Lower Columbia Chinookan Ceremonialism

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Citation Details

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Traditional Chinookan ceremonies or religious rituals were particularly vulnerable to the rapid changes that came with Euro-American contact. Change and loss occurred after the epidemics of the 1830s removed many specialists and broke apart the critical mass of people needed for group performances; and in the early 1840s, when missionaries at the surviving settlements at Willamette Falls, The Cascades, and the mouth of the Columbia discouraged traditional life rites. After such experiences, the details on what was practiced and the belief system behind it remained mostly in the minds of a few traditionalist survivors.

This reconstruction of what went before is based on two sets of data: eyewitness accounts of practices from the early contact period and ethnographic information collected from Chinookan informants between 1890 and 1936. Extant accounts were compared, identifying both recurring elements and passages that are judged to be particularly reliable, and recombined into configurations or geographically limited clusters. Complete firsthand or remembered accounts of single ceremonies have been especially valuable sources.

Anthropologists like to discuss religious systems under two broad categories: belief systems and the rituals that often act out the beliefs. Lower Columbia belief systems—a species of animism, or belief in nature spirits—are explored by Dell Hymes and Bill Seaburg in this volume (ch. 8). In cultures where traditions are passed on orally, ceremonials tend to vary a great deal from performance to performance, from place to place, and from one time to another. Anthropologists of religion have noted that ceremonial segments, or elements, may easily be dropped or added and moved around and that this accounts for much of the variation in ceremonial practices in the
Pacific Northwest (e.g., Gunther 1928; French 1955). At the same time, however, a common purpose, or theme, tends to hold them together. Ceremonials have been interpreted as a cultural means of giving meaning to otherwise inexplicable biological events or ecological realities (Malinowski 1948), such as changes in the life cycle or recurring yet variable fish runs, and of bringing together and anchoring groups of people to their own shared intuitive non-material cultural or belief systems, as in winter spirit dances.

Ceremonials can be discussed under two broad headings: calendrical rites and rites of passage. Calendrical rites mark recurring (usually annual) natural or social events—for Lower Columbia Chinookans, the First Salmon ceremony and winter spirit dances. Rites of passage mark changes in the life cycle, such as birth, puberty, mating (marriage), and death (funerals) and the social statuses that go along with them: child, adult, spouse, ancestor. All ceremonials are saturated with specific ritual behaviors that may be hard to comprehend when viewed in isolation; but when they are matched with what is known from the underlying belief system, such behaviors may be eminently logical. I will discuss two calendrical rites—the First Salmon ceremony and winter spirit dancing—and two rites of passage in the life cycle—head flattening and the practices and beliefs surrounding death.

FIRST SALMON CEREMONY

The First Salmon ceremony is a defining trait of the Northwest Coast culture area, occurring among almost all of the Native cultures from the Alaska Panhandle south to the Klamath River. It is the most prominent of a series of First Food rites that celebrate the arrival of seasonally important wild foods, found throughout the region but more diverse in the interior Northwest (or Plateau culture area). The common thread in these rituals was the belief that each species had a spiritual manifestation that had to be ritually honored if it was to return in abundance year after year. Given the fluctuation in most of these species’ natural cycles and without the control over supply that domestication brings, it is not surprising that ritual behaviors tended to cluster around economically important animals and plants. This is particularly the case with that resource most important to Native Northwest Coast peoples’ survival, salmon (see ch. 4 in this volume). Lower Columbia Chinookans also may have celebrated First Food rites for sturgeon (Ray 1938:110; Jacobs 1958–59:222) and elk (Lee and Frost 1968:283; Boas 1894:265).

The data on the Lower Columbia Chinookan First Salmon ceremony...
come from over a score of accounts, full and partial, ethnographic and his-
torical. The most important is a cluster of descriptions from the journals of
the Astorians, a detailed record from the missionary Joseph Frost in 1841,
George Gibbs's summary from the 1850s, and later accounts from three river-
mouth Chinook and one Clackamas informants—Silas Smith (1901), Charles
Cultee (Boas 1894), Emma Luscier (Ray 1938, 1942), and John Wacheno
(Drucker 1934).

The June 6, 1811, entry in the headquarters log of the Pacific Fur Company
at Fort Astoria records the first encounter of the fur traders with this unusual
ritual:

They [Chinooks] have salmon in great plenty, but from a superstitious
idea they entertain that boiling & cutting it across will prevent them from
coming into the River until the next new Moon, they have brought us Very
few & those they insisted on dressing & roasting themselves. We at first
suspected it was from some plan they had formed to starve us. (McDougall
1999:20)

Eight days later, “Comcomly & Kamaquiah paid us a visit, the former brought
15 small Salmon for a feast, but the whole to be eaten before sun set, & had it
prepared by his own people” (24).

