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A Retrospective on the Voices of Nuu'Chah'Nulth Women

JACKY MOORE, PhD

Abstract

"I remember my Aunt Nessie, my grandmother's sister, piercing my ears … The purpose of piercing a little girl's ears was so they would grow up to be good listeners."[1] *These words are from an interview with a Nuu'Chah'Nulth woman (a member of an Indigenous community located on Vancouver Island) who reaffirmed the timing of this delightful ceremony, usually carried out a few days after the birth of a little girl, stressing the importance of women being good listeners.*

This extract is one of many examples from the words of Nuu'Chah'Nulth women that comprised the main text of my PhD thesis The Hidden Voices of Nuu'Chah'Nulth Women. *Through a series of interviews with women aged sixty years or more, it emerged that women were the mainstay of their communities, that - despite colonialism, reserve living, the introduction of smallpox and dwindling population figures and land - the women ensured their communities would survive through their economic skills as chief providers for the sustainability of everyone. The interviews also showed how, as grandmothers and mothers, women accepted both traditional and modern responsibilities for the survival and continuity of their people, and how Nuu'Chah'Nulth women have used whatever opportunities presented to develop and market their skills by integrating cultural practices and skills into their developing economy.*

Fundamental to their beliefs is a commitment to family, to community, to place and to tradition. By sharing examples of Nuu'Chah'Nulth celebrations, these women's narratives take us forward to a greater understanding of the depth and wealth of a culture which colonisation has all but wiped out. What I heard about birthing, healing rituals, coming-of-age ceremonies, and historical protocols was shared through storytelling. The women had

1 Interview with Jackie Watts, May 2009: p15 transcript.

healed themselves to become stronger, to educate themselves, to train as lawyers, doctors, community developers, and social workers in order to support their communities and to pass on traditional knowledge.

Key words: Nuu'Chah'Nulth women, potlatch and ceremonies, intergenerational transmission, water and healing

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Résumé

« Je me souviens de ma tante Nessie, la sœur de ma grand'mère, me perçant les oreilles… Percer les oreilles d'une petite fille a pour but d'en faire quelqu'un qui écoute bien en grandissant. » Ces mots proviennent d'un entretien avec une femme Nuu'Chah'Nulth (membre d'une communauté autochtone située sur l'île de Vancouver) qui ré-affirmait ainsi le sens de ce rituel, habituellement tenu quelques jours après la naissance d'une petite fille, en soulignant l'importance d'une écoute attentive parmi les qualités d'une femme.

Cet extrait est l'un des nombreux exemples des enseignements offerts par les femmes Nuu'Chah'Nulth et composant le corpus et texte principal de ma thèse de doctorat, The Hidden Voices of Nuu'Chah'Nulth Women. *À travers une série d'entretiens avec des femmes agées de soixante ans et plus, on voit émerger le fait que les femmes furent les piliers de leurs communautés : En dépit de la colonisation euro-américaine, la vie dans les réserves, les épidémies de variole et autres maladies, la décroissance démographique, et la diminution des terres, les femmes continuèrent à assurer la survie de leurs communautés sur le plan économique en tant que principales pourvoyeuses. Et en tant que mères et grand'mères, elles continuèrent à assumer leurs responsabilités traditionnelles tout en endossant les responsabilités du monde moderne. Les entretiens démontrent qu'en particulier les femmes usèrent de toutes les opportunités pour développer et mettre en marché leurs connaissances techniques en intégrant leurs talents et leurs pratiques culturelles traditionnelles dans la nouvelle économie.*

Un élément central de la vision du monde des Nuu'Chah'Nulth est leur engagement envers la famille, la communauté, le lieu et la tradition. Les exemples de rituels et cérémonies qu'offrent les témoignages de ces femmes nous permettent de mieux comprendre les profondeurs et la richesse d'une culture que la colonisation a presque effacée. Ce que j'ai entendu des rituels entourant la naissance ou les soins aux malades, des rites de passage marquant la puberté, des protocoles historiques, a été transmis par les femmes à la communauté à l'aide d'histoires. Ainsi, les femmes se guérissent les unes les autres pour devenir plus fortes, pour acquérir des formations d'avocates, docteurs, travailleuses sociales ou agentes de développement, entre autres, de façon à supporter leur communauté, tout en lui transmettant les enseignements traditionnels.

Mots clefs: femmes Nuu'Chah'Nulth, potlatch et cérémonies, transmission intergénérationnelle, eau et guérison

Introduction

> "In the 1970s I remember hearing from all over the Nuu'Cha'Nulth coast people saying women were the backbone of the communities, how women have the strong minds, it is women who remember."[2]

First Nations trace their histories through myths and stories telling of people and their relationships with the land. Events are embedded into stories and rituals that symbolise rather than report chronologically, bringing the past into relationship with the present, and making connections through women's storytelling which ultimately transfer knowledge to the younger generations. It is this that ensures the transference of protocol, of ceremonies, and of skills through the generations.

Stories emphasise and confirm the peoples' fundamental regard for, and attachment to, the land and sea, as the Nuu'Chah'Nulth believe everything is connected and inter-related; this axiom, embedded in their stories spanning life from birth to death, focuses on the important moments of life: birth, naming, puberty and death.

> "My grandmother was a great story-teller … All the stories would have to do with from being born and traditional ceremonies. They have us singing and dancing. … My grandmother and all her relations and friends get together and decide on names, those names that take us throughout our lives so now we become women. Story-telling is about life and myths and legends."[3]

My primary research as a doctoral student of oral history[4] focused on a group of Nuu'Chah'Nulth women and illustrated the rich co-existence of the women with each other and their lands. I was honoured to meet thirteen women, spend time with them, talk to and interview them in a series of inspiring and thought-provoking meetings conducted between 2009 and 2010 on their land on western Vancouver Island. Of the thirteen interviews, five were carried out in the privacy of their homes and eight in tribal offices or community halls. This research report on that primary research is a story of First Nation women, an exercise inclusive of and within women's world, which aims to share their voices through their stories and history; their narratives serve to uncover memories. By conducting and investigating in-person interviews and documentary archives, the traditional skills and economic roles, status, and power of these women in their families and communities become evident. My aim is to challenge the contemporary reader regarding common inherited assumptions of First

2 Interview with Anne Robinson, May 2009, Port Alberni: pp.9-10 transcript. Anne mentioned the importance and respectful way of listening, of telling young women the significant things they need to remember when growing up.
3 Interview with Jackie Watts, May 2009: pp.9-10 transcript.
4 For further details about this research project, which resulted in my doctoral thesis, visit https://repository.canterbury.ac.uk/item/8722q/the-hidden-voices-of-nuu-chah-nulth-women.

