songs sung by children, as in the cats cradle string song.

Animal songs to be sung to the animal to either attract it during hunting or fishing. Like the spring salmon song.

The '*Cannibal*' Songs as with the others are songs and dances, done in costume and mask. Possession by the animal spirit can occur in which the person might bite others present, particularly if the animal spirit was an Eagle, Grizzly bear, or wolf. This is done with the beak / jaws of a wooden mask. This style of song is more of the 'folk song type. Songs telling stories of the animal '*accomplishing supernatural magical feats*' (Jenness p. 33) and events that took place in ancient *times* 'during

Shamanic songs could be used with either.