

Reinterpreting the Kwakiutl *Hamatsa* Dance As an Expression of the Apollonian and Dionysian Synthesis

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In Patterns of Culture, Ruth Benedict appropriates Nietzsche's distinction between the Apollonian and Dionysian art impulses as the model for her discussion of cultural diversity among North American Indians. However, Benedict's use of the Nietzschean model not only fails to capture the true ritual significance of the religious or spiritual practices of Kwakiutl Indians of the North West Coast, the result of which portrays the Kwakiutl as primitive savages, but it is also a crude misrepresentation of the Nietzschean model she takes herself to be adopting. While I do not think that Benedict's position is definitive of current scholarship on this topic, it is my contention that the Apollonian/Dionysian model, properly understood, yields some rather interesting insights into the religio-spiritual practices of the Kwakiutl and so is deserving of further study. This article offers an interpretation of the hamatsa dance of the Kwakiutl Winter Ceremonial as a synthesis of both Apollonian and Dionysian art impulses through which the Kwakiutl construct their ontological and moral worldview.

In *Patterns of Culture*, Ruth Benedict appropriates Nietzsche's distinction, articulated in *The Birth of Tragedy*, between the Apollonian and Dionysian art impulses as the model for her discussion of cultural diversity among North American Indians and *condemns* the Kwakiutl Indians of the Northwest Coast as Dionysian:¹

In their religious ceremonies the final thing they strove for was ecstasy. The Chief dancer... should lose normal control over himself and be rapt into another state of existence... [doing] deeds which would be terrible in a normal state. (Benedict 1959, 175)

Benedict's categorizing the Kwakiutl as Dionysian portrays them as irrational, primitive savages with a thirst for nothing but "the terrible

and the forbidden” (Benedict 1959, 179). Among the “terrible and forbidden” acts committed by the Chief dancer, the hamatsa, is cannibalism. As Benedict describes it, the hamatsa’s dance

was that of a frenzied addict enamoured of the ‘food’ that was held before him, a prepared corpse on the outstretched arms of a woman. On great occasions the Cannibal ate the bodies of slaves who had been killed for the purpose. (Benedict 1959, 178)

It is thus perhaps not at all surprising that Benedict would interpret such acts of cannibalism as expressions of destruction and excess and view the Kwakiutl as little more than the embodiment of Dionysian licentiousness.

In stark contradistinction to Benedict’s rather crude and uncharitable portrayal of the Kwakiutl, however, Stanley Walens argues that the “transcendental feelings the Kwakiutl seek are not in the least Dionysian, but are Apollonian. The Kwakiutl seek not excess but order” (Walens 1981, 41). Walens’ suggestion notwithstanding, it is difficult to reconcile the Dionysian frenzy evident in the Kwakiutl Winter Ceremonial² with the so-called quest for Apollonian order. It is my contention that the Kwakiutl cannot and should not be viewed as exclusively Dionysian, nor should they be viewed as exclusively Apollonian. Nevertheless, I will argue that the application of the Apollonian/Dionysian model to the Kwakiutl is not entirely misplaced.

The task of this paper is to offer a *re*-interpretation of the hamatsa dance of the Kwakiutl Winter Ceremonial as a *synthesis* of both Apollonian and Dionysian art impulses through which the Kwakiutl construct their ontological and moral worldview. I begin by outlining Benedict’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s Apollonian/Dionysian distinction and her reasons for adopting this model for her discussion of the Kwakiutl. I start with and challenge Benedict’s position not because I think it is definitive of current scholarship on the Kwakiutl (or on North American Indians more generally), but rather because I think that the Apollonian/Dionysian model, properly understood, yields some rather interesting insights into the religious or spiritual³ practices of the Kwakiutl and so is deserving of further study. Having outlined Benedict’s interpretation of the model, I turn briefly to Nietzsche’s

own discussion of the Apollonian/Dionysian model as a *synthesis* of the two art impulses. The Apollonian/Dionysian synthesis, for Nietzsche, represents an artistic expression through which the Greeks not only came to understand themselves and their place in the world, but also cultivated meaning and value for their lives. With a proper appreciation of the Nietzschean model in hand, I will argue that the Kwakiutl religious activities might also be better understood as a *synthesis* of both the Apollonian and Dionysian art impulses rather than as exclusively expressions of Dionysian excess and debauchery or, to the contrary, as strict representations of Apollonian order as suggested by Benedict and Walens respectively. I then trace out the structure of the Kwakiutl ontological and moral worldview through an examination of the metaphorical expressions of the Winter Ceremonial. To this end, I first consider the significance of the Winter Ceremonial itself and its “central shamanistic theme of overcoming death” (Goldman 1975, 99). Next, I focus specifically on the hamatsa dance as a metaphorical expression representing “the manifestation of all the forces that can destroy society” (Walens 1981, 15). It is in and through the ritual re-enactment of the myths of original acquisition of supernatural powers that the Kwakiutl see themselves as appropriating primal, supernatural powers for the protection of the community. I will look at one of these original myths as well as examine the significance of the ritual re-enactment of the original myths in structuring the Kwakiutl ontology and morality. In conclusion, I shall look at how the Kwakiutl worldview is dynamic, continually incorporating and appropriating new cultural and life experiences, and show that the Kwakiutl are anything but “a vanished civilization” (Benedict 1959, 175).

