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BENEDICTION

The Teachings of Chief Kwaxsistalla Adam Dick and the Atla'gimma ("Spirits of the Forest") Dance

Douglas Deur (Moxmowisa), Kim Recalma-Clutesi (Oqwilowgwa), and William White (Kasalid/Xelimulh)

Like the symposium that inspired this book, its contents are preceded by the words of Chief Kwaxsistalla *wath-thla*, Adam Dick. His name, Kwaxsistalla – bequeathed to him by his father and grandfather, who had inherited the name from generations going back to the beginning of remembered time – is a chiefly title meaning “smoke from his fire reaches around the world.” He was chief of the Qawadiliqalla (Wolf) Clan of the Tsawataineuk Kwakwa'kawakw from Kingcome Village on British Columbia's mainland coast.

The late Chief Kwaxsistalla opened the ethnoecology symposium at the University of Victoria, sponsored by the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation, with blessings and a presentation of his sacred property – principally, the Atla'gimma (“Spirits of the Forest”) dance cycle, which he directed at the First Peoples House for the benefit of all symposium attendees. He did so to acknowledge Nancy Turner's monumental lifetime contributions to the respectful documentation of First Nations' ethnobotanical practices, as well as her kinship to him as an adoptee of the Qawadiliqalla Clan. Chief Kwaxsistalla has often sought to honour Dr. Turner at the



B.1 | Chief Kwaxsisstalla Adam Dick.

University of Victoria in years past. With her retirement and the chief's passing a little over a year later, this event was his last ceremony at the university – an event that the symposium participants were fortunate enough to witness.

The presentation of the Atla'gimma dance was a gift of incalculable value. In the Kwakwaka'wakw idiom, the dance is said to be one of the items that Chief Kwaxsistalla pulled from his chiefly "box" for ceremonial occasions. To understand this, we must appreciate that our oral tradition describes a giant flood that washed over the land in ancient times. The Kwaxsistalla of that day placed his chiefly goods in a giant box atop a mountain near Kingcome Village for protection. The box held tangible things, such as regalia and sacred objects, but also many intangible things – the songs, ceremonies, edifying dance cycles, and profound teachings held by the chief of each generation to sustain the people, the environment, and the many delicate balances of the world. Until his death, on very special occasions, Chief Kwaxsistalla opened his box, sharing those chiefly belongings and ancient teachings with fortunate witnesses. At those times, the songs and voices of his teachers came forward into a new day and time. Fidelity to the teachers, who conveyed the ancestors' precise teachings, was why the old people valued deep listening, practised by Adam Dick as a child like all people of prominence did in the Kwakwaka'wakw world.

The Atla'gimma dance and all the protocols associated with it emerge from that foundation, and from the deepest well of traditional knowledge. Chief Kwaxsistalla was a man of unique circumstances and training. He was born during a time of forced enrolment in residential schools, the Canadian government's potlatch ban, and the "underground potlatch" that quietly kept ceremonial traditions alive. In his youth, colonial authorities took children by force from their families to subdue First Nations – prohibiting the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, language, and culture. Adam's family beheld police – travelling aboard a boat called *Black Raven* – snatching children off beaches without parental consent, taking them by force to residential schools. In Chief Kwaxsistalla's home, Kingcome Village, certain families actively contested colonial efforts to break their culture, sustaining one of the most active resistance movements on the coast. They posted lookouts during ceremonies, who watched the inlet for incoming police boats. When police boats did arrive, Kwakwaka'wakw families dispersed to nearby hiding places to conceal their ceremonial regalia and their children. Potlatches they commonly postponed until winter cold froze the river below the village, blocking police boats' access. Prophecies

emerged too: elders asserted that these events would eventually cease and the culture would have the potential to heal, if certain specially trained children carried sacred knowledge forward to future generations.

Then came an *ola'galla mee'kie'ya* (prophetic dream) that Adam Dick, born of chiefly lineage, would be one of those children to receive special training. The elders of his time hid him at age four, and began educating him in all forms of traditional knowledge appropriate to a clan chief – the ceremonies, the protocols and language of the potlatch, the traditional ecological knowledge, and ancient teachings in many other domains. Living with his grandparents, he moved from place to place with the seasonal round, going to clam gardens and root gardens, to berry grounds and seaweed patches, to Kingcome Village, and to all the other places of importance to the Qawadiliqalla Clan each year – always a step ahead of the *Black Raven*. Other traditionally trained elders, all born in the nineteenth century, assembled to educate him in skills that a clan chief would need in the times ahead. This was a traditional education for a clan chief, but undertaken with unusual urgency – reflecting their recognition that Adam Dick was unique, a conduit to a future time, and a keystone figure in their own cultural survival.

In his adulthood, Chief Kwaxsistalla served this role well. He spoke not as a single man but as a living manifestation of an unbroken chieftainship and cultural tradition, coming to us from very ancient times. With his background, he was uniquely knowledgeable – from mundane matters such as making bentwood boxes to weighty spiritual matters such as how to show respect to game species or protocols that guide ancient ceremonies. Kwakwaka'wakw, Nuu-chah-nulth, and other Indigenous peoples, as well as scholars sought him out for his knowledge of matters of cultural protocol related to the potlatch, traditional naming, social and economic systems, ceremonies, the Kwak'wala language and Kwakwaka'wakw history.

