

Remembering Who You are and Where You Are From

Totem poles, canoes, masks, longhouses, and salmon fishing; these are typical stereotypes that are too often employed to describe the West Coast First Nations culture and art. Indeed, First Nation cultures of the west coast are unique in character and language, and although a great diversity exists among the various tribes, they all share a love for the Pacific Ocean from which their food supply traditionally came. Although they live in relatively close proximity to one another, West Coast Indian cultures have always exhibited a great deal of variety in cultural makeup. They have also shown a great deal of ingenuity in terms of mapping their lifestyles. One characteristic the various tribes have shared in common is their orientation to the sea coast and rivers, and the resources found there and the surrounding areas. On this basis it makes some sense to speak of the Northwest Coast as a distinct cultural area because there are some similarities among the various tribes that overshadow their differences, such as the underlying foundation of their culture, which is actually comprised of a deep sense of spiritual well-being, that has been passed down through oral history from generation to generation.

One such cultural group of First Nation people living along the coastal area of British Columbia are the Sliammon Peoples, who are part of the Coast Salish People. Sliammon is a name given to these people because, according to Jackie 'La-Sah' Timothy, the spelling and pronunciation within their original language is different, as there is no English word for it.¹ The Sliammon language is one of the Salishan family dialects that is shared with the Comox people but has no identifiable traditional name. This language is spoken along the coast of the mainland, by

¹ Jackie "La-Sah" Timothy – Master Carver of the Sliammon Nation; Information gathered from email interviews received March 25th and March 27th. Mr. Timothy provided written oral explanations to the questions posed, copies of which are attached.

the Sliammon people, Klahoose, and Homalco.² Language is an important aspect of the Sliammon culture.

In the Sliammon language the word Haawogoos meant “respected leader of the clan, or family, or of territory.”³ Sliammon territory is slightly north of Powell River and is the site of an ancient First Nation fishing village that has been in continuous habitation for the past two millennia.⁴ The coastal area of British Columbia not only provides Sliammon’s with an abundance of seafood, but the coastal region also provides a rich natural resource of forested areas, particularly the Cedar, which is a very important commodity. The cedar contributes to their cultural lifestyle that features unique characteristics, whether it is in their skills in building canoes, ceremonies and rituals, kinship systems, or their art.⁵ Naturally, with this aura of importance attached to it, cedar wood was assigned some measure of spiritual significance as well.

Culture and heritage of the west coast people is a very diverse and meaningful way of life, a life and culture, which according to Mr. Timothy, “was almost destroyed and wiped off the face of the earth.”⁶ To Jackie Timothy, culture refers to the acquired knowledge and ideas, the customs and traditions as told by elders, the arts and skills that are learned and used everyday of their lives. Historically, people of high-status in Sliammon society were those who owned ceremonial rights, who had access to wealth or who were proficient in a specialized skill such as hunting. Gift-giving feasts through the celebration of the potlatch were at the heart of all West Coast cultural life and reflected the wealth and power of the great chiefs who apparently had the ability to mediate the

² <http://www.firstpeoplescanada.com/WILpresenters.html> - A brief description of the Comox or Sliammon languages of the Salishan family of languages.

³ Ibid.

⁴ <http://www.prcn.org/sliammon/index/spiritual/spiritual.html> - Sliammon webpage that provides insight into the history of their culture and their land.

⁵ Steckley, John I., and Cummins, Bryan D. (2008). Full circle, Canada’s First Nations, 2nd Ed., Pearson Prentice Hall, Toronto, ON; Chapter 11 – The Northwest Coast, pp. 112 – 119.

⁶ Jackie ‘La-Sah’ Timothy, written email correspondence regarding culture and his feelings of the genocide of indigenous human beings of this great land they have called “Turtle” Island. Received March 25th, 2008.

spiritual powers.⁷ In referencing Mr. Timothy's assertion regarding culture, it is mentioned in his first email interview, that when he was a small child he was "told of a great leader whom in their language was referred to as 'Haawogoos', which means respected leader of their people and/or his clan. In the past, potentially every man of high-status could be a headman who was known to be dignified, modest and above all, generous. He gave frequent feasts and gifts to ensure the continued support of his extended family.⁸ Though material goods were important, their culture was never just a milieu of rituals or survival; it featured contentment, ingenuity, and enrichment.