Alexander Ross (2000) explained and elaborated on what the Astorians
recorded:

When the salmon make their first appearance in the river, they are never
allowed to be cut crosswise nor boiled, but roasted, nor are they allowed to
be sold without the heart being first taken out, nor to be kept over night;
but must be all consumed or eaten the day they are taken out of the water;
all these rules are observed for about ten days. These superstitious customs
perplexed us at first not a little, because they absolutely refused to sell as
any unless we complied with their notions, which we of course consented
to do. (97)

Astorian Gabriele Franchère (1969) added that the Chinook believed that if
these rules were not followed then “the river would be obstructed and the
fishing poor that season” (96).

Taken together, the earliest accounts present the basic elements of the
Lower Chinook First Salmon ceremony, which recur in the later records:
failure to observe the ritual will negatively affect the run; the heart must be removed (and treated ritually); dogs must not eat the heart; the fish must never be cut crosswise (lengthwise was prescribed); fish caught in the morning must be eaten that afternoon, always before sunset (less often stated: all in one day); the usual mode of cooking is roasting; ritual restrictions and/or sale to outsiders continued for about a month (Ross’s “ten days” probably refers to some restrictions, not all).

By far the most detailed description of the Lower Chinook First Salmon ceremony comes from Methodist missionary Joseph Frost (1934) at Clatsop in 1841. On April 24, Frost (and his wife, presumably) “were invited to partake of three very fine” salmon “by the people of Wasalsal’s lodge; the first taken by them this season.” Frost described the butchering of the salmon in great detail: flanks were removed and roasted on spits, and the rest of the fish was cooked on a scaffold. The host did all the preparation but did not eat; the missionaries were served first, then guests, then lodge inhabitants. The proper preparation of the fish, always indoors, and consumption, always in the afternoon, seemed to constitute “a kind of sacred right [sic]” that was “strictly observed by all the natives in this region” “until the strawberries [salmonberries is intended] ripen.” After that, restrictions were lifted, trading started, and everyone could “cook and eat their salmon as they see fit.” If the ritual was not followed, Frost was told, then “the weather would become stormy & they would not be able to catch any more salmon” (162–63).

Frost did not stop with a simple description of the practices. As Christian communion is explained by the story of the Last Supper, the missionary searched for the story behind the behavior. He found it in a “Talapus” (Coyote) myth. As Frost retold it, Coyote came “from the south” and, “finding the people” with no food but land animals and birds, “made” salmon. He then “made a seine,” with Coyote in a canoe and Snake ashore with the land line, which he threw, and caught “a great draught of salmon” that he took to the people to eat. Coyote then

learned their fathers how to cut the fish and roast them, and told them that for some time they must eat only in the afternoon of each day, and that if any of them should touch a dead body, or . . . if their women, under certain circumstances [“circumstances” being a circumlocution for menstruating] should look upon a salmon net . . . until the berries began to ripen . . . which is about the first of June . . . the salmon would all leave the river . . . But as soon as the specified time arrived they were at liberty to cook the salmon.
as they might see proper, and sell them to whom they pleased . . . they fully believe that this is a law imposed upon them by their deity, and that distressing results would follow, namely, the removal of all the salmon, if this law should be transgressed. (300–1)

Frost’s description is the most comprehensive one available, but it does not mention everything. An important omission is the ritualized treatment of the heart, first noted by Ross and mentioned in half of the accounts. A more complete description of this comes from 1835: “Before the fish is split and prepared for eating, a small hole is made in the breast, the heart taken out, roasted, and eaten in silence, and with great gravity” (Townsend 1999:162). Details vary, but disposition of the heart appears to have been important. Many accounts say that if a “stranger” or a “dog” ate the heart, then the salmon runs would fail (e.g., Wilkes 1845: 324, 119). The fear of a dog eating the heart is clearly akin to the proscriptions on those who touched a corpse or on menstruating women: all were ritually unclean. It is a common theme in Northwest Coast religion that spirits are offended by ritual impurity or uncleanliness and that they will stay away or be driven away if such people or actions are present.

There is also more to say about Frost’s statement that the first salmon were those taken “by the people of Wasalsal’s lodge” and that the fish were prepared “by one man, and only one” who did not eat the fish himself. Who was this person? On the Lower Columbia, Emma Luscier said, “The fisherman obtaining the first salmon. . . . acted as ritualist” (Ray 1938:110), and it was he who invited the guests to his lodge for the ceremonies. When the Astorians were finally invited to eat salmon, it was “Concomly and Kamaquiah,” local chiefs, who supervised the goings-on. On Puget Sound, the family that owned the local weir or, more specifically, the family head who had access to net-making materials was in charge (Meeker n.d.). So it may be that the high-ranking man who owned the seine that caught the first fish was ritual leader on the Lower Columbia.