Nations women in general and Nuu'Chah'Nulth women in particular, and to expose misconceptions and expel illusions about the passivity of women or that Nuu'Chul'Nulth women had / have no voice in their community or the colonial world.

This research project is about Indigenous women's history. It is a very detailed, in-depth study that elucidates a branch of history with the aim of bringing forward the voice of the women of the Nuu'Chah'Nulth. In the wider historical picture, these women are First Nation and affected by colonialism, a feature of Canadian and, inevitably, Western history. In other words, this is a report on a study of a group of First Nation women who represent a fragment of the larger picture of western history, an exercise inclusive of and within women's history through the example of Indigenous women, situated in an historical context that is established through both oral history and the documentary archive. It resides at the intersection of three challenging research areas: women's history, Native Studies, and oral history; all three are encountered within different contexts and explored through the history of this specific group and thereby present a dialogue of past and present.

As a non-native researcher, it is difficult to explain the Nuu'Chah'Nulth worldview in a few words or to clarify how it differs from Euro-American thinking. This Indigenous worldview responds positively to relationships between people and place, history, identity, the natural and spiritual worlds. Such views have not been appreciated by Western commentators over the last two hundred years; Western notions of colonialism, capitalism, cultural supremacy, or greed for land ownership are far divorced from *heshook-ish tsawalk*, the view that 'Everything is One'. Any words I may use which epitomise the Nuu'Chah'Nulth perspective, such as balance, interconnectedness, interrelatedness, unity, or harmony, are based on my limited understanding and perception of the Nuu'Chah'Nulth worldview. I, like many researchers, have found the challenge of translating language and understanding cultural differences to be complex and I apologize for any inaccuracies or inconsistencies.

Qualitative research methodologies underpin this study, allowing for insight into cultural difference and tools for understanding someone else's world. Through analysis of interviews and archival records, it becomes possible to articulate the roles and responsibilities of Nuu'Chah'Nulth women in their communities, their strengths, knowledge, and skills, for those within and outside of the Nuu'Chah'Nulth community. As a researcher, I have been informed by both the historical documents and the subjectivities of the women whose cultural world is shaped by generations of stories and historical events. Storytellers work by personal contact within small communities while historians deal with widespread communities through print, removed, and impersonal. While historians could be considered detached and objective in their reporting and analysis of historical events, a First Nation storyteller is the opposite; however, both work towards realising a sense of identity and understanding.

Asking open-ended questions during the interviews gave Nuu'Chah'Nulth women the opportunity to narrate life experiences, and offer their interpretations of historical events and how these monumental episodes challenged and altered their lives. Through this process of remembering and re-interpretation, they had the time to reflect upon and explore ideas, especially the recent lived-through events of the reconciliation process in regard to residential schooling. Oral history emphasizes the

uniqueness of remembered lives while, at the same time, makes sense of a common past. One of its strengths is its ability to directly access what happened in women's lives and what they did, how they were affected by events, and – unobservable by other means – their attitudes and values.

I am often asked why I researched First Nation women, why this particular group, why the Nuu'Chah'Nulth. I had sent an exploratory email to the Tribal Council asking permission to interview some Nuu'Chah'Nulth women. Eventually a meeting was set up with Dr Michelle Corfield, the vice-president, in Port Alberni. After lots of discussion over a cup of tea she ended the meeting by saying 'you'll do, you can tell our women's story.' These were not her exact words but they portray the sentiments of her thinking. My request was then formally presented to the Nuu'Chah'Nulth Tribal Council by Dr. Corfield. Her arguments, clearly detailing my research, were considered, discussed and agreed. Although not present at the meeting, I have been told there was a strong acknowledgement of the vital role of women in Nuu'Chah'Nulth history, the necessity to balance Nuu'Chah'Nulth history, and to support the women's voices in the telling of their history. I was excited my research could begin.

My methodologies were shaped and challenged by the thirteen women. Taking the time to develop a rapport with them was essential for enabling their thoughts, reminiscences, and story-telling to surface. The interviews allowed the women time to reflect upon how they understood themselves and to tell their life-stories to me, an outsider. This, in turn, improved my own understanding of Nuu' Chah'Nulth women. At the start, I was told that I thought as a western woman, but at the end, I was told I was thinking like a Nuu'Chah'Nulth woman. This was a great honour. Despite not being Nuu'Chah'Nulth, not knowing their language and lacking a lifetime immersion in their culture, I hope I am able to present the vibrant contemporary and traditional ideas and knowledge in the narratives I was given.

The arrival of the *mamalhn'i*, the people who came from over the sea, in the late eighteenth century, affected the lives of Nuu'Chah'Nulth women profoundly. Yet, in spite of the devastating changes to their way of life, the women adapted the environment to their advantage whenever and wherever possible. The medium of oral history has the potential and power to celebrate Nuu'Chah'Nulth women, showing how they are not passive victims of colonialism but are advocates for their culture, traditions and for the women themselves. The strengths of their traditions empowered the women to resist the impositions and pressures from federal government to relinquish culture and language. Despite the traumatic influences of colonialism, the severe reduction of tribal lands, and residential schooling, maintaining traditional gender roles allowed Nuu'Chah'Nulth women to adapt to changing circumstances and adopt new industries and practices whilst upholding their cultural identities as First Nation women: working in the canneries from the 1870s onwards, hop-picking, selling their weaving and handicrafts on the harbour side in Seattle. As relief and welfare payments were insignificant, Nuu'Chah'Nulth women were predominantly involved in a mixture of subsistence, small-scale economic activities, waged labour, traditional work in resource industries, with handicraft production buoyant as women continued to sell their weaving, knitting and basketry goods along the road and dockside in Seattle and Port Alberni. By the end of the nineteenth century Nuu'Chah'Nulth women were travelling to where work was available, becoming an integral part of a waged economy for the

first time and subsequently keeping their culture alive through intermingling with women from other bands.

