



In the course of my work with the Native peoples of the Northwest Coast, I have had the opportunity to meet many hereditary chiefs. Like the peoples of Europe, Northwest Coast peoples drew their leaders from certain elite families, who were viewed as divinely ordained and categorically distinct from the commoners. Unlike most peoples of Europe, if a hereditary chief was despotic or miserly, they were easily replaced by contending chiefs, who might serve the people better. They were trained from birth to assume their proper role in society. They were providers, caretakers, group organizers. They were called upon at every turn to earn the loyalty of their people.

Recently, one hereditary chief tried to explain their traditional roles to me with a few carefully selected examples. A chief would walk up and down the shoreline as the people fished for salmon. Once the people had caught enough to sustain themselves and provide a little extra for ceremonies and trade, once all omens lined up in the proper sequence, the chief would announce that it was time to stop. Now, the fish would be protected: to earn the fishes' respect, to provide for the people upstream, to insure that there would be enough fish for the village's grandchildren, and their grandchildren in the time to come. At other times the chief would walk from house to house, asking what each family needed to survive the season ahead, maybe firewood, or fish, or berries. At each place, the chief would call together a work party from the village to seek out these things for the residents of that house. Each house was visited in turn. Each person helped provide for the whole group, and the whole group helped provide for each person. It was, they tell me, a very good system.

So much has changed on this coast. Traditional societies have been pulled apart by any number of forces: missionaries, traders, diseases, alcohol, poverty, residential schools; more recently, it has been the gradual disappearance of the salmon, the sexy, counterfeit gleam of rock videos, North American youth culture, urban amenities. Yet, here and there, the hereditary chiefs hold on, trying to serve their people in ways that are compatible with their traditional roles. At the close of the 20th century, their chiefly duties are manifested in ways that their ancestors never could have imagined. I think of R., a hereditary chief of the Nuu-chah-nulth, born into his chiefly family's longhouse, but whisked away to a residential school as a child. Culturally ambidextrous, he now advises college students and his own people on how to survive through changing economic times, and seeks to protect their wild salmon from industrial fish farms and logging operations that increasingly occupy their traditional lands. He also advises me, as well as other outsiders, on how to most effectively communicate with his people. I think of J., one of the last people to be raised in an all-Tillamook village, and a descendant of the last chief to reign on Tillamook lands. He fights mightily through Federal red tape -- attempting to protect the rights of his people when dredges unearth their burial sites, seeking to have his people formally recognized as a Tribe. I think of E., whom I recently met, a kind old fellow who speaks on his peoples' behalf, negotiating with government and timber representatives so that his people might not lose control of their sacred places, resource areas, and old village sites. One of his chiefly ancestors, whose name he bears, was also a celebrated negotiator during the fur trade, entertaining and befriending the earliest English, Spanish, and American visitors to this coast. Only once did this famed ancestor lose his composure: when the American captain of a trading ship, the same captain, the same ship, that founded Fort Astoria, slapped this chief around during routine trade negotiations with customary racist chutzpah, the chief responded in a manner reminiscent of our own European royalty. He quietly packed up his things, left, returned that evening with troops, killed almost everyone on board, sank the ship, and enslaved the survivors. I went out of my way to be extra polite to E.

And I think of another hereditary chief, far more traditional than most. When it became apparent, around the turn of the century, that the colonial assault on native cultures was having pervasive effects, his people isolated several youngsters of chiefly "noble blood" on remote inlets. He was among them. These children were designated as the future generation of hereditary chiefs, who might lead in the time-honored way once colonial influences subsided. For years, these youngsters were drilled in all aspects of traditional life and chiefly duties, in isolated villages where white influence was negligible and English was never spoken. When this last generation of traditional chiefs emerged from their villages, the cultural confrontation was just about over, and they were not on the winning side; it was clear that colonial influences were not going to disappear as they had hoped. Recently, I have had the good fortune to get to know this chief, to befriend him, to be his guest. As one of a handful of well-trained hereditary chiefs, he is sought out by other elders to preside over ceremonial events; this is both his

birthright and his obligation. But in recent years, many of his chiefly duties have grown less conventional, by necessity. He teaches me, an outsider, a researcher, so that his knowledge might be preserved for his descendants. (Few of his own young people currently seek him out: "All the young people, the Indians, want to be white. And all the whites want to be Indians! This is crazy!" But lately, he has been preoccupied by the construction of a longhouse.

