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SU-SIT'AATK

James McDonald

The raising of two crest poles marked a new beginning for the people of Kitsumkalum

Totem poles, more accurately called “crest poles,” are a unique feature of the aboriginal cultures of North America’s northwest coast. Far from being a forgotten art, poles are still being carved from the towering red cedars that grow along Canada’s Pacific coast. These wooden columns are important to the contemporary culture of aboriginal First Nations such as the Tsimshian, whose carvers have won international acclaim for the quality of their work.

According to Tsimshian custom, the raising of a commissioned crest pole occurs during a spectacular public event, called a potlatch. In the summer of 1987, the Tsimshian community of Kitsumkalum, the “People of the Robin,” held a massive potlatch to celebrate the raising of two crest poles and the installation of a high ranking chief. I was invited to participate in the even and to record the ceremony for ethnological purposes.

The village of Kitsumkalum, the focal point for about five hundred Tsimshian people, is situated on an Indian reserve adjacent to the municipality of Terrace, British Columbia. Organizers of the potlatch estimated that no poles had been raised in the Kitsumkalum Valley for more than 150 years, and therefore the production and raising of these two magnificent cedar poles, plus a third that Kitsumkalum gave to the city of Terrace, was a great achievement for the community. These activities demonstrated the community’s strength as well as its intention to revitalize the Tsimshian culture and to take a more active role in the future of the province.

Su-Sit'Aak, which means “a new beginning” in the *sm'algyax* language of the Tsimshian peoples, was the name given to the celebration. The new crest poles have a very special meaning for the heritage of the Tsimshians and indeed, for the heritage of all Canadians.

Preparations for the pole raising began in earnest during the preceding winter when the band council of Kitsumkalum sponsored a project for carving crest poles. This project was designed as an advanced class studying the highly formalized and academic style of crest art that is derived from the ancient crest system. The renowned master carver, Freda Diesing, who had taught several of the Kitsumkalum carvers in previous classes, was selected to instruct the students in the theory of crest designs as applied to cedar columns and in the proper techniques for large-scale carving.

The crest system is essentially a classification scheme that maps out the social relationships of Tsimshian society by providing a set of symbols for each family. These symbols are associated with the family's history and with its rights to supernatural powers, as well as to territories, resources, and other types of property. Families are the exclusive owners of their crests, and their ownership is registered and acknowledged at potlatches and other feasts.

Crest art, which uses these symbols, depicts the family histories and social relationships of the owners. The art is made from a variety of media, including the cedar columns for poles or the fabric of a chief's robe. The four crest poles just beyond the ROM rotunda and a chief's robe in the "From the Collections" gallery are superb examples of 19th-century crest art.

The day of the potlatch was Saturday 1 August 1987. A festive crowd, estimated at more than two thousand, gathered at the site of the pole raising outside the Kitsumkalum band administration building. The presence of guests at a potlatch honours the community and recognizes the right of the host to stage the event. In the case of *Su-Sit'Aatk*, the culture itself was being recognized by the Indian and non-Indian residents of the region who were in attendance.

Following modern practice the guests carried the poles to the site as a tribute to the hosts. This was done under the watchful eye of a specially appointed pole captain, who forbade any pole carrier to laugh, behave foolishly, or to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Respect had to be shown.

The stately procession that slowly followed the poles down the main street of the village was the community's formal presentation of its social and political structure. First came the elected and hereditary chiefs, immediately followed by the most important village elders: here was the governing board of the community. Behind these leaders marched the carvers whose skills and talents made the day's celebration possible. They were followed by the rest of the elders and the people of Kitsumkalum. Grouped together as a single civic body, the participants were expressing their desire to come together and to function as a community. Of course, they still displayed their family ties by the crests on their clothing, in accordance with traditional values, however, the dominant image of the community that they presented was of political and social unification.

After a brief welcome by the master of ceremonies and an explanation of what was about to happen, the poles were raised part way. A traditional pause before the poles were pulled completely upright made it possible for the guests to hear the history of the community and the poles to understand the significance of the pole raising, and to voice any objections.

In explaining *Su-Sit'Aatk* to the audience, Chief Cliff Bolton of Kitsumkalum said that Canadian laws have made it difficult for the Tsimshian to retain their culture. This celebration was his generation's way of telling the children that the next generation will have to be prepared to fight for the survival of their culture.