Continuity and diversity mark the lives of Nuu'Chah'Nulth women, their strengths creating the values and behaviours necessary to restore balance to their families and communities.

> "The strength of who we were has always been there, now we can pick up the tools of today and take our beliefs and values of who we are … and move forward."[5]

Their stories present a rich tapestry of Nuu'Chah'Nulth life, including healing procedures, traditions, and ceremonies associated with birth, naming, coming-of-age, and death. Their culture is based on *lisaak* (respect), humility, *ha-huu-pa* (teachings), story-telling, and responsibility to each other, to the family and to themselves. To get a sense of place of these ceremonies and stories, it is also necessary to return briefly to evidence from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Life has changed dramatically for the women since their meeting with the *mamalhn'i*. However, the essence of women's lives is remarkably similar, since they still honour and respect their culture, language, skills and traditions and ensure the transference of knowledge to younger generations. As one woman said, "Our history was passed on by the ancestors from generation to generation."[6]

The Potlatch –a time for ceremonies[7]

Sa:ya:ch'apis, a wealthy and 'blind old man, unfailingly good-humoured and courteous, steeped in the Aboriginal past and thoroughly innocent of English',[8] was brought up understanding the importance of *?o:simch*, the ritualized cleansing protocol, spiritual preparation, and prayer conducted prior to potlatches, ceremonies, and other social practices.[9] In the 1890s, Sa:ya:ch'apis gave many and varied potlatches, including those to honour his menstruating daughter (her coming-of-age and puberty) and to plant potatoes.

Long-time anthropological authority on the Nuu'Chah'Nulth, Franz Boas recognised that potlatches celebrated important events and rites-of-passage marking the end of a complicated series of preparations. Boas maintained that although the acquisition of wealth was important, the ability to hold a great potlatch was more admirable, and puberty potlatches were the most important family celebration of all, requiring the presence of guests as witnesses, for they were an essential element in maintaining status. It would be easy to conclude from his writings that the privileges associated with

5 Interview with Eileen Haggard, May 2009: p.10 transcript.
6 Interview with Delores Bayne, 29th April 2010: p.2 transcript.
7 The potlatch is a gift-giving, gift-sharing ceremony or festival; the word potlatch comes from the Chinook trade language and derived from the Nuu'Chah'Nulth word 'pachitle,' meaning to give away or gift.
8 Sapir, Edward & Swadesh, Morris (1939) *Nootka Texts: Tales and Ethnological Narratives with Grammatical Notes and Lexicon Materials*, the Linguistic Society of America, University of Yale.
9 The latter section of T*he Nootka Tales* were dictated by Sa:ya:ch'apis in 1914 (texts 33-39); they constitute an autobiographical account of his ceremonial activities and marriage.

ceremonies belonged exclusively to men and boys since Boas tended to obscure the roles of women and girls in ceremonies.

However, that gendered misconception was corrected when Bracken noted in 1997 that not only are women intricately involved in all potlatch preparations, they also hold key roles in the ceremony itself.[10] Girl's puberty rites, in particular, play an important role among these social events, as this is a special time in a young girl's life, a time when she is honoured and recognised as a woman. The potlatches provide a fitting occasion for women's belief in their self-worth and an expression of their importance in the community. The 1884 ban on potlatching, introduced by missionaries and supported by the government of Canada, effectively disabled this 'mutually beneficial arrangement.'[11]

In the mid-1880s, Chief Sa:ya :ch'apis, who had been preparing for his daughter's coming-of-age potlatch for many months, discovered to his dismay many people were declining his invitation to attend, giving as a reason their going to the hop fields: 'you are too late, we are going to the hop fields … we might be too late for the hops.'[12] This refusal was a serious slight for Sa:ya:ch'apis. Fortunately his friend, Chief Shonhin, issued invitations to his own neighbours and the potlatch took place. The conflict between securing wages to feed your family and hereditary gatherings was not an unusual occurrence at this time, so it gradually became common practice to incorporate gatherings into migrant employment opportunities. This turned a potential economic threat into an asset when the law prevented the holding of potlatches and other traditional ceremonies.

The Puget Sound hop-picking industry, a predominantly female activity, was reaching international prominence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nuu'Chah'Nulth women used canoes to travel to Puget Sound to earn money by picking both hops and *oolalies*, the local berries; many of the canoes also brought clams and mallard ducks to sell, allowing the women to maintain their connections to the places and resources which reflected earlier patterns of existence, a meeting of the past and present. In 1884, at the end of the hop-picking season, women and families continued through the autumn harvesting other crops; they finally returned home with their canoes laden with goods, flour, potatoes and sugar, all bought with their earned income, to sustain the communities through the winter, along with materials to give away at winter potlatches. Hop-field migrations represented a short-term escape valve for the women, away from Canadian colonial curtailments on gatherings and ceremonies. Large numbers of women, children, and elders congregated at strategic points across the border to share news, meet family, and take part in economic activities. As Canada's potlatch ban imposed restrictions on cultural events and practice, the women used every opportunity to gather together; interrupting their journey to the hop-fields presented an ideal time for these meetings. Off-reserve mobility became a crucial part of Nuu'Chah'Nulth life, a necessity for economic survival and social well-being, the women taking with them their practices, their culture, their language and their traditions.