Lower Columbia Chinookans did not take spring-run chinook, probably because lower river levels restricted the fish to the deep waters of the middle of the river, where seines could not be used. Instead, “first fish” were caught in June when higher river levels brought the runs closer to shore. Also of interest is the month-long period between the arrival of the first salmon and the appearance of salmonberries, when ritual restrictions applied, fishing of salmon was off-limits to outsiders, and salmon was not traded. This period


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of restricted access may have been a cultural response to the unpredictability of the summer runs and may have prevented overharvest.

So, the First Salmon ceremony on the Lower Columbia was unique. It did not have many of the better-known elements of the ceremony farther north, including a “salmon priest,” an altar with fish treated as high-ranking guests, a fish’s head pointed upstream, and the return of the bones to the river. There is no mention of salmon spirits living across the sea, in human form, donning salmon clothing for the run, and returning as spirits to the ocean to repeat the cycle again (Drucker 1965:95). The Lower Columbia ceremony emphasized proper preparation in a single lodge and observance of taboos for a month before everyone was allowed to fish without restrictions. The mythological “charter” that has survived from the Chinook does not identify the first fish as “chief of salmon” who leads his flock upstream and who must be honored ritually if he is to return and lead the runs in following years. Instead, the background myth highlights Coyote’s Myth Age introduction of salmon and fishing methods, plus a lengthy list of taboos that must be observed if the runs are to be maintained.

Frost’s salmon story appears to be a shorter version of a myth that Franz Boas collected twice from Charles Cultee in the 1890s. Cultee’s “Coyote Myth” dates from the Myth Age and is concerned with the institution of seine fishing and taboos related to salmon fishing and processing, though neither version emphasizes the introduction of salmon per se. Cultee’s versions have Coyote fishing for salmon, on the first day successfully and on the second day unsuccessfully. Then, in frustration, he asks his “sisters,” resident in his gut, what he did wrong. (The “sisters” recur in many Coyote myths, always at hand, always advising Coyote on proper behavior.) This happens many times in succession, and each time the sisters relate a new set of taboos that must be observed if the fish are to return to be caught (Boas 1901:45-49). The Chinook Texts version, which is longer, begins at Neacoxie Creek in Clatsop territory, and the “sisters” advise on proper butchering (lengthwise, not crosswise), cooking (on spits), roasting, and keeping the fish away from menstruating women or those who have touched corpses (Boas 1894:101-6).

Then, interestingly, Coyote moves upstream from Neacoxie, fishing at new places and encountering new and unfamiliar taboos at each location. The myth clearly expresses his increasing frustration with the many rules and probably is a projection of how many Chinooks actually felt. But it also indicates—and this is an important point—that first salmon taboos, and probably ceremonial elements as well, differed for each village and drainage...
system on the Lower Columbia. For the neighboring Tillamook, Boas (1923) wrote, “There was a separate method of treating the fish for every river. . . . The methods of cutting the fish were different” (9–10).

There are only a few records of First Salmon rituals for Chinookan peoples between Kathlamet and The Cascades. In 1934, John Wachenö recalled some distinct elements: five “crane heads” of wood were set up on the river’s banks; the first five salmon taken had their heads burned off; there was no gambling at this time; and when “cooked”—roasted not specified—“everyone took a bite.” Then—and this is the only clear documentation of this element for the Lower Columbia—“Salmon bones thrown back in river, became salmon again” (see Boyd 1996:128, 174; Boas 1923:9–10; Jacobs 2003:204).

From The Cascades, there is only the following:

B.B. Bishop, one of the earliest builders of steamboats on the Columbia . . . told the writer that the Indians at The Cascades had a spring festival with the first run of salmon. They would boil whole the first large salmon caught, and have a ceremony in which the whole tribe would pass in procession around the fish, each taking a bit. They exercised the utmost care to leave the skeleton intact, so that at the end it had been picked clean but with not a bone broken. (Lyman 1915:382)

WINTER SPIRIT DANCING

Compared to the First Salmon ceremony, documentation for what was undoubtedly the major ceremonial activity of the Lower Columbia Chinookans, the cycle of winter spirit dances, is sparse. Early white observers were rarely privy to these rituals, so the more complete documentations come from Charles Cultee, Emma Luscier, and Clackamas-speaking Victoria Howard. Verne Ray (1942), the compiler of Lower Chinook Ethnographic Notes, was very interested in the winter ceremonies, though much had already been lost by the time he collected his information from Emma Luscier in the early 1930s. By comparing the Chinook notes to data from upriver Plateau peoples, however, he was able to generate a general outline for the winter spirit dances.