The Apollonian and the Dionysian

Explicitly referencing the Apollonian/Dionysian duality outlined by Nietzsche in his seminal work on Greek tragedy, Benedict centers her discussion of the cultural diversity among aboriginal peoples around what she suggests are “two diametrically opposed ways of arriving at the values of existence” (Benedict 1959, 78). The goal of the Dionysian, argues Benedict, is to achieve excess:

he seeks to attain in his most valued moments escape from the boundaries imposed upon him by his five senses, to break through into another order of experience.... The closest analogy to the emotions he seeks is drunkenness, and he values the illuminations of frenzy.

(Benedict 1959, 79)

In pointed opposition to the Dionysian instinct, the Apollonian strives for rationality, order, and “has often little idea of the nature of such [Dionysian] experiences.... He keeps the middle road, stays within the known map, [and] does not meddle with disruptive psychological states” (Benedict 1959, 79). Benedict argues that the Kwakiutl dance songs celebrate Dionysian “madness as a supernatural portent” (Benedict 1959, 176) and that the “initiation of the Cannibal dancer was peculiarly calculated to express the Dionysian purport of the Northwest Coast culture” (Benedict 1959, 177). A superficial glance at their religious practices, such as the cannibalistic frenzy of the hamatsa dancer, for example, does indeed seem to give merit to Benedict’s classification of the Kwakiutl as Dionysian. It is interesting to notice, however, that Benedict herself indicates that the purpose of the Kwakiutl Winter Ceremonial is to “‘tame’ the initiate who returned full of ‘the power that destroys man’s reason’ and whom it was necessary to bring back to the level of secular existence” (Benedict 1959, 177). That the Winter Ceremonial seeks to “restore” the initiate to the “normal” order of things would seem to suggest that, while there are certainly Dionysian elements in their religious ceremonies, the attainment of Dionysian frenzy is *not* the primary end to which the Kwakiutl are oriented and thus the Kwakiutl cannot and should not be categorized as *exclusively* Dionysian.

As I have noted above, Walens suggests that the Kwakiutl, through the Winter Ceremonial, primarily seek Apollonian order rather than Dionysian excess. As we have seen, however, and as will be spelled out in more detail below, it is difficult to entirely overlook the Dionysian elements evident in Kwakiutl ritual activities. Thus, it would seem that the Kwakiutl can neither be classified as exclusively Apollonian nor as exclusively Dionysian. Perhaps, then, the pseudo-Nietzschean model Benedict employs is itself misplaced. As Benedict herself admits, not all of Nietzsche’s discussion of the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy is

applicable to her analysis of the cultural diversity among North American Indians:

The fragments I have quoted are faithful descriptions, but there were refinements of the types in Greece that do not occur among the [North American Indians], and among these latter, again, there are refinements that did not occur in Greece. (Benedict 1959, 79)

Not only does Benedict's depiction of the Apollonian and Dionysian fall markedly short of being "faithful" to Nietzsche's presentation of the model, it is also important to note that the Greeks themselves did not employ the Apollonian/Dionysian distinction as a means of self-understanding. Rather, it is a model imposed by Nietzsche as a hermeneutic tool for interpreting Greek tragedy: "*We have borrowed these names from the Greeks* who reveal the profound mysteries of their view of art to those with insight, not in concepts, admittedly, but through the penetratingly vivid figures of their gods" (*BT* 1, my emphasis).⁴ Strictly speaking, the "types" Apollonian and Dionysian, as discussed by Nietzsche, do not occur in ancient Greece. Benedict's motivation for employing the Apollonian/Dionysian model, however, is not that she thinks the North American Indians she examines can be equated with the Ancient Greeks, but rather that she takes the model to highlight cultural differentiations between various aboriginal groups. Nevertheless, although there are cultural differentiations among the North American Indians that might be abstracted and classified as either Apollonian or Dionysian, Benedict's use of the model not only fails to capture the true significance of the Kwakiutl religious practices, the result of which portrays them as primitive savages, but it is also a crude *misrepresentation* of the Nietzschean model she takes herself to be adopting. While Benedict is correct to note that the North American Indians cannot be equated with the Ancient Greeks, appreciating the Apollonian/Dionysian model as Nietzsche intended it to be understood will, I contend, provide a model for a more charitable and insightful understanding of Kwakiutl religious practices.

As noted above, Nietzsche's analysis of Greek tragedy focuses on the *synthesis* of the Apollonian and Dionysian art impulses through which the Greeks gave meaning to their lives and structured their worldview.