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10 Bracken, C. (1997) *The Potlatch Papers: a colonial; case history,* University of Chicago Press: p.142-143.
11 Cote, C. (2010) *Spirits of our Whaling Ancestors: Revitalising Makah & Nuu'Chah'Nulth traditions,* University of Washington Press, Seattle: p.56.
12 Raibmon, Paige (2005) *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the late nineteenth-century Northwest Coast,* Duke University Press, Durham: p.104; detail of historic occurrence in Sapir & Swadesh *Nootka Texts:* p.149-151.

> "They weren't only from this area; there were fourteen bands here and we'd all go from Nanaimo, from Duncan, from Salish, Saanich; they were all there."[13]

The autumn and winter months were important times for families, for this was the period when potlatches and ceremonies took place. It was a time when people travelled to other reserves for gatherings, weddings, celebrations, and business. These events, integral to Nuu'Chah'Nulth life, continued to be held albeit in secret and on a greatly reduced scale until 1951, when the ban was repealed and public potlatches were once again permitted. Now the younger generations are showing an interest in specific rituals and ceremonies and it is the women who are sharing their knowledge and stories with daughters and granddaughters in the hope that traditions will not be lost. Grandmothers and elders inspired these women; 'They were inspirational … They were ahead of their time considering everything they had gone through in their own childhood.'[14]

The Nootka Tales

Between 1910 and 1923 anthropologist and linguist Edward Sapir collected extensive information from Nuu'Cha'Nulth elders. With the help of a young Nuu'Chah'Nulth man, Alex Thomas (grandson of Sa:ya:ch'apis), the notes were collated, translated almost word-for-word from Nuu'Chah'Nulth to English, and eventually became the Sapir-Thomas Nootka Texts. These short stories are informative, humorous, and full of the rich detail of Nuu'Chah'Nulth political, social and spiritual life; they often refer to women's work, skills, and roles in the community. As an example of historical practices enduring until today, much is made of ceremonial wailing in the story of the Raven and his Wife, tale number eight, mirroring current Nuu'Chah'Nulth rituals. Of great interest in Sapir's tales are references to ritual bathing, cleansing, and prayer to gain long life and freedom from disease, activities happening for four days before ceremonies and still occurring today. The tales link to interviews where the women mention the importance of being cleansed before a ceremony:

> "On the morning of the ceremony my daughter and I went out to bathe and to talk to the creator and to prepare ourselves for the day."[15]

> "[My grandmother] was always going for a bathe. I can remember going for a bathe with her in the water, in the creek, to cleanse herself. She prayed and she taught me all that … so that when I'm really down I'll find somewhere to bathe where I can be quiet."[16]

Water is, and continues to be, an integral part of celebration and women's lives.

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13 Interview with Kathy Robinson, May 2009: p.8 transcript.
14 Interview with Jackie Watts, May 2009: p.22 transcript.
15 Interview with Eileen Haggard, May 2009:p.12 transcript. Eileen described the preparations for a ceremonial feast for her late brother.
16 Interview with Louise, April 2010: p.1 transcript.

Along with Chief Sa:ya:ch'apis, his son Douglas Thomas knew and understood the meanings of the varied face paintings depicting rituals and ceremonies in the Nootka Tales. The designs themselves are simple, clearly identifying variances between the different ceremonies. These amazing face paintings, illustrating the ritual costumes, colours, and symbolic representation of economic life, provide for the researcher evidence of women's role and status in Nuu'Chah'Nulth society. For example, women painted their faces for the butter-clam digging ritual; woman painted their faces for purple sea-urchin harvesting ritual; woman painted their faces for dancing for joy.[17] The designs concern *?o:simch*, those essential rituals undergone before any ceremony or any life activity takes place. In essence, these face paintings epitomise Nuu'Chah'Nulth life practice.

During our interviews, the women told me about a few of these ceremonies that were either personal to their lives, ceremonies with which they were familiar, or rituals they routinely carried out. I witnessed the custom of eating raw sea-urchins to cleanse oneself, for equilibrium and calming; the salmonberry-picking ritual often occurring while walking through the forests collecting berries; preparation of cedar bark peeling for weaving, another ritual that took place while I was interviewing a Nuu'Chah'Nulth elder; the use of small smoking pine branches for calming or preparing oneself for a new venture, another custom witnessed by me and carried out prior to an interview. Face painting is rarely carried out now but the ceremonies continue to be very much in evidence; the sea-urchin custom, in particular, which I personally witnessed and which is common amongst the women who are going through the healing process of cleansing themselves from the effects of residential schooling and other trauma. Waving a smoking pine branches gently around promises a calm atmosphere, to be at peace with yourself and others.

Singing and Dancing and Story-telling

Grandparents and elders kept communities together even during the time when ceremonies and potlatches were banned.

> "[Women were] dynamic in pulling other community members together. Every Wednesday night we would have a potluck … and we sang and danced to celebrate our lives through songs and dances. They were a part of that community that wanted to keep the language and culture and dance going."[18]

For the Nuu'Chah'Nulth, the dances and songs of winter ceremonies sustain all human life and reaffirm the relationship between families and ancestors. Music and songs are owned by individuals or families and, in the past, were used to reinforce rank, status and privilege, distinguishing owners from other Nuu'Chah'Nulth families. A complex system of unwritten rules governs both songs and their owners, rules learned and followed, to honour and respect family and preserve tradition. Songs are transferred to other family members at potlatches hosted by the current song owner.

17 Thomas, Douglas 'Face Paintings from the Sapir Collection' in Hoover, Alan L. (Ed.) *Nuu'Chah'Nulth Voices:* p.172-200.
18 Interview with Jackie Watts, May 2009: p.23 transcript.