His home is now surrounded by pieces of the longhouse, as a nearby building site is being prepared. It is amazing to see, these huge cedar logs, taking shape into totem poles, house posts, cross beams. (The cedar is seldom logged by the Native peoples, who have lost control over their own territories. More often than not, timber companies donate a few old-growth cedar logs to these people as a public relations gesture, after these companies have logged the old growth off each band's traditional lands.) Supernatural beings slowly crawl out from the fragrant wood grain, aided by the chief's adze. Over here, there is thunderbird and Dzonokwa, the wild woman of the woods, taking form in the wood, crests from the chief's family. These are creatures that played an important role in the creation of his people. And there, on the cross-beams is sisiutl, the two-headed sea serpent, who attacks and devours people walking alone on the beach. Some say that one head is male, the other female, one hot, the other cold; it is yin and yang, in serpent form. If one attacks you, stand firm. Do not run. The two heads will meet as it lunges, opposing forces will meet, and you will achieve tremendous spirit power. The old chiefs knew people who had gained this power; they saw how powerful and enlightened sisiutl's near-victims could become. Some report seeing sisiutl in recent years. And there are totem poles, alive with ancient animals, retelling events from his peoples' past.

Some young carvers have rediscovered their craft. A few of them construct cedar doo-dads for tourists and art dealers, are skeptical about the truth of the old tales. But there are these elders with traditional training and chiefly status, for whom carving is a consecrated act. The carving of each component of a longhouse is a particularly solemn event: there are strict protocols, ways of relating to the tree, the creatures one represents, the ancestors who owned the stories. There are things one must and must not do. A longhouse that is built with these protocols, they suggest, will have a power, an energy that exists somewhat independent of the people who occupy the house. A longhouse that is not built according to these protocols will merely be a house, an inert, huge cedar box.

There are also very specific ways that the longhouse must and must not be used once it is built. There are spaces for powerful things, and other spaces devoted to mundane things. There are greetings and proclamations that must be made when the longhouse is first occupied. The house must be given a proper name. But most importantly, there is a certain role that the longhouse must have in society, if it is to function, if it is to be powerful. It is to be a nexus of community life -- a place for remembering the past, and negotiating plans for the future. It is to be a place to which a community comes together to announce births, to celebrate marriages, to mourn deaths. It is to be a place where debts are repaid, where wealth is redistributed to the less fortunate. It is to be a place for feasting, for dancing and singing, for retelling tales by the fire. It is a place for teaching, for bestowing honorific names, for making public announcements. How can so many functions be summarized? It is central. It is the place where the community's soul resides. It is to be a space that holds the disparate, messy, sometimes conflicting pieces of a society together, in one place, a consecrated place, in a spirit of community, in a spirit of mutual respect.

At the close of this century, a century during which traditional societies have come apart at the seams, it is no wonder that this chief, late in life, has chosen to devote his energies to building a longhouse. He is among the wisest, most traditional chiefs left. He sees that his people scatter in every direction, like eagle down in the wind. He sees that the people of this time have lost that spirit of community and mutual respect. They have no core, no center, and they need one badly. The longhouse represents one of his last, big attempts to provide for his people. Like his ancestors watching the salmon, protecting the interests of their unborn descendants. Like his ancestors, walking door to door, asking each family "What is it you need?" They need a center, a place to gather, a sense of community that overrides their petty internal conflicts. They need a place to educate their children about their past, and a place to celebrate, talk, and sing, together. A longhouse just might make a difference.

A public S.H.E.D. meeting, addressing the fate of Logan Creek on the north end of Cannon Beach as well as the downtown wetlands, will be held on Saturday, July 24th at 10:00 a.m. at Cannon Beach City Hall. As discussed in last month's Ecola Ilahee. The meeting is open to the interested public, and represents a rare opportunity to express your views on the fate of our City's wetlands and streams. Be there!

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