Spirit dancing took place during the coldest two months of winter and consisted of five-day dances held sequentially in different houses. Hosts might be shamans, wealthy men, or fathers seeking public recognition of the new guardian spirit of their offspring. The dances were open to all,
and consisted primarily of individual singing and dancing representing, symbolically, one’s guardian spirit. Recognition of new spirit powers and power performances by people with unusual and strong powers might occur. Gifts were distributed, usually to guests, at the end of each five day session, but sometimes at other points in the ceremonies.

Accounts are rare, so we must turn to a myth text for the flavor of the river-mouth spirit dance. Cultee’s “ūpanpan [skunk] her story” describes a spirit dance held by Myth Age people. Skunk is “a chieftainness” who “made a large house and invited the people.” Blue-jay is her assistant and gift distributor. Several spirit people come and dance, and the songs they sing hint at their identity. The “Maggots” dance first, singing “We make move the rotten meat.” Blue-jay gifts them with a mountain goat blanket. They are followed by geese, who sing “We pull out the sea grass, the sea grass” and are gifted with a goose-skin blanket. Then elks: “We hiss on bluffs” and are gifted with an elkskin gift; and wolves: “We carry deer-fawns in our mouths; we have our faces blackened” and are gifted with a wolf blanket. Grizzlies follow, along with inc’ξ birds, gray cranes, and rabbits, each with characteristic songs and gifts. The myth ends with a miraculous performance by skunk, the hostess, who “made wind [farted] and the whale fell down dead.” The assembled guests then feast on whale meat (Boas 1894:147-48).

Melville Jacobs (1929–30) recorded several spirit power songs from Mrs. Howard. The animal power songs—rabbit, owl, grizzly, mouse, bear, chipmunk—are cryptic and descriptive like Cultee’s songs. Mrs. Howard sang others, however, that were not animals—sunset, fire, lightning—and many that she could not identify. “In some songs,” she told Jacobs, “they kind of name their power in the song so people know what the power is, but in other songs the people can not tell what the power is.” The songs could be a kind of charade, or they might simply mystify (adding to the power). Mrs. Howard never knew what her own mother’s power was, but her maternal grandmother’s was fog. When her grandmother performed, she wore her hair long and loose and sprinkled with goose down, painted her face red, and danced with “arms outstretched . . . hands and palms facing out,” apparently alternating with thumping on the floor with her cane. She sang: “Towards dawn the early morning mist e . . . ai” and “the others in the crowd followed her song and danced as she danced” (see Jacobs 1959a:ch. 15).

Both Emma Luscier and Mrs. Howard described how the guardian spirit power of “novices” (post-spirit quest youths) was recognized and initially...
expressed at the spirit dances. According to Luscier, the novice—who had been experiencing the type of malaise called “spirit illness,” indicating that he had acquired a guardian spirit—neither slept nor ate during the five-day run of the dance, “until he heard a song which satisfied him, relieved his illness” (Ray 1938:81–83). Mrs. Howard told of a young man who fainted during the ceremonies and did not respond to a burning ember on his hand, both signs of spirit possession. Following this public display, his father had to throw a five-day dance and give-away recognizing his new power (Jacobs 1958–59:544, 658–59).

Winter dances were compulsory for people with unusual and strong spirit powers to express them publicly. The records record a few “power performances” cryptically and three in more detail. As on the British Columbia Coast, some of these involved a degree of legerdemain, while others were more or less straightforward. It is not possible to say how much was fact and how much was illusion. Emma Luscier mentioned “holding hot stones” and said that “Sam Millet’s spirit was an owl, and like the owl he was able to swallow snakes” (Ray 1938:84). John Wacheno said: “Person with power from fire—could light pipe without fire (holding in sun), handle hot stones drink boiling water.”

“Dog-eating,” well known as a ceremonial element from the British Columbia Coast and fully documented from The Dalles (Boyd 1996:130, 138–39), is also reported from Willamette Falls:

May 23, 1845 . . . A year ago last winter at the Falls of Wallamette an Indian thus ate a dog after which his long hair was cut off, singed & cut off by him. If he lived through this operation he was to be denominated a great doctor among his people, also a chief or ruler. He was sick sometime & came very near dying but finally recovered & lives to enjoy the acknowledged honors. (Alvan Waller, cited in Boyd 1996:138)

In everyday life, dogs were considered to be the animals closest to humans and never were eaten.