Within this traditionally oral society, the strict rituals governing the transfer and perpetuating of songs eliminate potential confusion over responsibilities and rights of song ownership: *p'acil*, the giving of gifts to the guests who witnessed the transfer, puts the final seal on the transaction.[19] Traditional song ownership and the protocol surrounding the agreement about which songs stay in the family to be passed through the generations define a serious undertaking as the songs have been owned for a long time. In response to a question about the respect due ownership of family songs and dances, a Nuu'Chah'Nulth woman, proud of her lineage, said:

> "…my great-grandmother was a really powerful woman; she was a leader; she taught us how to sing, to chant. Some of the songs she composed are used for our entertainment. She owned all kinds of chants and songs from the wolf society, thunderbird chants and hummingbird chants, and we still use them today."[20]

> "Her grandmother had told her, 'you represent this tribe, the tribe you dance for, or your family, you can dance for them'; my grandmother was the one who had all the knowledge and the history … she passed down the history, our lineage, our genealogy."[21]

Generations of knowledge are represented in these dances, songs and chants and the women recognise their responsibility in continuing the tradition of transferring knowledge to the younger generations, an undertaking the women are more than willing to maintain.

There are distinct songs for the different stages of life, and there are strict protocols to follow for each of these songs. When a daughter comes of age, a new song is created for that specific purpose; she now owns that song, it is her property, and you would need to ask permission from her, as the owner, to use that song. A new song was created from a dream experienced by a Nuu'Chah'Nulth mother prior to her daughter's coming-of age ceremony. The new song involved people singing, bringing the family closer together, and showing her daughter the right way to go, her journey in life.[22] Songs have a purpose: they support you, helping you to move forward in a positive way, giving strength. Songs are not just for entertainment but for a reason and the words spoken here endorse that statement.

> "Songs and dances are pretty but they have a purpose and they are supposed to do something; dances are graceful, they have a purpose, they are supposed to help you in life. It is all about helping you move forward in your life in a good way. They are not just for show and entertainment they have a purpose about why you do it, when you do it, how you do it."[23]

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19 Goodman, L.J. & Swan, H. *Singing the Songs of my Ancestors:* pp41-42; According to Helma Swan, the Makah word *p'a* means 'to throw', and *p'acil* means to throw gifts. The Makah/Nuu'Chah'Nulth speak of this activity as the 'giving of gifts' at a potlatch.
20 Interview with Genevieve, May 2010: p.18 transcript.
21 Ibid.,: pp5-6 transcript.
22 Interview with Eileen Haggard, May 2009: pp.15-17 transcript.
23 Interview with Anne Robinson, May 2009: p.7 transcript.

Songs and stories are essentially personal but change and evolve in the retelling, becoming a recurring activity carefully interwoven into Nuu'Chah'Nulth ritual and ceremony.

Birthing ceremonies and celebrations

Everyone in a Nuu'Chuh'Nulth community actively participates in the rearing and teaching of a child, and ceremonies are an important part of this process, as gatherings offer a wonderful opportunity for *ha-huu-pa* (teachings). Ceremonies occur from pre-birth to death. As women are the first teachers of newborns, female elders come forward and sing, once the pregnancy has been confirmed, telling stories about the birth of a child.[24] Before the birth there is the first naming ceremony when the unborn child is given a name. It is the role of grandmothers and elders to talk and talk to the unborn child so, when the baby is born, the child has already learned to listen; they already have knowledge, as it is said babies learn from the beginning.

For the Nuu'Chah'Nulth, birth is a sacred event in the circle of life; it is a powerful celebration of life that strengthens the people.[25] The moment I met one particular Nuu'Cha'Nulth elder, even before I had explained the purpose of the interview, she began telling me about women's strength when they gave birth, and about the whole birthing process. During the latter stages of pregnancy, she explained, the young mother was told what was going to happen. It was stressed that 'she mustn't tell anyone when the labour pains start, she mustn't talk about it at all. If you talk about things you'll have a hard labour.'[26] It was a time when women stayed at home, prepared everything, and gave birth on their own.

When the baby was born and was heard to cry, then the waiting women intervened to support the young mother by giving her herbal drinks which revitalised and strengthened her, by allowing her time to rest, to get to know her new baby, to wash and cleanse herself. The women did this by taking on everything else for the new mother: cleaning the room, washing clothes, preparing food and drinks, everything except looking after the needs of the baby.[27] A slightly different story was proffered during another interview, when it was suggested women supported the young woman through the birthing process itself. There is the possibility that that story may have referred to more recent times or even to a different band. However, the mother's responsibilities are similar in both versions, as described here:

> "[Women] worked right up until they were able to give birth. It was only women who were part of the birthing and were there to deliver the baby, all the women. You weren't allowed to scream because you didn't want your baby brought into the world screaming or hearing

24 Interview with Eileen Haggard, May 2009: p12 transcript.
25 Malloch, Lesley 'Indian Medicine, Indian Health', p.470 in Monture, P. & McGuire, P. *First Voices* p.466-479
26 Interview with Kathy Robinson, May 2009: p1 transcript
27 Ibid.; I believe Kathy was talking about the early part of the twentieth century as she was unsure of the date when women started attending hospital to give birth.

> screaming or being frightened so the woman was given a stick to bite down on to stop her from screaming."[28]

Once the child is born, disposing of the afterbirth was another sacred part of the birthing process. This particular celebration is the subject of a cultural revival. As babies were, historically, born at home, some experienced midwives and women from the local community ensured a short ceremony was carried out immediately after the birth. One woman's grandmother, who was very traditional, had taught her granddaughter how to 'work the afterbirth' immediately after her own mother had given birth to her younger brothers and sisters. 'Working the afterbirth', not just disposing of it, involved giving a value to the afterbirth, moving its influence forward by performing a 'small ceremony around the afterbirth.'[29] Today, when requested, a particularly skilful and knowledgeable Nuu'Chah'Nulth woman conducts these simple but meaningful and powerful afterbirth ceremonies for young mothers and their newborn babies. She feels very honoured to do so as the afterbirth has to be disposed of. Before the afterbirth is buried, blood is dropped onto the young mother's face to 'take away all the dark marks you get from being pregnant.'[30] The word is spreading. The skills have not been lost, the knowledge is still evident, traditional birth practices are once again being considered, and it is believed the revival of these practices is an inherent part of the decolonisation process.[31]