Information provided by Mr. Timothy inferred that this kind of leadership had been passed on through hereditary of a family. However, Mr. Timothy expressed that there was a great difference between the leaders of old in comparison to Nation leaders of today. "When you went into a village long ago, you would look for the person who had the least, and would probably be the first person to greet you when you came into the community. This leader would have very modest belongings as well as a humble home; would be responsible for the people and would give away most of his possessions if the people needed whatever he had."⁹ His contention is that today when visiting a reserve and looking for a leader who would be called the chief, you would find an individual with the most expensive home, lots of cars and would appear to possess financial freedom. Mr. Timothy refers to these people as "the transient people who are now the new 'Indian Agents.'"¹⁰ When the Department of Indian Affairs removed the hereditary leaders and replaced them with the voted in chiefs, though his people now have their own people as chiefs, these new

⁷ Steckley, John I., and Cummins, Bryan D. (2008). Chapter 4: Effects of Colonialism, pp. 172 – 179.

⁸ Jackie 'La-Sah' Timothy Email Interview – March 25, 2008.

⁹ Ibid, March 27, 2008.

¹⁰ Ibid.

chiefs have no connection to the hereditary leadership of old, and are in full control of the federal governments' fundings that come to 'the infested welfare reserves of today'.¹¹

The Indian Act created a relationship of dependency between First Nations and the Federal Department of Indian Affairs, and this "dependency has permeated all areas of Sliammon First Nation people, working to repress the development of institutional structures that reflect the unique needs for, and philosophies of, traditional First Nation's laws and governance."¹² Presently, the Sliammon Nation is in the throws of establishing a Treaty with the Federal Government that will address some of the issues discussed in Laura Roddan's and Arlene Harry's article that addresses issues of the Sliammon Treaty Society. Dan Russell's (2000) book, *A People's Dream: Aboriginal Self-Government in Canada*, and edited by Olive Patricia Dickason, enlightens readers on the issues brought forward by First Nations across Canada that pose the growing strength of the First Nations' movement to regain the self-government they once had before the arrival of Europeans.¹³ When Canada's First Nation people attain the right to self-government, they will have the individual rights to worship however they see fit, without interference from the Federal Government.

The implementation of residential schools throughout Canada that was sanctioned by the Federal Government with the affiliation of many different churches, virtually disrupted First Nation's abilities to provide knowledge to their children; knowledge that would give them a solid understanding of who they are and where they came from. When Mr. Timothy was asked whether the residential school inspired him in any way, his response was definitely not. He felt that since he was forced to attend the Sechelt Residential School that was governed by the Catholic Church, from

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² <http://www.conservationgis.org/test/tribal/native4.html> - Sliammon Treaty Society – Laura K. Roddan and Arlene C. Harry, discuss key objectives of the Traditional Use Study. Retrieved March 20, 2008.

¹³ Russell, Dan, Miller, Bruce G, Brisson, Sillery R., Dickason, Olive P. (Reviewer), et al. (2003), "Canadian aboriginal saga: a people and a dream [A people's dream: aboriginal self-government in Canada] [Aboriginal autonomy and development in northern Quebec and Labrador] [Prospering together] [Aboriginal education in Canada] [Aboriginal people and other Canadians] [The problem of justice] [Oka par la caricature]," *The American Review of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 33, Iss. 2; pg. 261-268.

the tender age of 4-1/2 years old and made to stay there for ten years against his will and the will of his family, that the school itself was a prison.¹⁴ What he missed most in the early days was the presence of his grandparents who had been responsible for raising him since he was a baby, as his mother had died well before he knew her. Residential schools were established to expedite the assimilation of Aboriginal people; thankfully they were ultimately unsuccessful. As summarized by Kelm, residential schools were "[p]redicated on the basic notion that the First Nations were, by nature, unclean and diseased [and] residential schooling was advocated as a means to 'save' Aboriginal children from the insalubrious influences of home life on reserve."¹⁵ For many years the federal government and various Christian churches co-managed the residential schools, which were chronically underfunded and overcrowded. The last residential school in British Columbia closed in 1986. The impact of the schools across generations in communities is evident. In the early days, many residential school graduates who returned home were still able to learn traditional knowledge and skills from family members. However, a decline in traditional economies, such as food gathering, trapping, fishing and trading (through potlatch, for example), meant that just a few generations later, only a small number of individuals had this opportunity. As well, by this time, few First Nations people could find employment off reserve and, if they could, it tended to be seasonal work, which "involved physically demanding labour and/or poor pay."¹⁶ This reality has led to the current high rates of unemployment, poverty, and despair for young people in many Aboriginal communities, as illustrated in Mr. Timothy's remarks regarding Sliammon's present-day chiefs.