The chief then went on to say that one pole carved in a modern style has all the major village crests on it to represent the whole community. Dedicated to the children, this pole signifies the future. The other pole, a replica of an older pole, displays crests of one of the ancient families of Kitsumkalum. This pole represents the past and shows respect for the elders who have died, the cultural heritage of the ancestors, and the generations that suffered during the period of harsh Canadian assimilation policies.

After the chief's talk the polite veil of ceremony dropped to reveal the serious face of

otherwise subtle negotiations. Guests were permitted to openly dispute the right of the host to use any of the crests, to raise the pole, or to use the histories. They could challenge the village's right to hold the ceremony or question some aspect of the ceremony's ritual and symbolic structure. They could also dispute the claims to the territories mentioned in the stories represented on the poles. Any legitimate complaints by the guests would have disgraced the hosts and could have ended the ceremony. All that had been accomplished in the community would have suddenly come undone.

While the poles remained partially raised, a chief from a neighbouring village rose to the microphone and asked permission to speak. As a high-ranking titleholder, his opinion was important and the audience listened carefully as he expressed his intention to comment on the pole raising and to sing an important song as a tribute to Kitsumkalum.

When all was said, Kitsumkalum's right to raise the poles had not been questioned. After the last speech the pullers were asked to finish their work by raising both poles simultaneously.

Today's your day...to experience history in the making. Today you'll be seeing, for the first time, two poles being raised simultaneously – a tribute to a great culture, a tribute to an idea...we can still retain what was once so beautiful and so proud. (*Victor Reece, Pole Captain*)

The approach to raising the poles was unique and this gave Kitsumkalum a certain prestige. This was the first time that two crest poles had been pulled up simultaneously, and the sight of both columns raising their heads into the sky was spectacular. It was also the first time that both traditional and modern methods were used simultaneously to raise poles. The traditional pole was lashed and hoisted in the traditional manner: the modern-style pole was rigged with a modern pulley system. Using two methods to raise the poles was intended to add emphasis to the contrast between the past and the future.

After the poles were secured, the carvers celebrated with an enthusiastic performance of the special Robin Dance and Robin Song, in accordance with the crest privileges of the "People of the Robin." The pole raising was officially over.

All of the cultural premises and values that had guided the day's ceremonies had been validated. The potlatch feast that followed with an installation ceremony for a titleholder allowed the people of Kitsumkalum to show additional respect for their ancient Tsimshian culture and to further demonstrate their ability to use that heritage to redefine and enrich the present. During the feast program, all those who had taken an active role in the preparations and rituals of *Su-Sit'Aatk* were compensated with gifts of blankets and money. Other gifts were given to the audience for witnessing the ceremonies and thereby recognizing the cultural themes of *Su-Sit'Aatk*.

Chief Bolton summed up the importance of *Su-Sit'Aatk* when he said, "I hope that the younger people will take this as a go-ahead to [encourage] them...to get into other areas of our culture, like our language, and other ways that our people had lived. We can't go back to the old ways completely, but there are parts of it that we can use along with today's way of living...I have to say that it's a very proud moment for our village...Also for all the people in this area – native people and non-native people alike."

Comments about the raising of crest poles today

Chief Clifford Bolton interview by the Native Music heritage Society

The culture is important to the Kitsumkalum people just as the culture is important to all the other tribes and all the other nations in the country, and in the world. People work very hard to keep their culture, and keep their identity – whether they be Indian or non-Indian people.

We as Indian people, through the laws of the land in the early parts of the century, have lost our culture, or were forced to stop practising some segments of our culture. In 1952 the law that banned us from practising our culture was lifted, and since then efforts have been made to carry these things on again.

We decided we would do this totem pole raising some years back, because we felt it was important that our people start over again in bringing back our culture. So our theme of these totem pole raising ceremonies is “A New Beginning.”

With all the preparations and learning of the old traditional ways to the best of our ability, *Su-sit’Aatk* is a new beginning for our people. It’s giving them a chance all to learn from the same level, from the beginning to the end of the totem pole raising.

So to us, this is very exciting, because there is a lot that had been forgotten. It didn’t totally die out because it had been always around all this time, but now it’s coming to the surface.