This delightful story was provided:

> "Not that long ago my daughter came to me and says "I've had your first grandson and I want you to work the afterbirth." I said I would be honoured. And the only thing I told her was 'my grandmother always put a few cents in with the afterbirth or whatever you want the child to be.' My daughter put a little hockey stick in with my grandson's afterbirth."[32]

There is a similar ceremony for the moment when the umbilical cord falls off, where the cord is removed and put into a container with different objects symbolising a family's expectations and hopes for the child later in life.[33] A Nuu'Chah'Nulth woman, who now has a law degree, had a pen included as her relatives wanted her to grow up to be very smart and academic and be very successful in her world.[34] The timing of the ceremony was reaffirmed when I was told that although the ceremony was usually carried out a few days after the birth, it was an event that could happen any time during the first year of life and one that occurred throughout the Nuu'Chah'Nulth nation.

28 Interview with Jackie Watts, May 2009: p19 transcript
29 Interview with Louise, April 2010: p1 transcript
30 Interview with Kathy Robinson, May 2009: p.2 transcript
31 Research on Dakota practices, American Indian Studies Department, University of Minnesota: research focuses on traditional midwifery, birth practices and knowledge of the Dakota/Lakota/Nakota Nation and their revival of these practices: accessed from H.AMINDIAN@H-NET.MSU.EDU, 25th February 2012.
32 Ibid, p5-6 transcript.
33 Interview with Genevieve, May 2010: p23 transcript.
34 Interview with Jackie Watts, May 2009: p15 transcript

> "It was believed that if you buried the belly-button with articles you wanted the child to be, to grow up to be good at sports or to be a singer, you would take whatever you wanted for that life and bury it in the yard with the belly-button."[35]

The reasons for these actions are obvious, as gently encouraging success is considered to be an optimistic and positive start to life.

With training and qualifications, these forward-looking Nuu'Chah'Nulth women can be understood as agents of change by balancing traditional methods and time-honoured ideas with current thinking. According to some of the women I interviewed, gaps still exist in traditional knowledge and in the passing of this knowledge. However, songs and ceremonies, beliefs and stories around birthing and caring for young children continue to be told and learned whenever there are gatherings.
In the past it was a common occurrence for Nuu'Chah'Nulth women to be midwives. This was just one of the many community health management roles they were involved in, together with medicine women, traditional doctors, women having a responsibility for disease prevention and health promotion in their communities.[36] Although the particular skills of midwifery had largely disappeared in the Nuu'Chah'Nulth communities by the beginning of the twentieth century, there is family evidence showing how midwifery skills have been transferred down through the generations.

> "Her mother was a midwife and I think there were three generations of midwives. … There were a couple of other midwives but it stopped with my grandmother's age because they didn't want to pass on the trauma and working with medical issues with families, so it stopped with my grandmother."[37]

These sentiments were reaffirmed by another woman when talking about her grandmother and great-grandmother, women who had the required skills and knowledge to be midwives, women who harvested medicines and plants from the forest for use in childbirth.

> "She was a midwife although that is not what it would have been called in our dialect but she was a very knowledgeable person in birthing, floating and assisting throughout the community."[38]

In her paper, Malloch asserts that midwives had important roles in the Nuu'Chah'Nulth community. These women were caretakers of the birth process, of new life, and this involved nutrition, herbs, gynaecology, pre-natal care, and natural childbirth.[39] Although some practices have returned, such as

35 Ibid, p. 16 transcript
36 Anderson, Kim 'Notokwe Opikiheet – 'Old Lady Raised': Aboriginal Women's Reflections on Ethics and Methodologies in Health' in Monture, P. & McGuire, P. *First Voices* p.507-519
37 Interview with Jackie Watts, May 2009: p.1 transcript. It is believed the issues relate to increased instances of tuberculosis and other imported diseases are difficult to manage with natural remedies.
38 Interview with Eileen Haggard, May 2009: p6 transcript.
39 Malloch, Lesley 'Indian Medicine, Indian Health' p.470 in Monture, P. & McQuire, P.; Dr Marlene Atleo draws on Nuu'Chah'Nulth origin stories to address the complexities and ambiguities of Aboriginal health beliefs, inclusive healthcare and nursing practice in Nursing Science Quarterly: *Nursing Practice with Aboriginal Communities: Expanding Worldviews*

the afterbirth ceremony, it would not be practical to completely embrace traditional ways, a sentiment endorsed by the women. However, by combining traditional practices and western medical knowledge, it is very feasible to provide an extremely supportive maternal and infant care system at home and in the community by women who are themselves living in these communities and who are also trained healthcare workers. Nuu'Chah'Nulth women have the skills and knowledge needed for the well-being of their families and communities, skills central to Nuu'Chah'Nulth life.

The women also speak of the intergenerational transfer of this knowledge between women. One particular comment quietly asserts this truth:

> "When my babies were really small babies, my elder sister said mum told them to wrap the babies up and put them outside. If you do that for at least five minutes a day they won't get sick; it helps to build up their immune system. I did that and I find that my children rarely get your common flu symptoms. It was something passed on that was really important and useful to do."[40]

Marking the First Year

Completing the first year of a child's life marks an important celebration for Nuu'Chah'Nulth children, for reaching one year old was considered to be a milestone in life. In the past, if a child survived their first year, it was believed they had the strength to grow and live. Although this is not such a crucial factor today, the end of the first year is still worthy of a celebration, a significant time in a child's life. It was the time a child received her formal name within a family gathering. It is the grandmothers and elders that decide the names. When the child is a year old, It is also the time of a traditional ceremony for cutting the hair. The whole family is invited to share a feast; it is the time when all the family songs and lullabies are sung.