Apollo and Dionysos are, according to Nietzsche, both art deities grounded in *nature*, from which *all life* springs (BT 1–2). Through Apollo, on the one hand, we understand things such as order, restraint, individuality, rationality, and the human desire for privacy. Through Dionysos, on the other hand, we understand ecstasy, community, motion, melody, chaos, animalistic unity, friendship, and music. Nietzsche argues that it is in and through Dionysian intoxication that the human soul awakens and experiences the gods, forgets its individuality, and is reconciled with nature and its fellow human beings:

not only is the bond⁵ between human beings renewed by the magic of the Dionysiac, but nature, alienated, inimical, or subjugated, celebrates once more her festival of reconciliation with her lost son, humankind. (BT 1)

The *union* of the Apollonian and Dionysian art impulses, claims Nietzsche, is key to understanding the world: we grasp a plurality of individual things in the world, which is represented through Apollonian art, and we also grasp that all the individual parts of the world fit together in “one world,” which is represented through the unity of Dionysian art. In other words, for Nietzsche, seeing the world as individuated is a consequence of the Apollonian impulse, while the sense of the world’s unity is a reflection of the Dionysian impulse. For the Greeks, on Nietzsche’s view, the drama on the stage is an Apollonian expression of the Dionysian experience:

This insight leads us to understand Greek Tragedy as a Dionysian chorus which [ever anew]⁶ discharges itself in an Apolline world of images. Thus the choral passages which are interwoven with the tragedy are, to a certain extent, the womb of the entire so-called dialogue; i.e., of the whole world on stage, the drama proper. (BT 8)

This last point, that the Dionysian chorus *ever anew* discharges itself is, we shall see, central to understanding Kwakiutl thought in the sense that the Kwakiutl view the world as dynamic and ever-changing. That is, the world eternally *re-creates* itself and the Winter Ceremonial of the Kwakiutl can be understood, I contend, as an Apollonian expression of the Dionysian experience.

Although I do not have the space to give it the treatment it properly deserves, it is important here to caution that Nietzsche's discussion of the Apollonian/Dionysian synthesis is representative of a Western worldview and as such we should worry that examining the Kwakiutl's behaviour in these terms fails to represent them as they understand themselves (cf. Walens 1981, 3). However, given our embeddedness in Western culture, it seems to me that this is an unavoidable limitation of any inquiry into a non-Western culture and does not necessarily imply that all such inquiries are wholly sterile or abortive. As we shall see, the model I will outline is in itself without content save the appropriation of power through artistic expression for the purpose of giving meaning and value to human lives, which is precisely what the Winter Ceremonial, I will be arguing, purports to do.

Before moving on to a discussion of the Winter Ceremonial itself, however, it is worth highlighting some of the advantages the Nietzschean model I have been outlining has over Benedict's. As I have noted, the Apollonian/Dionysian model is importantly a *synthesis* of the two impulses, and does not, *contra* Benedict, represent two *opposing* value systems. Through this *union*, the Apollonian/Dionysian model can provide us with a useful hermeneutic tool through which we might understand the power relations between the human and other inhabitants of the universe expressed in the Kwakiutl religious activities without blatantly imposing Western values and prejudices—an inescapable flaw of Benedict's presentation of the model, for instance. It is crucial to emphasise this last point: that both the Apollonian and Dionysian impulses are grounded in nature and allow for the expression and affirmation of both *inter-human* relationships as well as, and more importantly for North American Indians, *human and other-than-human* relationships (cf. Walens 1981, 3). The Kwakiutl, not unlike Nietzsche,⁷ view the world (nature) in terms of power relations. Walens, for example, observes:

Every human activity and characteristic is in some way participant in the world of power; similarly, every animal, spirit, and plant being participates to some degree in the possession and exercise of supernatural power; and finally, all world events are the consequences of the exercise of supernatural power. In brief, the entire world is directly involved

in the acquisition, the use, and the experience of supernatural power (Walens 1981, 28).

It was in and through the performance of tragedy that the Greeks were able to exercise the supernatural powers at play in their world with the aim of providing meaning and value to a horribly violent and seemingly senseless existence. Similarly, it is through artistic performance that the Kwakiutl derive meaning and value for their lives. As Helen Codere notes, the “chief characteristic of the winter dance... is that it did dramatize and make *imaginative play* with what were to them the horrors of physical violence” (Codere 1950, 112, my emphasis). Jim McDowell adds that this dramatization and imaginative play with the horrors of existence “reaffirmed basic cultural values and transmitted them from one generation to the next, giving continuity to the social order” (McDowell 1997, 219). With these considerations in mind, and with specific attention to the hamatsa dance, I will now turn to a discussion of the Kwakiutl Winter Ceremonial to show how these religious activities might be understood as an expression of the Apollonian/Dionysian synthesis.