Similar to dog-eating was what Mrs. Howard called “Bird blood spirit-power,” but here the performer drank bird blood. Blood was food for the dancer’s guardian spirit, and sometimes the performer cut his arms and drank the blood (Jacobs 1958–59:505-6). This last behavior—gashing—may be a different power performance from blood-eating. At The Dalles, people who gashed themselves during spirit dances were demonstrating strength
and invulnerability to pain, and the scars remained as evidence of their bravery. Outside of a ceremonial context, gashing was observed near Fort George in the early 1830s:

In times of pretended inspiration, and communion with the Great Spirit, they seize a fleshy part of the body, about the stomach and ribs, in one hand, and plunge a dagger right through the fold, without drawing blood. This act is taken as a proof of their invulnerability—a favour granted by the Great Spirit [more properly by a particular guardian spirit]. I have seen some of them thus gashed all over the front of the body. While I was in charge of Fort George, one of these crafty old priests prepared to perform this operation in my presence. He grasped a handful of his flabby flesh, and drew his dagger. But I instantly checked him. (Dunn 1844:91–92)

Cultee said that each gash represented a person killed (Boas 1893a:41). All of the other activities were outlandish or risky, if not outright dangerous, and all indicated strong powers.

The performances that are more frequently reported from Lower Columbia Chinookan lands involve magical movements of inanimate objects: effigies, power sticks, and power boards. A Kathlamet tale related by Cultee describes a dancing figure: "one man at Nisal sang his conjurer's song. A small figure of a supernatural being was made of cedar wood. When this man, who had a supernatural helper, sang, then the cedar figure moved and danced.... it went to and fro five times in the house.... All the people went to see it. They were surprised" (1901: 201–3). Wachen described a half-Kalapuya Clackamas whose spirit power controlled "wooden dolls which he could make dance by his singing" (Drucker 1934).

"Dancing stick" performances were recorded from Kathlamet (Gibbs 1955–56:137–38) and The Cascades (Kuykendall 1889). In her description of a performance, Emma Luscier said the sticks were the same as the batons used as drumsticks on the roof rafters and were several feet long, with feathers and other objects attached two-thirds of the way up (Boyd 1996:123–24). Gibbs (1955–56) said that the sticks were "carved and painted." In the spirit performances, the sticks moved magically by their own power: at Kathlamet, "a rapid and tremulous motion was communicated to them, the operator holding them near one end." Other people tried to stop their movement, but could not, and "their hands become clenched so that they cannot be disengaged"
until the operator blew on them. The action stopped when the spirit power owner suddenly threw his hands in the air (137–38).

At The Cascades, the power owner passed the sticks to someone in the audience, who was unable to let go and was “jumped up and down around the lodge” until “the stick raised up violently, uplifting the man’s arms,” and he fell down in “a state of cataleptic rigidity.” Not until the power owner made movements over him was the man able to let go and “awake.” The power sticks were also reported to “stand or dance about alone and even remain suspended in the air.” Informants described a “sensation” like “electric current” while holding the sticks: “Their muscles were thrown into a state of tonic spasm, so that they found it impossible to let go.” This statement might sound suspicious if it were not duplicated by another account collected from a Twana elder in southern Puget Sound in the 1930s (see Elmendorf 1992:185; Adamson 1934:193; Olson 1936:155).

Beyond individual spirit songs, dances, and power performances, there is little evidence that Chinookan peoples possessed anything like the “dancing societies” of the northern Northwest Coast. The complex North Coast form of the potlatch was absent, though gifting was pervasive. Mrs. Bertrand said that Concomly gained knowledge of the form of a dancing society through purchase of a northern slave (Ray 1938:91) and Cultee described a potlatch performance (Boas 1894:268–69), but Ray (93) believed both to be late overlays from the north. My survey of the historical and ethnographic literature turned up no other examples.

**HEAD FLATTENING**

Pregnancy and birth constituted a particularly dangerous transition period for both mothers and their babies, and a cluster of taboos surrounded those events. Immediately after birth or shortly following, children were placed in a special cradle for head flattening, one of the hallmark customs of the Lower Chinookans (see ch. 7 in this volume). A practice that was more closely related to social ranking than to rituals of transition, head flattening was described by almost all who wrote about Chinookan peoples from 1792 into the early 1900s, and we have over 30 separate accounts on the custom.

We know about two varieties of head-flattening cradles that were characteristic, more or less, of the lower river and the Portland Basin. In 1834, John Townsend (1999) reported:
The Wallammet Indians [observed at Clackamas village at Gladstone] place the infant soon after birth, upon a board, to the edges of which are attached little loops of hempen cord or leather, and other similar cords are passed across and back, in a zig-zag manner, through these loops, enclosing the child and binding it firmly down. To the upper end of this board, in which is a depression to receive the back part of the head, another smaller one is attached by hinges of leather, and made to lie obliquely upon the forehead, the force of pressure being regulated by several strings attached to its edge, which are passed through holes in the board upon which the infant is lying, and secured there. The mode of the Chinooks, and others near the sea, differs widely. . . . A sort of cradle is formed by excavating a pine [cedar] log to the depth of eight or ten inches. The child is placed in it, on a bed of little grass mats, and bound down in the manner above described. A little boss of tightly plaited and woven grass is then applied to the forehead, and secured by a cord to the loops at the side. (127–28)

The downriver version is often compared to a canoe, which James Swan says was called “canim” or “canoe.” Charles Wilkes collected one of these cradles in 1841, and it is now at the Peabody Harvard Museum (for the upriver version, see Kane 1971b:246).