Pole Captain Victor Reece interviewed by the Native Music Heritage Society

The significance of poles today in modern day gives our people another sense of a different kind of reality, in recalling history, and giving people a different outlook on what our culture was, and not what our culture is. The purpose of the poles, the significant of pole...is to recall history: the stories of individual chiefs, individual families, and individual clans. In the case of [Kitsumkalum], these poles are significant to [these people] in that they’re recalling the history of one aspect of their culture, and that’s being able to recall their own history, and thereby giving the people a sense of belonging again.

From my perspective, poles being carved and raised in modern day, such as these are, gives the children a sense of a direction, a direction to follow, thereby creating a stronger base on which to pursue life.

In fact, poles were significant in that they marked certain points in history, and certainly [with the two poles in Kitsumkalum] we mark again another point in history.

Although we have a slogan that says “A New Beginning,” it’s really taking a traditional idea and refreshing it, so that we can draw the young back into our fold, and give them meaning, and give them strength so that they could face the world, and contribute to humanity, contribute

to the people.

There's no one significance to poles. It's the visual part of a culture that recalls not only immediate history, but past history, and we could look at the future and say that yes, we do, we do have a direction. That's the significance of the ceremony of pole raising...for the new generation to understand that our contribution to the society as a whole, is a very significant contribution.

Carving the cedar crest columns

Freda Diesing interviewed by the native Music Heritage Society

At first we started to do the one pole, and this was to be the village pole, representing two stories, and the crests of all the people in Kitsumkalum. At the bottom [the] pole starts with the Bear story, and then there's the Eagle, and the Killerwhale, the Raven, the Wolf and the Frog,...the top represents how Kitsumkalum got to be called the Robin Village.

After a while we decided to do a replica of an old pole...that had once stood at [Kitsumkalum. We knew it from] a picture that was sent from England by a traveller at the turn of the century. This was the Bear story pole [which] represents a myth of a woman, a berry picker, who was captured by the Bears, and lived in a cave in the mountain with her Bear husband [with whom] she had two cubs. The pole includes the large Bear, the woman with a cub, the cave in the mountain, another Bear and then the man, and on top we decided to put a Robin. We put a Robin on top...to signify that it's Kitsumkalum.

After we decided to do the second pole then we decided it would be a good idea to give a pole to the city of Terrace, so we ended up doing three poles instead of one, which was a big job but good experience for the carvers in that they had to really rush with them to get it done on time. Also, it's good experience to put forward the knowledge they had in doing the first one. It was just like a test, having to do the other poles.

Description of Illustrations

1. A procession from the village of Kitsumkalum carries two newly carved crest poles to the site where they will be raised.
2. People from the region gather to celebrate the raising of the crest poles and then other events of the day.
3. The Kitsumkalum people have lived along the Skeena River for centuries.
4. The main street of Kitsumkalum.
5. The poles are raised part way and are held in this position while the history of the community is recited, the significance of the ceremony is explained, and any opinions are voiced. After everyone has spoken, if there have been no objections, then the poles will be raised to the fully upright position.
6. The crest pole of modern design is called *Gila-Quoex*, which translates as robin. It is a twelve-metre long village pole representing all the people of Kitsumkalum and their future. The images on the pole refer to the woman who married a bear, the primary crests

of the people of the village, and the story of the founding of the ancestral Robin Village. The robin crest is at the top. From top to bottom, the identities of the crests and their carvers are: *Robin*, Lorraine McCarthy; *Man with a Fish*, Lorraine McCarthy; *Frog*, Norman Guno; *Wolf*, Freda Diesing; *Raven*, Sandra Wesley; *Killerwhale*, Vernon Horner; *Eagle*, Myrtle Laidlaw; *Bear with Woman and Cub*, Dorothy Horner.

7. *Nebah* is the name of the traditional-style bear-mother pole. Approximately eleven metres long, this pole is a replica of an ancient pole that was thought to have stood in Kitsumkalum territory. The log that was used was very long and the carvers did not wish to cut it short. Instead they elongated the design at the top and added the robin crest on top, which represents the village. The other figures refer to the story of the woman who married a bear, and there is a hole that signifies the cave in which the bears hibernated. The robin at the top was carved by Lorraine McCarthy while the other figures were each carved by several artists.

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