The Winter Ceremonial and the Hamatsa Dance

The Kwakiutl year is divided into two seasons: *Bakoos*, the summer season which runs from March to November; and *Tsetseka*, the Winter Ceremonial, or supernatural season, which runs from November to March (cf. Rohner 1986, 106). Walens observes that the

summer season is given over to secular organization. Group membership, daily life, food-gathering, and other activities are organized along idioms of locality, lineality, coresidence, friendship, and common interest. (Walens 1981, 44)

The Winter Ceremonial season, on the contrary, marks a complete reversal of the Kwakiutl social structure:

New ceremonial names were used and new songs were sung; the use of *Bakoos* names was forbidden, and serious penalties were imposed on those who neglected or forgot this prohibition.... The whole system was altered to conform to the individual's relationship with the spirits. (Rohner 1986, 106)⁸

Most, if not all, work was conducted during the summer season, excepting only that which was absolutely “necessary for survival itself or for the Ceremonials (Rohner 1986, 106). Gloria Cranmer Webster notes that “together all of these activities [summer and winter] ensured that each individual group enjoyed a healthy sense of identity” (Webster 1992, 25). As we shall see, however, the work that the Kwakiutl considered *most* crucial for ensuring their survival and sense of identity was that involved in the activities of the Winter Ceremonial.

According to Codere, “the sacred aspect of the [Winter] Ceremonials derived from the belief that a number of supernatural beings came to visit the village in wintertime” (Codere 1990, 372). With winter comes darkness and, as Irving Goldman suggests, darkness, for the Northwest Coast Indians, represents death and the arena in which the struggle for life is to be fought (Goldman 1975, 98). The Kwakiutl, among others, thus saw winter as the long night, the descent into the darkness of death. Goldman writes

The Kwakiutl Winter Ceremonial is a kind of shamanistic festival, a dazzling display of powers, a pitting of human powers against the powers of alien supernatural beings, or, as the people often say, a time to see what the supernatural powers will do. (Goldman 1975, 99)

A central theme of this “shamanistic” festival is the ritual overcoming of death, which can be understood as a metaphorical expression of “that side of the culture that faces the coming of the night” (Goldman 1975, 99). As noted above, the Kwakiutl understand the world as a primal, supernatural power. The Winter Ceremonial consists of a series of contests between persons and spirits through which the Kwakiutl interact with supernatural powers within this world of power, attempting to exercise the supernatural powers to their own advantage. The Winter Ceremonial, Walens writes,

is the keystone to the entire interaction between mankind and the supernatural, between the bestial and humane facets of human nature, and between the cosmic forces of creation and those of destruction. It both represents and is the moment of utter taming of those forces that would send the world into the chaos of uncontrollable rapaciousness.
(Walens 1981, 15–6)

In other words, the Kwakiutl view the appropriation and transformation of this primitive, supernatural power as being essential for the survival of their community.

Unlike Western thought, where causal relationships are typically understood linearly in terms of space and time, “Kwakiutl principles of causal relationships operate not through systemic, syntagmatic contiguities, but through metaphorical, paradigmatic correspondences” (Walens 1981, 22). Opposing forces such as good and evil, creation and destruction, human and supernatural, for examples, all form a bond of interdependence within this world of power, and so are something more than simply binary opposites. The Kwakiutl see the supernatural powers as real and they appropriate and transform the powers through “simulated actions, by establishing identity with the sources of power” (Goldman 1975, 105). In particular, it is through the simulated activity of eating that the Kwakiutl establish an identity with the supernatural powers.

All beings eat—some eating other beings—in order to survive. McDowell notes that the “Kwakiutl believed that humans survive only because the spirits gave them food. In return, people were obligated to give lives, in the form of human souls, to the spirits” (McDowell 1997, 230). As the Kwakiutl see it, much like humans rely on the supernatural powers for survival, the supernatural spirits “need to have human beings perform their rituals for them, to keep their sacred objects, to free their souls for rebirth” (Walens 1981, 15). In other words, the human relationship with the supernatural spirits is reciprocal, forming a cycle of death and rebirth within a bond of interdependence; just as the spirits sacrifice themselves so that humans may survive, so too must humans sacrifice human lives and human flesh to secure the continued survival of the supernatural spirits. It is in and through the ritual re-enactment of the myths of original acquisition, like the hamatsa dance which focuses on the universal activity of eating, that this reciprocal relationship is sustained and the Kwakiutl form a metaphorical basis upon which they structure their worldview.

As Goldman indicates, although there are many traditions and rituals among the Kwakiutl (with new ones always being incorporated),

they differ only in detail and all share the common theme of an initiate being removed from the human realm and introduced to the supernatural power before being re-captured by his co-religionists (Goldman 1975, 88). The major ritual of the Kwakiutl Winter Ceremonial is the hamatsa (cannibal) dance, which celebrates the “the most formidable and frightening of supernatural of beings, *Baxbakualanuxsiwae*, Man Eater at the Mouth of the River” (Goldman 1975, 94). According to Walens, the hamatsa dance represents the “ultimate projection of the power of primal hunger” (Walens 1981, 15). Before looking at the ritual re-enactment of the hamatsa dance, however, it will be worthwhile to consider one of the myths surrounding the origin of the hamatsa.