Two-thirds of the accounts mention the time span for head flattening—an average of one year, though Silas Smith (1901:258) said “some mothers continued it longer than others,” a practice related to rank. Infants were released from their bonds only for cleansing; for feeding, the cords were loosened and the cradle pressed to the breast (Corney 1965:150). The effects on the skull are clear in several illustrations, including those of Charles Cultee. The face is broadened, and the front-to-back radius of the skull has been flattened. In 1796, Charles Bishop (1967) described it as “resembling an human face carved out of a Flatt Piece of Plank, the thickness of the head from the Back Part to the Eye Brows often seen to be not more than half the Breadth of the face. In a front view it gives them a fine open countenance” (126). Several descriptions compare the shape of the head to that of a “wedge.” In profile, there was “a straight line from the crown of the head to the top of the nose[,] considered by them [to be] the acme of beauty” (Hale 1846:216). The process was controlled by loosening or tightening the cords that held the flattening board (Duflot de Mofras 1937:182). In the first year, before the sutures closed, the skull was soft and could be shaped (Smith 1901:258), “partly by actual compression, and partly by preventing the growth of the
skull” (Hale 1846:216). Narcissa Whitman was shown a child at The Cascades whose head, at the back, “was of a purple colour as if it had been sadly bruised” (Drury 1963:99), and almost a third of the observers commented on the “goggle” eyes of the children. Despite this, there was near unanimity that the process caused no pain and did not affect intelligence. HBC Governor George Simpson (1968) reported that “this operation does not seem to give pain as the children rarely cry and it certainly does not affect the brain or understanding, as they are without exception the most intelligent Indians and most acute and finished Bargain makers I have ever fallen in with” (96). In fact, very few observers applied negative value judgments to the custom. Edward Belcher (1843:206) compared it to the binding of Chinese women’s feet, and missionary Joseph Frost said that when he asked a Chinookan why they flattened heads, he answered: “Why do your ladies make themselves so small about the waist” (Lee and Frost 1968:103).

Ideas of beauty aside, the main reason for Chinookan head flattening was social: free people flattened their heads, while slaves were not allowed to. It was a visual marker of social separation (see ch. 7 in this volume). Head flattening also indicated kinship, and flat-headed people did not take slaves among neighbors who also had flat heads. They went further afield and took them from communities of round heads (Hajda 2005). Head flattening was apparently difficult to do right, and the technique may have been privileged information.

DEATH AND BURIAL CUSTOMS

Death was a rite of passage not only for the deceased but for the survivors as well. The only description of a funeral in the literature is Sal-tsi-mar’s in 1853 at Willapa Bay (Swan 1972:185–89); otherwise, there are thumbnail accounts that mention a few elements. The body lay in state in the house for five days, and the corpse was washed and clothed by paid specialists. For Clackamas, morticians received special powers from “blue flies” and may have been the same as the “corpse handlers” at The Dalles (Boyd 1996:108–9). After the body was removed, the house was abandoned or burned.

Mourners cut their hair—to the earlobes, according to Emma Luscier—and fasted for a period, usually stated as a month; morning and evening, they sang dirges. For the Clackamas, close relatives avoided fresh food (Drucker 1934; Jacobs 1958–59:501). Swan (1972) described the mourning songs at Willapa Bay:
The burden of the song . . . is simply an address to the dead, stating their love for her, the many years she had lived with and taught them, that she was not poor, and had no occasion to go to a better country, and they saw no reason why she should go to the land of the dead . . . Every day, at sunrise and sunset this chant is repeated by the relatives for thirty days. (187)

Close relatives might mourn longer. The name of the deceased was tabooed and dropped out of circulation, and close relatives might change their names. That was the case with Concomly on the death of his two sons in the “mortality” of 1824-25. On that occasion, Concomly wore “the worst clothing he could possibly procure & abstained from washing . . . for eighteen or twenty months” and changed his name to “Madsu” (Scouler 1905:168). James Swan (1972:189) stated that the name taboo remained in force until reburial—or perhaps when the soul had departed to the second afterlife—and named five people who changed their names following the deaths of close relatives. Wilkes (1845:118) mentioned a dance of several women at Astoria that marked the end of mourning for a widow and her eligibility for remarriage.