¹⁴ Jackie 'La-Sah' Timothy, Email Interview March 27, 2008.

¹⁵ Kelm, M. (Ed.). (1998). Chapter 4 – A "scandalous procession": Residential schooling and the reformation of Aboriginal bodies. In *Colonizing bodies: Aboriginal health and healing in British Columbia 1900-50*, Vancouver, BC: UBC Press (p. 57).

¹⁶ Mussell, W. J., Nicholls, W. M., & Adler, M. T. (1993). *Making meaning of mental health challenges in First Nations: A Freirian perspective* (2nd ed., p.14). Chilliwack, BC: Sal'i'Shan Institute Society.

Despite being taken as a small child, Mr. Timothy retained the memories of the stories told to him, and his spiritualness is exemplified in his everyday life; in the way he treats his neighbours, friends, and family, and how he expresses this spiritualness in his art. His spiritualness has aided him in his courageous endeavour in speaking out to Langley students in the public education forum, regarding his experience as a 'prisoner' of the residential school system. Mr. Timothy is providing oral knowledge to a group of young people, who may be better off because of it. They are the future of Canada; with this knowledge in hand perhaps their voices will ensure that nothing like residential schools would ever be reinvented within the Canadian system of education.

Sliammon spirituality holds the belief that supernatural beings controlled the structures and events operant in the universe and human beings should strive to develop workable relationships with them through ceremonies, prayers, and rituals.¹⁷ Common to the belief system of the Northwest peoples was a concept centred on the guardian spirit. This spirit formed a special relationship with individuals and blessed them when they hunted, engaged in battle, or required healing.¹⁸ This concept is reflected in a story as told to Mr. Timothy by his grandparents regarding the grizzly bear, and why the grizzly bear together with the eagle, is part of their family crest. To the Sliammon nation, "the grizzly bear represents an important medicine, and why the grizzly is important to their heritage and what relation it is to his family."¹⁹ The Sliammon oral story is as follows:

"Long ago there was a famine in the village, and food was very hard to come by, and the people needed to be fed. The hunters of the village were desperate and took to hunting the most dangerous and strongest animal known in the territory – the Grizzly Bear. The Grizzly did not see the human being as a real threat on one-to-one bases; instead, saw the human being as a very sad animal and seemingly knew the plight they faced. The Grizzly felt that he should give the human being a gift of medicine because he knew that the humans needed this more."

¹⁷ Jackie 'La-Sah' Timothy, Email Interview March 27, 2008.

¹⁸ Muckle, Robert J. (1998). *The First Nations of British Columbia*, Vancouver, BC: University Press, p.49.

¹⁹ Jackie 'La-Sah' Timothy, Email Interview March 27, 2008.

In order to teach these human beings about how to use this medicine, the Grizzly bear started to lead the hunters far into the mountains. He allowed them to catch up to him so that he could sacrifice his body with a blow by a spear on one of his hind legs. Wounded, the Grizzly started to run away, limping terribly as he was hard-pressed to run faster due to his injury.

Seeing how badly wounded the bear was, some of the hunters became very excited because they thought they would easily kill the Grizzly; whereas, others were very scared because they knew not to mess with a wounded Grizzly. Despite the Grizzly's wound, only one hunter was able to keep up to him. The Grizzly could have killed that hunter at any time, but chose to teach him about the medicine instead.

The Grizzly approached the area where he knew the medicine was and with his great powerful claws and teeth he dug at the ground and opened it up to expose the medicine making sure there was plenty of it all around him and waited for the hunter to come. Lying there in a small hole that he had dug, the Grizzly was facing the hunter with great growls and shaking his head. He made the hunter stand still with fear. Knowing that he now had the hunters full attention, he took the medicine and broke it up into small pieces and rubbed it on the wound. While looking face-to-face with the hunter and rubbing the medicine in, he then let out another great growl and threw the medicine at the hunter. The Grizzly then ran off a little distance, turned and stood up and raised his paws and then standing on all fours, turned slowly and walked away without a limp and disappeared into the mountains. This is how the grizzly gave the medicine to the Sliammon people. This medicine is used today by Jackie 'La-Sah' Timothy's family only."²⁰

According to Muckle (1998), a guardian spirit was usually obtained during a period of self-sacrifice, fasting, and prayers, yet sometimes an individual would obtain the spirit through a kind of family lineage. Therefore, according to Mr. Timothy's rendition of the oral story regarding the significance of the Grizzly Bear as told to him by his grandparents, Mr. Muckle's assertion would be correct.