Just as there are many variations of Kwakiutl traditions and rituals, so too are there several versions of the origin of the hamatsa itself. Franz Boas retells the legend of the origin of the hamatsa as told by the Naqoaqtoq.⁹ The chief of the Awikenox tribe, Nanwaqawe, “had four sons who were mountain-goat hunters” (Boas 1970, 396). Nanwaqawe had a craving for mountain-goat meat, and his sons offered to go on a hunt so that they might bring home some meat to satiate his craving. Before leaving, however, Nanwaqawe gave his sons a stern warning: “do not enter the house of the smoke which looks like blood, else you will never return home. It is the house of *Baxbakualanuxsiwae*” (Boas 1970, 396).¹⁰ When they arrived at the house of blood-coloured smoke, Nanwaqawe’s sons wanted to “test” their father’s advice. Upon arriving at the door they found it open and a woman called them in: “I am rooted to the floor. I will help you. This house into which you came belongs to *Baxbakualanuxsiwae*. Now do as I tell you and take notice of what you see” (Boas 1970, 397). The boys were told to dig a hole in the corner of the house and to place red hot stones inside it. The woman also told them that when *Baxbakualanuxsiwae* came home he would dance wearing his mask. When they had finished preparing everything they heard a whistling sound and were told to sit. The woman, known as *qominoga* and whose job it was to get food for *Baxbakualanuxsiwae*, said: “I will say that I found food, [so] that he may not see what we have planned” (Boas 1970, 397). *Baxbakualanuxsiwae*, whose body was covered all over with mouths, entered the house crying “Hap, hap,

hap!” [Eat, eat, eat!] and then laid down on his back. When he arose, he ran around the house four times crying “Hap, hap, hap!” before going into the bedroom. The four young men sprang the trap and Baxbakualanuxsiwae fell into the hole and died. One of the sons took all of the masks, the hamatsa pole and whistles, and was taught Baxbakualanuxsiwae’s song by the woman. The chief’s sons then all went home and later returned to Baxbakualanuxsiwae’s house with their father. It turns out that the woman, qominoqa, is the chief’s daughter, which helps to explain why she taught his sons “the secrets of the ceremonial of Baxbakualanuxsiwae” (Boas 1970, 397). Because she was rooted to the ground, however, the woman was unable to return home with her father and brothers, and instead told them to give a winter dance as soon as they got home. One of the Chief’s sons, Tawixanaye, was to disappear and be the hamatsa, and another was to be qominoqa and retrieve the food. The woman also advised the chief and his sons of the cleansing rituals that they must perform: “For four years the Hamatsa shall do no work, else he will die early” (Boas 1970, 399). The ritual re-enactment of the origin myth of the hamatsa, to which I now turn, mirrors many of the thematic elements just described.

The entire Kwakiutl community is involved in the Winter Ceremonial either as spectators or as actors. Social status, however, plays a vital role in determining membership within the Dance societies. All of the dances are considered property by the Kwakiutl, and one must acquire the right to perform the dances. The right to perform the hamatsa dance, for example, is restricted to males and is either inherited from one’s parents or is received through marriage as a dowry from one’s father-in-law (cf. Rohner 1986, 106). Douglas Cole notes that while marriage among the Kwakiutl is considered a purchase, “the object bought was not only the woman but the right to membership in her clan for future children of the couple” (Cole 1991, 148). Apart from inheriting or purchasing the right to perform the hamatsa dance, one can obtain the right to dance through victory in war: a warrior has the right to claim his victims name, position, family crests, and privileges as his own (cf. Codere 1950, 110).

The re-enactment of the hamatsa dance begins with the supernatural

being abducting the initiate who has been “sacrificed” to him. The power being takes the initiate into the woods where he is detained for a period of up to four months. In reality, according to Wayne Suttles, “an initiate was selected by the person who had acquired the right to the performance, and he ... was taken off to some isolated spot ... and taught the songs and dances and how to play the role” (Suttles 1991, 97). Many of the actions performed by the hamatsa are intended to horrify the uninitiated and in this regard Benedict is certainly correct in suggesting that the “initiation of the Cannibal Dancer was peculiarly calculated to express the Dionysian purport of the [Kwakiutl]” (Benedict 1959, 177). Goldman’s description of the condition of the hamatsa echoes this suggestion: “the condition of possession is considered a form of madness, of being bereft of the senses, of being wild and uncontrollable like a released force or passion” (Goldman 1975, 94). While the initiate was detained in the woods, “people occasionally heard a whistle and cry of “Hap, hap, hap!” (Eat, eat, eat!), signifying his craving for human flesh” (Suttles 1991, 97). (James Sewid adds that the whistles were meant to be the voices of supernatural spirits (cf. Sewid 1969, 83).) When the hamatsa finally returned he would enter the house through the roof, “and in a mad frenzy he ran around biting people, removing bits of flesh from their arms or chest” (Suttles 1991, 97). Suttles indicates that others who have previously been initiated might also become frenzied upon the hamatsa’s entry into the house (Suttles 1991, 97). According to Boas, there are 12 healers (shaman), called *heliga* or *salalia*, who run up to the hamatsa with “swinging rattles, the sound of which is supposed to pacify the hamatsa” (Boas 1970, 439). As well as being pacified by the rattles, the hamatsa is progressively brought back to a “normal” state through the use of songs and fire—the hamatsa enters wearing nothing but hemlock branches which are burnt off of him (Suttles 1991, 99). Having returned to a normal state, the hamatsa disappears once again before re-appearing, accompanied by a woman, dancing calmly. Suttles highlights two central features demonstrated by the performance, both of which I have alluded to above: “first, that the initiate had received great power from the non-human being that possessed him, and second, that the ritual

procedures could control this power and restore the initiate to human society” (Suttles 1991, 97).