In addition to flattened heads, the most conspicuous, unusual, and commented-on custom of Lower Columbia Chinookan peoples concerned their modes of burial and cemeteries. Graves were noted and described by almost every visitor to the Lower Columbia, particularly after the epidemics of the 1830s. The most comprehensive and concise account comes from John Dunn (1844) at Fort George in the early 1830s:

On the death of one of these people, the body was formerly wrapped, in skins or mats ( . . . now they use blankets), and disposed in a small canoe; the deceased’s arms, and other articles of general use, being laid beside him. The canoe is then placed on a platform by the river side, or on rocks out of reach of the tide, and other mats tied over it. Sometimes these sepulchral canoes are suspended from boughs of trees, six or eight feet from the ground. The canoe in which the body is placed is perforated at the bottom, for the twofold purpose of letting out the water that the rains may have deposited in it, and of preventing it from ever being used again by the living. When his friends can afford the expense, a large canoe, reversed, is placed over the lower, to protect it from the rain; and both are firmly tied together. . . . Formerly on the death of a chief, or other person of wealth and importance, one or more of his slaves was put to death. (86–87)
William Clark described the supporting platform:

4 pieces of Split timber are Set erect on end, and sunk, a few feet in the ground, each brace having their flat Sides opposit to each other and Sufficiently far asunder to admit the width of the Canoe in which the dead are to be deposited; through each of those perpendicular posts, at the height of 6 feet a mortice is Cut, through which two bars of wood are incerted; on those Cross bars a small canoe is placed. (Lewis and Clark 1990:97)

There was some consistency to the grave goods and where they were placed, inside or outside the canoe. Grave goods were always gender-specific and included only personal, movable property. A man's bow and arrow, guns, fishing harpoon, and paddle were placed inside the canoe, as was jewelry. Outside the canoe, usually on poles, were hung a woman's kitchen utensils: wooden bowls, tin kettles, pans, baskets, and blankets, which might be shredded before being affixed to the poles. Later accounts noted that grave goods, like the canoes themselves, may have had holes punched in them. One early source reported that “boards painted with rude resemblances of the human figure” (Scouler 1905:280), probably spirit boards, were placed next to burial canoes. Cul tee said that a man's guardian spirit “baton” and a shaman's rattle were “placed next to” or “hung” on the canoe (Boas 1894:257). The rationale for grave goods was not, apparently, what Euro-Americans thought—that the dead would use them in the next world—but, as Swan (1972) stated, to appease the ghosts: “The Chinooks say that the dead revisit the earth at night and would be very angry if they found their property in use by others, for which reason it is put by their graves. They [the ghosts] value these things much, and come to look after them” (317).

Particularly splendid grave goods, of course, accompanied the wealthy. In 1847, one canoe-coffin on Mount Coffin, assumed to be that of a chief's wife, contained “sixty-six finger rings” and “forty ankle and wrist ornaments” (Thornton 1849:281–82). In the Cowlitz cemetery (but not noted in any Chinookan burial site), dentalia might be placed in the mouth and over the eyes; at Clackamas, dentalia beads were strung on the hair of the deceased (Drucker 1934; Jacobs 1958-59:630).

Well-to-do, high-ranking Chinookans, in addition to having better canoes and more grave goods, might be reburied after several years, the second time in a box. This is what happened to Concomly, as related by Dunn (1844): “The noted chief, Concomly, was buried with great ceremony, in a
canoe near Fort George in 1831. His body was afterwards taken out of the canoe, for greater security, by his relations, and placed in a long box, in a lonely part of the woods” (94). Reburial may be why we have two surviving illustrations of “Concomly’s grave,” one a canoe (Kane 1971b:fig. 170), the other a raised box (Wilkes 1845:320–21), which were constructed and used at different times.

Canoe-burial was the preferred mode of interment for Lower Columbia Chinookans and their non-Chinookan neighbors as far upriver as the downstream half of Sauvie Island. Above that point, known historic cemeteries in the Portland Basin practiced variant forms. At Clannaquah village on the east bank of Sauvie Island in 1844, the cemetery was “laid out in streets,” and burials consisted of cedar uprights supporting horizontal boards of up to “three tiers,” on which wrapped corpses were laid. On the west shore of the island, on a ridge behind the village of Cathlanaquiah (galánaqʷáx), an early settler recalled that bodies were placed in branches of oak trees and that “stone images sometimes occur[red] on the ground beneath.” The people at Gladstone village on the lower Clackamas in 1841 interred their dead under “a broad head-board … frequently painted or carved with grotesque figures.” At The Cascades cemetery—on the north side, just below the rapids—wrapped bodies, perhaps of extended families, were placed in eight-foot-square wooden “vaults,” on the model of houses, with doors sometimes “curiously engraved.” Grave goods were on the roof or upright poles, and William Clark saw “Several wooden Images, cut in the figure of men” beside the tombs (Lewis and Clark 1988:361). The usual type for Chinookans of the Columbia Gorge and The Dalles were burial houses on midriver (Memaloose) islands (Boyd 1996:106–8, 246–63; ch. 2 in this volume).

