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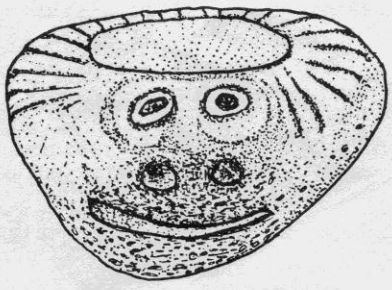

RITUAL BOWLS OF THE SALISH INDIANS: SOME THEORIES

by

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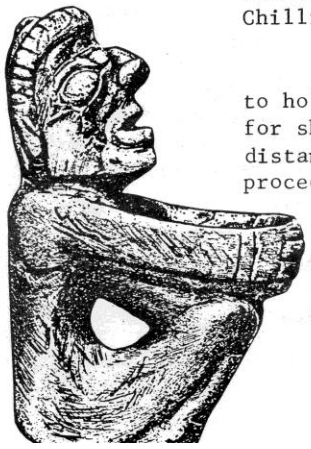
Two questions I am commonly asked when giving public demonstrations in artifact technology revolve around the use of stone bowls and whether or not individuals or families specialized in making these and other stone tools commonly found by the archaeologist. The purpose of this article is to 1) provide a brief summary of Wilson Duff's conclusions regarding his ethnographic survey of the use of human seated figurine bowls (as presented in Prehistoric Stone Sculpture of the Fraser River and Gulf of Georgia - Anthropology in British Columbia, No. 5, 1956); 2) to present two accounts of stone bowl use not mentioned by Duff; 3) to comment on the family ownership and production of some stone artifacts.

Duff's Conclusions

Duff is cautious in pointing out that the "accounts are fragmentary, and most were obtained by persons who little understood the intricacies of Salish religion." He concluded that some of the sculptured stone vessels were used in recent Salish culture by "shamans and (or) ritualists" and that "some at least, were made to represent guardian spirits." They could be used for clairvoyance, prophecy, curing, or other operations for which the shaman used his guardian spirit powers, and for the even greater range of use for which the ritualist used his spells - in life-crisis rites, sorcery, love magic, etc."

SALISH BOWL

Redrawn from Harlan I Smith, "Archaeology of Georgia & Puget Sound," 1907.



Some of the specific accounts in the literature surveyed include the use of a bowl for a girl's puberty ceremony in the Kamloops area, and to mix medicine and to bring rain in the Chilliwack area.

Duff emphasized that "all accounts agree that they were used to hold water, and in Salish culture in general, it is not uncommon for shamans and seers to use containers of water in which to see distant places, and for shamans to use water in their curing procedures."

Unpublished notes of Diamond Jenness, dated Oct. 27, 1935 provide information he obtained from Sechelt informants: "The stone figures with bowls in their laps were used to hold oil in (whale oil?) at potlatches; the Indians dipped their dried fish in

the oil. They were made - or many of them at least - by a family at Sechelt, and were carried to different places by the daughters of that family as they married. Enemies raided the village at Sechelt and carried off 2 figures, whereupon the family threw the remaining 6 or 7 in their possession into the water, lest they be carried off also. Some surviving members of the family probably know where they were thrown."

First Salmon Celebrated

Ellen Webber provided information from an "old Indian" living somewhere in the lower Fraser area in the 1890's. Although this article shows obvious Christian influence, its reference to the first salmon ceremony is basically in keeping with other ethnographic references:

> "The first fish caught in each village or camping place was offered to God, by burning. A small portion of the entrails was placed in a bowl with the heart and taken by the medicine man as far out into the Fraser as he could wade, and there it was held aloft and burned." (Webber 1899 p. 311)

In this circumstance no mention is made of the shape of the bowl. Could these be the fish-face-like bowls common on the Lower Fraser?

The well-known Sechelt Image, which Duff relates on a stylistic basis to the seated human-figure bowls, had a similar ownership claim to a specific family as the bowls mentioned by Jenness. When the Sechelt image was found c. 1921 it was "claimed by Dan Paull .... of Sechelt, who recognized it as a mortuary stone of his family, which, as an uncle related to him, had disappeared many years ago, during an epidemic of smallpox. It had formerly been set up to the memory of the wife of a chief" (Duff 1956:89).

Family Owned Bowl

The passing of ownership of stone bowls through the female line was mentioned in a story related to Hill-Tout: "The Chilliwack formerly possessed a large stone statue of a human being. It was owned by a certain family, and was taken to the neighbouring Sumas tribe by a woman who married into that tribe." (Maud 1978:55). In this story there is no tradition of bowls being made by the family: "This statue was said to be the work of Quqals, who one day passing that way saw a man and wife, who in some way displeased him, and were in consequence transformed into stone statues." (Ibid) One may surmise from this that the statue in question could have been found as an archaeological specimen by the Indians and passed through the family. This is certainly a possibility that we have to keep in mind. We simply do not know what would be done with a stone figure found archaeologically by Indian people in the prehistoric or early historic period. Would it be reincorporated into a new ritual?

This is certainly possible. At present the Jenness story is unique in stating that the bowls were "made" by at least one specific family.

Boas reports inherited use of hafted hammer heads on Vancouver Island:

> "The Kwakiutl claim that grooved and perforated stone hammers with long handles (dexuma'no), like those of the Bella Bella and other northern tribes, were not made. It is said that about 1840, a hammer of this type was introduced through the inter-marriage of a Kwakiutl and a Bella Bella; and the hammers are still called "Do'qwa-is" hammers from the name of the person who first introduced them. Their use has always remained confined to Do'qwa-is and to his descendents." (Boas 1909, p. 314).

Conclusion: Evidence is Sparse

The evidence for specific uses of stone human figure bowls and that for the family use and making of stone artifacts among the Salish is still very sparse. Most of the ethnographic information was collected at a late time period long after the traditional use of these items and should be viewed with caution.

The specific use of some of these bowls will undoubtedly be determined by on-going and future analytical laboratory techniques which examine the micro-residue left on them. The question of family ownership and manufacture of bowls and handmauls is certainly an interesting one that may shed some light on the process of artifact diffusion. Although the evidence is weak for select family production and ownership we should keep this in mind when examining the distribution of some artifacts on both an intersite and intrasite basis.

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