Understandably, it is difficult at first to see how the frenzied activities of the Cannibal Dancer lead to morality. Thus, it is important to consider the ritual significance of the hamatsa dance as a metaphorical expression of the Kwakiutl worldview. Goldman notes that because

the *hamatsa* is a human being, he is literally a cannibal. His state of being is, nevertheless, ambiguous. He is human, but he is also mad, and possessed by the Man Eater Spirit, and it is the spirit that is the devourer of men. (Goldman 1975, 96)

Suttles and Boas both suggest that although the biting is real, the bits of flesh consumed by the hamatsa are actually cut off by a knife (Suttles 1991, 97; Boas 1970, 441). Moreover, there is “so much sleight-of-hand involved in the Winter Dance that it is uncertain whether human flesh was actually swallowed or simply hidden somehow” (Suttles 1991, 97; see also Boas 1970, 441 and Holm 1990, 381). Benedict notes that strict count is kept of the mouthfuls of flesh consumed by the hamatsa and that upon completion of the dance he is “given emetics until he had voided them. He often [does] not swallow them at all” (Benedict 1959, 178). The vomiting, Goldman contends, ritually signifies the resurrection and cleansing of the human being (Goldman 1975, 96). As we have seen, the myth of the origin of the hamatsa demands a period of four years before the hamatsa is allowed to return to work. Although there are variations as to the actual length of time involved, the Kwakiutl do separate the hamatsa from the community for the purposes of “ritual cleansing” upon completion of his initiation. Benedict notes that the hamatsa is detained in a small room during this isolation period and that upon re-entry into society he has to relearn how to walk, speak, and eat (Benedict 1959, 179). Simply, the hamatsa has to be re-socialized after completing his initiation.

The Kwakiutl ontology is structured around the re-enactment of the original myths of acquisition of supernatural powers. The hamatsa dance as a ceremony of symbolic rebirth

resembles the socialization of children.... Like the first *hamatsa*, [children] come into the world naked, they are reared by a female assistant,

they dance in the womb and live off their mother's flesh, their hunger cannot be denied, they are ignorant of proper behaviour, and they will eventually devour their parents wealth. (McDowell 1997, 233)

Walens adds that the "*hamatsa* ceremony recapitulates the entire process of birth. The *hamatsa* is as much in a state of pre-existence as is the soul of an unborn child" (Walens 1981, 158). Simply, all humans, on the Kwakiutl worldview, are cannibals, feeding off of the flesh of their mothers, entering the physical realm from the spiritual, and in need of socialization. It is the ritual taming of the *hamatsa* that then leads to the Kwakiutl understanding of morality. Walens writes:

hunger is power, but the knowledge of how to control hunger is an even greater power. The *hamatsa's* hunger is fearsome; but it is the same hunger felt by every human, and thus every human has the power to learn how to control it.... Morality, the force of controlled social action, the strength of ritual, can conquer even a Cannibal's hunger. In fact, ritual can totally alter the impetus of the cannibal's hunger, changing it from a destructive act to an affirmation of self-control, an act of creative power. The winter ceremonials prove that no matter how terrible the power of hunger, no matter how many fearsome guises it assumes, no matter how many masks it wears, and no matter how many voices it speaks with, morality will be the ultimate victor. So long as humans have the knowledge to use food correctly, they need never fear hunger nor its awful accompaniment, death.

(Walens 1981, 162).

Morality, for the Kwakiutl, always wins out in the end. That morality, which is an Apollonian trait on the model I have been suggesting, is the ultimate end to which they strive through the ritual activities of the Winter Ceremonials shows that the Kwakiutl cannot be classified exclusively as Dionysian. At the same time, however, the nature of the Winter Ceremonial activities undoubtedly exhibits elements of Dionysian destruction and excess. Thus, if we do choose to employ the Apollonian/Dionysian model while discussing the Kwakiutl, their religious activities must be considered as a *synthesis* of both artistic impulses.

A “vanished civilization”?

As I noted above, the Apollonian/Dionysian synthesis model outlined by Nietzsche is one that expresses itself in an ever-changing world. I will now consider some examples of how the Kwakiutl themselves have responded to new cultural and life experiences, most notably contact with the Western world, and how they have incorporated these experiences into their moral and ontological worldview.