Many Chinookan customs concerning funerals, treatment of the dead, and cemeteries can be interpreted as reflecting a fear of ghosts. Houses of the deceased were burned and possessions destroyed, and only people with protective powers handled corpses. Mourners were “disguised” by cutting their hair and wearing old clothes, and the names of recently deceased people were no longer spoken. Cemeteries were in isolated places avoided by the living.

In 1834, at Mount Coffin, an observer explained why Indians were rarely encountered at burial grounds:

The vicinity of this, and all other cemeteries, is held so sacred by the Indians, that they never approach it, except to make similar deposits; they will often even travel a considerable distance out of their course in order to avoid intrud-
ing upon the sanctuary of their dead... After we embarked, we observed an old withered crone with a long stick or wand in her hand, who approached, and... waved her enchanted rod over the mouldering bones. (Townsend 1999:131)

Swan (1972:68) explained that it was fear of ghosts that kept them away.

To understand this fear, we need to look at Chinookan beliefs about ghosts and the afterlife (see Cultee’s story of his grandfather’s visit to the Land of the Dead and Mrs. Howard’s myth, “Dead Persons Come to Purchase the Unmarried Girl,” in addition to Swan 1972:174, 212–13, 316; Jacobs 1959a:13). There were two Lands of the Dead: the first for those recently deceased, who could still visit the living, and the second for those gone longer than about 10 years. Ghosts—the souls of the deceased (spirit powers of dead people were another category)—were lonely; they hung around cemeteries where their worldly things were and, if they had the opportunity, enticed their closest relatives and friends to join them. Ghosts were awake at night and asleep during the day and tended to do many things opposite of the living. In the otherworld, where they resided, things were not always what they appeared to be. Mrs. Howard’s “unmarried girl,” for instance, was purchased by a dead man at night; in her new home, her husband and his people “danced all night” but reverted to bones at daylight (Jacobs 1958-59:380-88). When Cultee’s grandfather visited the Land of the Dead, he thought he saw “two people carrying a stick.” They were house posts. He thought he saw a man “dragging his intestines,” but on closer look it was a woven mat (Boas 1894:247-48). In “Blue-jay and Io’i’s Myth,” Bluejay caught what he thought were leaves, branches, and a log. They were trout, salmon, and a whale, food for the dead (Boas 1894:169). The otherworld was located at the end of a trail or across a river, somewhere to the west. It was not a bad place. Clatsop Silas Smith (1901) apparently did not exaggerate much when he said:

Their conception of the spirit land is quite beautiful and pleasing. There it is always spring or summer; the fields are perpetually green, flowers blooming, fruit ripening, and running waters diversify the scenery of the beautiful landscapes, with always an abundant supply of game, and of course the inhabitants are in a continuous state of felicity. (260)

Swan (1972) wrote: “departed spirits enjoy themselves so much in their new state of existence that they wish all their friends to join them” (181).
So it is not surprising that souls of the living, once they were in the Land of the Dead, might be tempted to stay there. The traditional Chinookan belief system included no concept of heaven or hell or of sin or good works that determined where one went after death. The otherworld was especially attractive to infants, who if not treated well on earth might opt to return to the “Land of the Babies” (Jacobs 1958–59:286). The beliefs also help explain one form of curing ceremony, which assumed that sickness was caused by the initial departure of the soul to the Land of the Dead, where shamans (or their spirit powers) visited in an attempt to rescue the soul before it was too late. The concept of two afterworlds also appears to be related to the two-stage burial sequence: in a burial canoe while the flesh remained on the body and, when only bones were left, in a burial box. Sometimes, it appears, high water levels picked up burial canoes before they reached the second stage (e.g., Scouler 1905:278). As the otherworld was supposed to be to the west and the body was oriented in that direction, it seems that the survivors had prepared their dead well for such a happenstance. The second Land of the Dead was more vague, a place where the deceased became “lost” (Swan 1972:316) or “vanished entirely” (Jacobs 1959a:13).

There is much more to Chinookan ceremonialism, including complexes relating to birth, ear piercing, the first menstruation, and the all-important spirit quest. Always, Chinookan belief systems and ritual practices backed up each other, made perfect sense, and fitted seamlessly into their world.