> 'My grandmother and all her relations and friends would get together and decide on the names. Those names would take us throughout our lives so now we could become women as being held up means becoming a women with the utmost respect as you are the one who will bring life. There was lots of singing and dancing and story-telling.'[41]

Puberty and the Coming-of-Age Ceremony

Ensuring sustenance for the community and care for the young and old meant girls and women took on increasing responsibilities with age, historically and in the present time. The narratives express what girls encounter when they enter womanhood or the 'woman's cycle,' following puberty. When

July 2005, 19: 259-263 by Othmar F. Arnold & Anna Bruce, http://nsq.sagepub.com/content/18/3/259.full.pdf+html
40 Interview with Eileen Haggard, May 2009: p.14 transcript.
41 Interview with Jackie Watts, May 2009: p.10 transcript.

daughters come of age, a large and significant potlatch is held involving the whole family. It is the time the girls receive their 'young ladies name.'

> "If you had a coming-of-age for a girl it would be right away as she got her monthly period or it would wait until the spring when everything was new and you celebrate life, everything has to be new for her. In the spring when everything is new you are able to bring in new life as you now have the ability to bear children."[42]

At puberty, there is a distinct separation of genders and girls spend more time with the women of the community. The importance of the puberty ceremony was stressed time and again, as it is the time when girls are told they hold the physical and spiritual responsibility for maintaining the well-being, the life-force, the strength of the community through their ability to give birth. In one interview, a time in the early 1990s is remembered when a family was preparing a puberty ceremony for their two daughters. It was strongly emphasised it was the women who dealt with the detail of the ceremony, all the preparations, and the event itself.

> "One day some of the older ladies were talking about how it is the women who have the strong minds, that it is the women who remember, which is why it's important for young ladies when they become young women, you tell them good things because that is what they'll remember when they grow up, the things they need to know for their children and grandchildren; because that was always the teaching you would get. … As I got older I began to see more of the complexities of all the simple little phrases they would use as we were growing up, wheels within wheels … This is where it all began with humility and knowing who you are in your family and in the community; this is very important when you're growing up.[43]

People talked about the importance of *lisaak* - respect for women - explaining a girl's links to her family, who her mother is, who her grandparents are, especially her grandmothers: they 'bring her forward and say they would like her to be respected.'[44] At the heart of the Nuu'Chah'Nulth community is the expectation women are treated with respect and honour, a certainty repeatedly stressed. The respect for older women is recognised in ceremonies, so at coming-of-age ceremonies, young girls listen to their grandmothers asking the people gathered there to respect the girls throughout their lives.[45]

> "I think the strongest core value that has probably persisted is respect for women. Our sons and grandsons feel it very strongly. They are always very respectful to the women in our family. … The biggest sense I get and understand is that they [the men] have a responsibility to recognise that women are to be respected."[46]

42 Interview with Jackie Watts, May 2009: p.20 transcript.
43 Interview with Anne Robinson, April 2009: pp9-10 of transcript.
44 Interview with Eileen Haggard, May 4 2009: p.12 of transcript; many of the women were raised by their grandmothers.
45 Ibid., p.12 of transcript
46 Interview with Ina and Charlotte, 4 May 2009: p.18 and p.22 of transcript; see also interview with Eileen.

However, it is not just respect for women that is important; it was quietly asserted women should also respect themselves:

> "I think my grandmother always said you have to respect yourself no matter where you go or whatever you do. So act respectively, be respectable, and respectful."[47]

Respect for women is central to Nuu'Chah'Nulth beliefs. Men listen to and respect women's ideas; one interviewer said that Nuu'Chah'Nulth 'men still ask women and the women still tell them what should be done, what needed to be done.' Men do not make decisions until they speak to the women but 'it had to be done in private, it was always in private, and then the decision was taken back to the meeting.' Although it appears this comment relates to the past, I believe it also happens in the present, as this Elder was speaking about respect for and listening to women's ideas, saying: 'they listened to the women, and sometimes they would ask the women what they should do,' which reflects the protocols of two hundred years earlier when Captain Cook negotiated trade deals with the Nuu'Chah'Nulth people involving both men and women.[48]

The Importance of Water within Ceremonies

In the aboriginal worldview, the energies of water are closely linked with women because when children are born, water precedes the child; water is the first environment known to a child. In a context where, traditionally, Nuu'Chah'Nulth women have a special relationship to and respect for water, an archetypal symbol of fruition and childbirth, the significant role of water within ceremonies and Nuu'Chah'Nulth women's lives needs to be acknowledged. For these women, water offers life-giving forces accompanied by duties and responsibilities and it must be an integral part of a woman's life to have any significant meaning.[49] Towards this end, mothers and daughters spend time together in the forest, bathing and preparing for their important roles in social events and ceremonies, and cleansing in the sea for personal health. The following two references to cleansing rituals show this importance, instances that occurred over one hundred years apart, today and in the nineteenth century. In this first, an elder who was about eighty years old spoke of earlier times:

> "… That's where we stayed for a while to cleanse and cleanse and cleanse. I watched every woman take care of their bodies, drink what they had to to keep their insides clear. They made a brew of stinging nettles and drank that so they could clear their insides."[50]

47 Interview with Jackie Watts, 4 May 2009: p.23 of transcript.
48 Interview with Kathy Robinson, May 2009: p.5 of transcript. There were occasional interruptions as family members and her carer popped in to check who I was and what we were talking about, although no-one interrupted what was actually said. She was very eloquent about the women's oral tradition, saying if someone came for advice it was always the women that gave the advice and the men only added information if necessary.
49 Monture, P.A. & McGuire, P.D. *First Voices*: p.136.
50 Interview with Kathy Robinson, May 2009: p.4 transcript.