Benedict claims that the Kwakiutl culture fell into ruin during the late nineteenth century, and thus represents a “vanished civilization” (Benedict 1959, 175). To be sure, their religious and secular activities have altered dramatically since contact with the Western world, most forcefully subsequent to Canadian federal legislation in the form of the Indian Acts of 1885 and 1915 which prohibited Winter Ceremonial and potlatch activities (cf. Holm 1990, 378). The prohibition of the Winter Ceremonial and potlatch activities, coupled with heightened efforts to convert Natives to Christianity, resulted in stripping the Kwakiutl of their self-identity.¹¹ It is both interesting and important to note the irony inherent in these conversion efforts, however. As Webster puts the point,

The introduction of Christianity must have been a confusing time for our people. At the same time missionaries like Hall¹² were preaching, “Thou shalt not steal,” settlers were helping themselves to large tracts of land with the approval of the government and without regard for the rights of the indigenous people. While Hall was excoriating the Kwagu’ for the ceremonial eating of human flesh, he was encouraging them to become participants in a church ritual that involved some kind of symbolic cannibalism. While Hall was telling people that, “It is better to give than to receive,” he was also telling them that lavish gift giving at potlatches was sinful and heathenish. (Webster 1992, 29)

Nevertheless, the prohibition of Kwakiutl religious activity, and the federal attempts at replacing it with Western religious rituals, by no means implies that the Kwakiutl have simply “vanished.” Rather, the Kwakiutl culture is dynamic and as such is continually evolving and appropriating new cultural and life experiences. “If a culture is alive,” notes Webster, “it does not remain static. Ours is definitely alive and changes as the times require” (Webster 1992, 36).

The Western idea of eternal truths or a, so to speak, return to paradise, is misplaced as far as concerns the Kwakiutl. Goldman argues that origin myths commonly share the “Orphic idea that life in its growth moves out and away from its primal sources” (Goldman 1975, 106). In re-enacting the myths of original acquisition of supernatural power the Kwakiutl are not trying to regain that which they formerly (or originally) possessed, but rather “have perhaps the more constructive benefit of setting forth the cultural metaphysics, using the language of visual symbols and the irresistible power of mimesis to impress upon all the meaning of Being” (Goldman 1975, 106). Importantly, although the Kwakiutl worldview is dynamic rather than static, the ritual re-enactment of original myths retains continuity with the past and emphasises the importance of transformation and self-purification. All of these elements are evident in Kwakiutl responses to the cultural conflict arising from the European (Western) influence on traditional Kwakiutl society. For example, McDowell suggests that Baxbakualanuxsiwae represents colonial European society. Just as the hamatsa “is tamed and vomited from the Cannibal, reborn with new social means, so too shall the natives be absolved from the deleterious white rule to return to their own ceremonial and economic activity” (McDowell 1997, 210). The Winter Ceremonials have also been used as a form of therapy

for people suffering problems with drug and alcohol abuse. After four days of rigorous initiation, a person is supposed to have visions of his powers, hear his “spirit song” and emerge with a new, positive outlook on life. (McDowell 1997, 210)

The significance of using the Ceremonials as a therapeutic tool is, of course, the metaphorical death and rebirth of the patient. Ronald Rohner, however, notes that the Winter Ceremonials are no longer produced, save in toned down and abbreviated versions (Rohner 1986, 110). There is, nevertheless, a renewed interest in traditional Kwakiutl art forms, which, argues Rohner, “is due to the enthusiastic response of white consumers” (Rohner 1986, 210). McDowell echoes this sentiment suggesting that “nowadays, the ceremonial dance has even become something of a tourist attraction” (McDowell 1997, 211). But this renewed interest in Kwakiutl tradition is far from being merely

limited to white consumerism and thrill-seeking tourists. Rather, as Webster points out,

Few in the 1980s learned the Kwakiutl language at home; English replaced the Kwakiutl language in the usage of most people under 50. However, children were taught the Kwakiutl language, ceremonial dancing, and associated mythology, and the conventions of traditional art in primary school programs, which have become common since the late 1970s. The success of these programs has been in increasing cultural awareness and providing positive Indian identity in the young, rather than in revitalizing native speech and ceremonial habits (Webster 1990, 388).

So although there is a sense in which the Kwakiutl culture did fall into ruin to the extent that the ways in which the Kwakiutl celebrated the religious aspects of their culture a century ago has all but vanished, the Kwakiutl are anything but a “vanished civilization.” Rather, they are a culture that has changed with the times, finding new ways to retain continuity with the traditional past while adapting and transforming to an ever-changing world.¹³

Conclusion

McDowell argues that the mythological understanding of ourselves represents a

state of sacredness ... so powerful that it can engender fear and trembling in the depths of the soul. It stems from awe at the spirit-world's power, from awareness of personal insignificance, and from the act of transcending everyday reality. (McDowell 1997, 232)