Mr. Timothy's story of the Grizzly Bear is one of the reasons why his family has a crest that holds both the Grizzly Bear and the Eagle. Apparently, it is very rare to have two spiritual crests represented by one family, but it is indicative of previous hereditary leadership of that family, which the Timothy's have yet to claim. The eagle crest comes from a marriage that has historical significance to the Timothy family, as it had occurred prior to colonization. These family crests

²⁰ Jackie 'La-Sah' Timothy's written recital of the Guardian Spirit story of the importance of the Grizzly Bear to his clan, as provided in the Email Interview received March 27, 2008.

represent those particular families' rights to songs and dances. Mr. Timothy can recall his grandmother who would chant and sing songs that resonated with some of the deepest sorrow he has ever heard. She sang from the deepest recesses of her own soul, for the souls of a past then gone, and cried for a childhood never to be seen or experienced again on this earth.²¹

When Mr. Timothy recalls special moments he shared with his grandparents as a youth he tends to tear up naturally, due to the emotional and physical ties he held with them as they were instrumental in contributing to who Mr. Timothy is today. He can recall times when he was able to gather with his grandparents and other elders in a circle to hear the wonderful stories that would be told. The other elders would say "Before we speak among the adults, we must sit little Jeetski down and tell him a story and give him treats if he sits and listens to what we say."²² Of course, like any youngster, this type of bribery worked wonders, as he would sit intently listening to the lessons being taught through their oral traditions of introducing a world full of mystery, sorrow, laughter and wonder. It is in remembering these stories that Mr. Timothy is inspired. These oral histories were told in the hopes that the listeners would never forget them. Mr. Timothy is of the opinion that his grandparents and the elders of his clan knew they would not be of this world long and had seen in the future how their people were destroyed and how the culture and way of life was soon to be lost. As a child, he didn't recognize the grave importance, but as an adult he can recall hearing often prior to a story being told to "Remember who you are and where you are from."²³

It is through the process of remembering the skills and stories heard from his youth that Mr. Timothy's inspiration from those experiences creates art as he was taught. To him, to be an artist encompasses much more than just carving; it is the ability to remember the significance of the story,

²¹ Jackie 'La-Sah' Timothy, Email interview remembering how his Grandmother would sing songs that no one other than he could handle listening too, because they were usually so sorrowful – March 25th, 2008.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

the dances and songs and recreate that significance inside his work of art. As a Master Carver, Mr. Timothy has been able to draw on his past knowledge to better understand the significance of how his art can be informative; how the knowledge he is able to replicate in his carvings, keep the stories of old alive.