In recent decades, he had a transformative effect on the practice of ethnobotany in British Columbia and beyond – and was thus an honoured guest, and host, of the ethnoecology symposium. Students and professors have written entire theses, dissertations, books, and articles based on his teachings. The book *Keeping It Living*, the first overview of traditional plant management on Canada's West Coast, took its title from a Kwak'wala term learned from Chief Kwaxsistalla for all forms of plant cultivation – *qw'aqw'ala'owkw* (“keeping it living”) – alluding to the practice of looking after the well-being of culturally preferred plants so that they will look after



B.2 | Grouse dancer, representing the spirit of the grouse.

us. Working with an entire generation of scholars, he brought into public and academic discourse many things nearly forgotten on the coast: clam gardens (*loxiwey*), estuarine root gardens (*tekilakw*), the traditional management of crabapple groves, edible seaweed patches, eelgrass meadows, and more. He could describe these things, their importance, and their traditional management based on his specialized childhood training. He sometimes consulted for museums, as one of the only individuals who could name and identify artifacts, masks, and other items in collections gathered over a century ago. In recent times, archaeologists brought him artifacts related to fishing and other subsistence practices for identification; he could not only name each item but also reproduce many of them perfectly by hand, drawing on the instructions of his teachers long ago. He also hosted many University of Victoria students in his home – an ongoing traditional ecological knowledge symposium they affectionately called

“Adam’s School.” His influence on Canadian ethnobotany continues to be truly transformative, a gift to all of us from him and from the elders of his youth. His legacy suggests the importance of traditionally trained knowledge holders to the field of ethnoecology and the richness of that field’s contributions.

But what of the Atla’gimma dance? The dance cycle relates to fundamental lessons from a vision experienced long ago by a man from Wuikinuxv (Rivers Inlet). Oral tradition speaks of the man hunting grouse – originally for food but, over time, increasingly for sport. His reckless killing, a blatant departure from the material and ceremonial respect shown game species, brought growing imbalances to himself and to the living beings around him. The spirit of the grouse visited him in his sleep, along with other spirits in succession, each imparting key lessons about how to reform himself and how humanity might maintain balance between the human and natural worlds. The masks shared in the dance represent the spirits that appeared successively in this vision, carrying the teachings and powers imparted by each.

To demonstrate the weight of this dance cycle, we consider one example: the Stump. In the Atla’gimma, this being is represented by a blocky, stump-man face with a small tree growing from his top; it is a popular mask, a charming and playful carved representation of this spirit being long ago. Unpacking the meaning of the stump, we glimpse the profound and multilayered teachings within the larger dance cycle. As with a seedling growing from a nurse log in the coastal forest, the stump shows that within destruction there is the seed of rebirth and of resurrection. The stump not only imparts hope but also brings a revelation that – with effort and nurturing – all manner of past damage can be restored. Not only can a forest be healed, but *everything* can be healed. And that power is sacred. One can restore a damaged habitat, an endangered species, or an entire forest with time and political will. Yet, if we systematically review the damage around us, we see that we might heal other things too, such as damaged relationships with other communities and nations or between First Nations and settler societies. Within that historical destruction, there lies the seed of potential healing. In our personal lives, with regard to our fractured relationships and the people we have loved who now live estranged from us – even at difficult and tenuous personal distances – there is a capacity to heal, to make peace, and to rebuild what was broken. This capacity to heal lies latent in all forms of destruction. The stump shows us this power and asserts that it is sacred. And that is only a small portion of what is taught



B.3 | Stump dancer, a blocky, stump-man face with a small tree growing from his top.

by a single stump! In this beautiful and complex dance, each masked figure similarly carries layers upon layers of meaning, knowledge, and potential healing.

Received through dowry by the Kwakwaka'wakw generations ago and inherited by Chief Kwaxistalla, the Atla'gimma was his chiefly possession, now carried forward by his successor. Its performance was a powerful opening to a symposium devoted to the future of Canadian land management and protection, relations between settlers and First Nations, and our shared survival in this place we call home.

By bringing forward the Atla'gimma dance, Chief Kwaxistalla expressed his heartfelt hope that we will continue to strive to restore broken and unbalanced relationships of all kinds. And the Atla'gimma is just one tool in the chiefly box; it is like a prayer for hope and a plea to do what one can to bring healing into the world -- biologically, culturally, socially, and personally. One can plant a native species in a blighted piece of ground, work for national reconciliation and healing, or call an estranged loved one in an effort to make peace. All healing is welcome. We all exist together in a transitional point in time. The past spans out behind us infinitely; the

future spans out before us infinitely too. Here we are, at this moment, doing what we can to ensure that we chart the right course, that the damage of the past disperses, and that ahead of us all lies a healthy and balanced future of our choosing. Soon enough, we will hand off our landscapes, cultures, and knowledge to the next generation. The contents of the ethnoecology symposium and the present book give us hope that this might yet happen in a way that will bring greater health and balance to the human and natural worlds. Like Chief Kwaxsisstalla's teachers a lifetime ago, we deeply invest ourselves in a future that we will not live to see, knowing that this is so very profoundly the right thing to do.