If what I have been arguing is correct, then this sentiment is as true for the Kwakiutl as it was for the Ancient Greeks. Classical Greek tragedy, as Nietzsche understood it, is a synthesis of Apollonian and Dionysian art impulses, and it was through the “ritual *re-enactment*” of tragedy that the Greeks were able to face the tragic truth of their existence and find the strength to embrace and celebrate life in spite of its horrors. The Greeks structured their worldview and ultimately their morality through the performance of tragedy. The Kwakiutl, like the ancient Greeks, view the world as a primal, supernatural power. It is in and

through the ritual re-enactment of the myths of original acquisition of this supernatural power that the Kwakiutl structure their ontology and morality. Viewed under the Apollonian/Dionysian model, the Kwakiutl, in their Winter Ceremonial in particular, undeniably exhibit elements of Dionysian destruction and excess. Nevertheless, the end to which they carry out their religious ceremonies is that of Apollonian order. Thus, the Kwakiutl Winter Ceremonials might, like Greek tragedy, be understood as a *synthesis* of both the Apollonian and Dionysian artistic impulses, and not, as Benedict suggests, strictly Dionysian. Simply, the Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies do not represent “two diametrically opposed ways of arriving at the value of existence.” Rather, it is the *union* of both elements that allows for the artistic expression of the value of existence while structuring a moral worldview. The Apollonian/Dionysian model, however, evolved from a Western perspective and as such can only fail to exhaustively express Kwakiutl religious activities as they understand it themselves. Nevertheless, a proper understanding of the synthesis model does offer a more enriching understanding of Kwakiutl religious practices. After all, inquiry from a Western perspective cannot but examine a non-Western culture using Western paradigms. In this paper I have tried to show that the Apollonian/Dionysian model is one such paradigm that might fairly depict Kwakiutl religious practices without imposing blatantly derogatory Western stereotypes.¹⁴

End Notes

1. The Northwest Coast Indians for the most part resided in the coastal region of what is now British Columbia—more specifically, from Alaska down to Puget Sound in the northern region of Washington State. Audrey Hawthorn notes that although the seven major tribes inhabiting this area shared in a common culture, the tribes were linguistically distinct and that customs and practices varied between the tribes (Hawthorn 1967, 4). The regional breakdown of these seven major tribes is as follows: “In the north lived the Tlingit and Tsimshian tribes. The Haida inhabited the Queen Charlotte Islands. On the west coast of Vancouver Island lived the Nootka, while the Kwakiutl [who refer to themselves as *Kwakwaka-wakw* (McDowell 1997, 132)] shared the north region of Vancouver Island and the mainland directly opposite. The Salish occupied the delta of the Fraser River and some southern parts of Vancouver

Island, and were distributed southward down the Washington coast; one of the groups of Salish people occupied territory to the north, near the Bella Coola River" (Hawthorn 1967, 4).

2. According to Bill Holm, the Kwakiutl name for the Winter Ceremonial is *ééqa* (pl. *éééqa*) and Cedar Bark Dance in English. The *ééqa* was designated the Winter Ceremonial by anthropologists (Holm 1990, 378).
3. The term "religious" is, to be sure, loaded with Western connotations. While "spiritual" might then be a better descriptor I have chosen to use "religious" throughout the paper both to remain consistent throughout and because much of the literature on the Kwakiutl uses "religious" rather than "spiritual."
4. I employ the following standardized citations for Nietzsche's works: *BT*=*The Birth of Tragedy*; *BGE*=*Beyond Good and Evil*. Arabic numbers refer to section or aphorism, not page numbers.
5. The German word *Bund* [bond] can also mean "covenant" in the biblical sense.
6. Ronald Speirs translates this passage as "over and over again" (*BT* 8), whereas Walter Kaufmann renders it "ever anew." I here opt for Kaufmann's translation since it captures the sense of *re*-creation I take to be important to Nietzsche's view, rather than suggesting a self-same, and so static, discharge of the Dionysiac chorus.
7. In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche argues that the world is "'will to power' and nothing else" (*BGE* 238). Although it is not my intent to go into detail about Nietzsche's view of will to power, suffice it to say for our purposes here that much, if not all, of my discussion of the Kwakiutl understanding and use of power applies to Nietzsche's view.
8. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to give the Kwakiutl social structure the treatment it deserves, it is important to note that while the Winter Ceremonial season does mark an inversion of the Kwakiutl social scheme, "the underlying principle of ranked positions claimed primarily through kinship and hereditary connections, and necessarily validated by distinctions of property, remained" (Codere 1950, 108; see also Codere 1990).
9. Boas offers several variations of the original myth of the hamatsa. I have chosen this particular version as it is the first and most detailed version Boas discusses.
10. Although he does not explicitly make the connection, Boas indicates that members of the tribe had been mysteriously disappearing without a trace, which might be the reason for the Chief's warning his sons to avoid the house with blood-like smoke.

11. For an excellent first-hand account of the impact of the prohibition efforts of the Canadian government on the Kwakiutl, for example, see Agnes Alfred's (2004) *Paddling to Where I Stand*.
12. After several unsuccessful attempts at converting indigenous peoples to Christianity, the Church Missionary Society of the Church of England sent Reverend Alfred J. Hall to Fort Rupert in early 1878 in an attempt to speed up the conversion process.
13. In this sense, the Kwakiutl religious worldview is a perfect expression of the Nietzschean "will to power." Will to power in this sense, as Alexander Nehamas notes, is "the ability to use the materials that already exist in the world in a new and different way" (Nehamas 2000, 137–8).
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