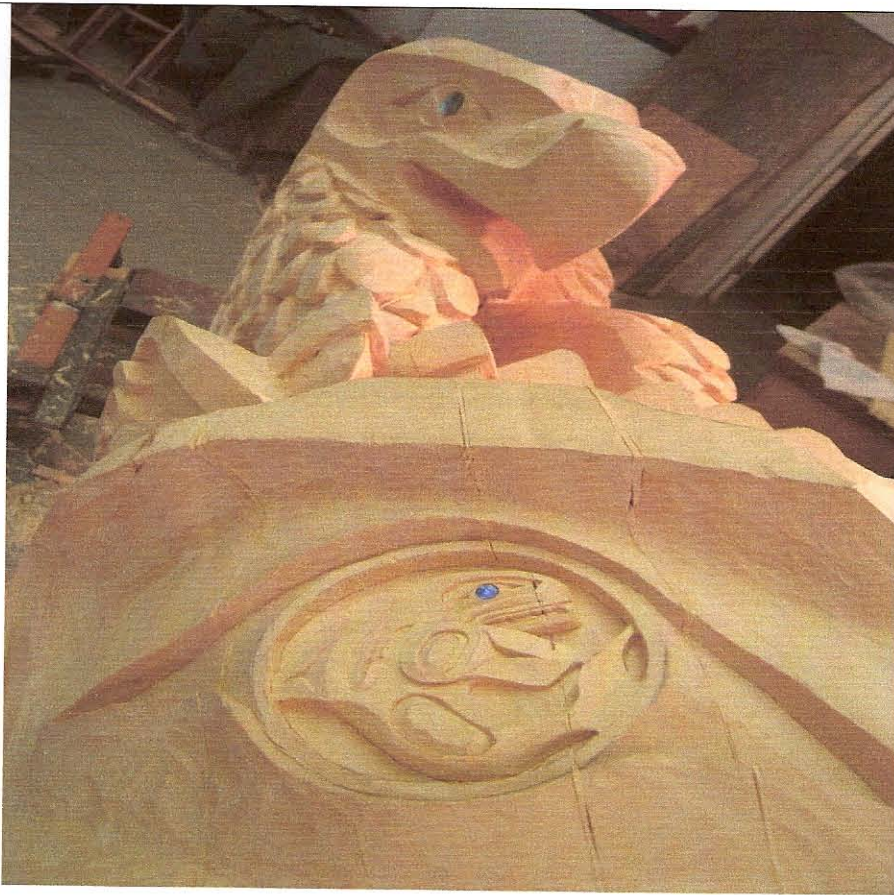
One of Mr. Timothy's well known works of art had been commissioned by Dr. Monture, a Mohawk doctor. Dr. Monture told Mr. Timothy that he was quite familiar with the west coast totem poles and wanted to combine his cultural background and theme with the west coast design. After further discussions, the pole was named "West Meets East".²⁴ The eagle, which is part of Mr. Timothy's crest, was also significant to Dr. Monture. To the Doctor, the eagle represented a part of the peace tree which is a great symbol to the eastern tribes. Dr. Monture also wanted a bear to be placed on the bottom of the totem pole because his relatives were a part of the bear clan; and of major importance to him was to have the wolf incorporated into the design since the wolf represented his clan. He also requested that a turtle be incorporated into the pole because it is the symbol of mother earth of which First Nation people live on.

Mr. Timothy, a very humble man, only wishes to carry on with what his grandparents asked of him long ago, to remember who you are and where you are from. Through his art, and his gift of being straight forward and honest, he is able to carry not only the title of Master Carver, but also Cultural Broker. His art depicts his spirituality and beliefs; his oral teaching of the residential school experience, to students in the Langley School Division earns him the title, Cultural Broker. He brings his knowledge not only through oral stories of his Nations' past, but by presenting his own oral of a history that he had the misfortune of experiencing. In drawing from his life

²⁴ Jackie 'La-Sah' Timothy, Email Interview received March 27th, 2008. – Discussing the totem pole he was commissioned to sculpt by the Mohawk Nation in the east; the pictures are of the work in process, the artist, and the finished product.

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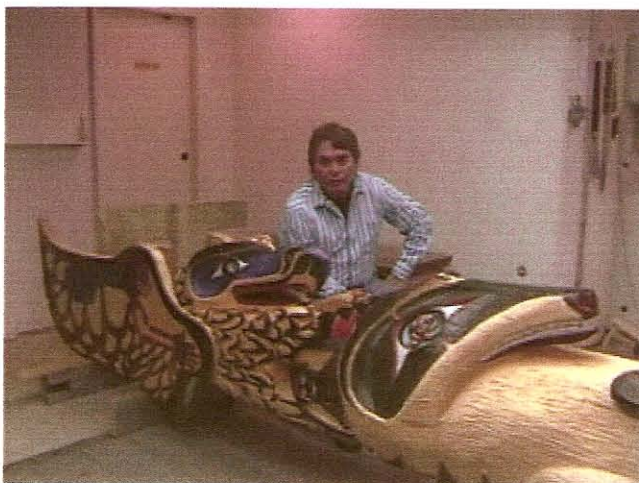
experiences as a First Nation Sliammon individual, Mr. Timothy has observed his ~~grandparents~~ wish – a wish that he should never forget who he is and where he is from.



“West Meets East” – Jackie ‘La-Sah’ Timothy, Sliammon Master Carver



“West Meets East” – The near finished product that will be shipped to Ontario.



Jackie La-Sah Timothy – Master Carver

The Totem Pole – “West Meets East”