In recounting this story this elder was talking about her grandmother, who lived in the nineteenth century. The ritual of cleansing in the twenty-first century, *?o:simch*, is clarified by another in this second example: 'for all our ceremonies we did a cleansing', a custom that must not be rushed. On the morning of a memorial, mothers and daughters 'go out to bathe, talk to the creator, and to prepare themselves to come forward.'[51] Memorials can last two days with many people needing to be fed and watered during that time and daughters have an important role in food preparation, keeping the food flowing throughout the ceremony, supporting their mothers, grandmothers, and female elders, and standing up with them. This is known as 'an open-door policy'.[52]

In the mid-nineteenth century (1868), Gilbert Sproat records his observations of Nuu'Chah'Nulth women and water in his book *Scenes and Studies of Savage Life*. He remarks upon the frequency with which women wash themselves in fresh water, especially at the end of a working day, changing their clothes, and arranging their hair. He makes numerous references to water, bathing, and cleanliness:

> "Till beyond middle age many … [women] bathe every day in the sea, and in the winter they rub their bodies with oil after coming out of the water. … Mothers roll their young children in the snow to keep them hardy. … They wash often, the fresh air circulates around their bodies …"[53]

The Formalities of Death

Nowadays, many Nuu'Chah'Nulth women are trained health and community workers or drug councillors, able to combine traditional knowledge with new qualifications. They are a powerful group of women with the ability to tend to the needs and responsibilities of their families and communities, with an intensity of commitment which extends into all parts of life and death. They deal with the end as well as the beginnings of life with strength and tenacity.

Historically, on the death of a person, it was the women who attended the body and prepared it for burial. Once it was certain life had ended, the women cleansed the body and 'put them back into a foetal position. They get a big cedar mat and cover' the body.[54] In 1868, Gilbert Sproat described the preparation of the dead for burial as the women placed the body 'on a couch in a sitting position.'[55] Again, displaying an unexpected sensitivity towards women, Sproat realised women's hair is cut as a sign of grief:

51 Interview with Eileen Haggard, May 2009: p.12 transcript.
52 Ibid.
53 Sproat, G.M. (1868) *Scenes and Studies of Savage Life*, Smith, Elder & Co., London: Chapter IV Physical Appearance: pp24-26.
54 Interview with Delores Bayne, April 2010: p.13 transcript.
55 Sproat, G.M. (1868) *Scenes and Studies of Savage Life* Smith, Elder & Co., London with descriptions of preparing the dead for burial, p.257. Gilbert Sproat was an Indian Agent for the Nuu'Chah'Nulth region.

> "They cut the hair as a mark of respect for the dead. … The women display their grief openly. In their houses the women often talk about friends who have died; how they were respected; what great things they did."[56]

Similar observations were expressed in 2009, one hundred and fifty years later:

> "… All the women would come together and they would grieve and they would cut their hair as a sign of mourning because their hair represented a life, a lifeline, like a lifetime of enjoyment with that family member; … all of them who were related would cut their hair."[57]

The men take over the burial process by 'putting them back into the mother earth from where they came; it's like a womb, going back.'[58] Both women and men cleanse themselves afterwards 'as the last part of the ritual is to cleanse, to get the blessing and a sense of cleansing.'[59] These rituals give a sense of completing the life cycle. In historical times, burial of the dead was dealt with differently; some were buried in caves or on arches but the process was always handled with sensitivity.

> "They weren't buried in the ground until the settlers came. All the women would come together and they would grieve, they would cut their hair as a sign of mourning because their hair represented a life, a life … a lifetime of enjoyment with that family member, as a sign of loss. The women would scream and wail and cry for two or three days."[60]

Conclusion

As grandparents decline, the teachings and rituals of ancestors are now beginning to be taken over by younger family members, along with modern responsibilities and practices. Women's confidence in following traditional ways in the twenty-first century, such as women-centred approaches to pregnancy and childbirth supported and managed by the women in the community and grounded in the belief of women's power to give life, are quietly demonstrated in the communities today. These traditional ways were discussed by a number of women interviewed and linked to the teachings they had experienced from their elders when growing up, saying 'the grandmothers' teaching was very good.'[61]

These comments are significant, since they demonstrate that women's historical knowledge and roles are continuing into the present day. They acknowledge the transmission of skills and traditional practices, for instance, when managing girls' transition into adulthood through coming-of-age ceremonies, when dealing with afterbirth, when conducting the sea-urchin ceremony for health and

56 Ibid., p.262 in Chapter XXV, Usages in Burial.
57 Interview with Jackie Watts, May 2009: p.15 transcript.
58 Interview with Delores Bayne, April 2010: p.13 transcript.
59 Ibid.
60 Interview with Jackie Watts, May 2009: p.15 transcript.
61 Interview with Kathy Robinson, May 2009: p.11 transcript.

vitality, and when teaching and learning the Nuu'Chah'Nulth language. It is the authority of the women themselves which shapes and takes responsibility for the growing child and, in particular, which raises girls - as incoming members of the band - with the skills necessary to respect their elders, each other, and themselves. These skills have endured despite residential schooling. The women are comfortable with change, secure in the knowledge they can adapt to meet changing needs (something they have always done), as well as making effective use of those changes. Moreover, the women's stories establish future goals and endeavours for the next generation of Nuu'Chah'Nulth women. Through education and training, women's lives will continue to be transformed, and women will continue to encourage the dissemination of new and old ideas to families, groups, and intergenerational organisations. This demonstrates a remarkably high level of resilience among Nuu'Chah'Nulth women.

By applying their knowledge about the continued importance of life-stages and associated ceremonies in the communities today (and in the future), and ensuring education is positively contributing to the health and well-being of individual women, families and communities, the women believe the circle will re-connect. This is not a simple process or even a short one; I was told it will take seven generations to unite families and communities, to give them the skills, knowledge and strengths needed to evolve and progress. Nuu'Chah'Nulth women are firm in their conviction of the value of transmitting values, traditions and skills to daughters, granddaughters, and nieces, and to all female members of their extended families. They know that this ensures the continuity of knowledge, traditions, language, culture, and ceremony in an inter-generational exchange of ideas, knowledge and skills.

> "You see the power and strength within our women, today it's our younger women."[62]

Dr. Jacky Moore
September 2021

Biography

Dr. Jacky Moore is an independent researcher. These stories were part of her PhD Thesis for Canterbury Christ Church University, Kent, UK.

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