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### Chinook Subsistence: A Society's Role on the Success of the Salmon

The seasonal rains had begun to cease for the summer months were upon them. Smoke curled up through the tilting afternoon sunlight. The sounds of informal chatter and laughter filtered through the crowds of men and women who worked methodically, quickly, and carefully to prepare their provisions for the months ahead. Nearby, the Columbia River has offered up its bounty of the summer Chinook salmon run, and nothing will be taken for granted. Drying racks bordered the fire and poles of cedar were skewered with dripping chunks of vivid red flesh. Surrounded by the day's catch in its various stages of preparation, and garbed only in cedar bark skirts, the women form small familiar groups, and take turns pounding salmon that has already been dried to make *itkilak*, a staple food for their people. It was a warm day that was uninhibited by the *Tlohonnipsts* "those who float ashore"— or by the knowledge of what is to become of their people.

Before 1792, the Chinook speaking peoples of the Columbia River basin had no formal contact with European explorers, the *Tlohonnipsts*, and it was then that the perfect unity with their environment can best be examined. Salmon, the intricacies of its lifecycle, and the Chinook people's consumption of it formed the basis for the spiritual and traditional acts of their aboriginal culture. As Charles C. Mann and Mark L. Plummer contend, "Wild salmon are the cultural symbols of the Pacific Northwest" (716). Not only for modern inhabitants, but especially for those native aboriginal peoples, subsistence on salmon throughout the seasons

shaped how they lived, worshipped, and passed on to the spirit world. Through a use of taboo and an unwavering respect for the species, the historical salmon populations and their riverine habitat were healthy and multitudinous. By never turning their back on the salmon, the Chinook represented a people who could live prosperously within and never without their environment.

Prior to European contact, the population of Chinook speakers could be found spread along both shores of the Lower Columbia River from modern day The Dalles, Oregon to the Pacific Ocean, as well as the length of the Willamette River from its falls to its mouth. Grouped by anthropologists into one large cultural-linguistic phylum of Penutian speakers, the Chinook were actually a summation of as many as seven separate linguistic groups. Furthermore, they could be divided into thousands of villages that were made up of distinct kin/lineal tribelets of sociopolitical orientation (Wihr 44). The Lower Chinook, or those inhabiting the river near the coast, were the Shoalwater and the Clatsop. While further upriver, there found the Cathlamet, Clackamas, Multnomah, Cascades, and the Wasco-Wishram (Wihr 40). To outsiders they were known collectively for their undeniable trading and business savvy, and for their uniquely shaped heads.

Cranial deformation or manipulation was the mark of beauty, freedom, and wealth. Masters of their environment, they lived in a highly stratified society which ranged from nobility to the enslaved. So rich were they in their provisions that leisure times was in excess. Not because of their possession of slaves, but because those held captive were not even used for labor purposes. Rather, they were a material possession to show wealth or status. Slaves were not allowed to flatten their own or their children's skulls. So not only were they condemned to a life of poverty and submission, but were also victims of the social stigma of being a "roundhead".

Aside from business and social politics, a major feature of Chinookan livelihood was the salmon or *igunat*. Each season brought forth a new species of salmon, each with different uses and customs involved. One unquestionable theme with each run was how the Chinook never once took for granted the resource that allowed them the prosperous life they led. Access to uninhibited salmon fishery was stifled with the onslaught of European society. With their present day descendents only numbering around 2500, the Chinook face the possible extinction of their culture (Sohn 33). Before the competing society's invasion, by protecting the fish with taboo, mythology, and customs, Chinookans ensured that they would never know a time of famine and disease. These enforced and highly superstition based traditions affected the success of the salmon runs. A return to prolific amounts of fish each cycle was the direct result of a people's respect and fear alike for their actions on nature. Unfortunately, their religion offered no protection against foreign intruders.

To understand the intricacies of the Chinook culture, the characteristics of their most sacred source of food must also be understood. An estimated 400 pounds of salmon was consumed each year by the pre-European contacted Chinook people. With an estimated population of around 22,000, that totals a consumption of up to 8,800,000 pounds of salmon per year (Hewes 216). These estimates show how important the salmon were, and how a lack of fish would lead directly to a huge gap in the nutritional needs for each and every person.

Native cyclic seasonality was defined not by the weather, but by the type of salmon that would be traveling upriver to spawn. The major species of *igunat* are Chinook, Silver, Chum, Pink, and also the cousin salmonids Steelhead and Cutthroat Trout all were readily utilized by the natives, and swam up the river systems from mid/late spring until early fall.

Fishing practices were also specific to each of the species. Varying in size, each type of fish required different tools and procedures to be caught. Generally, cedar or hemp seine nets were used for the large Chinook salmon. Men would travel out mid river in massive, dugout canoes and drag their nets upriver to catch the salmon. The fish were then brought ashore and most likely clubbed to death following ritual guidelines and taboos to be discussed later. Also used were five to six foot long dip nets that men placed into the churning waters of the falls (*Tumwater*) from wooden platforms that were ingeniously attached to the rock walls without any use of metallurgy. They then snared the salmon attempting to scale the falls and clubbed them once they were out of the water. In the shallows, salmon and steelhead could be speared or hand caught.

Regardless of the salmon species, the commonality in the catch practices can be found in the politics behind the fishing grounds. Chinook villages were the conglomeration of kin groups united by consanguinity and/or by marriage, and led by a powerful headman. Each village claimed the rights to traditional fishing grounds specific to the different salmon runs (Wihr 43). The claim was not an act of ownership, but rather of usufruct. They were there at the time, so they will use those grounds to partake in the fish. They set up seasonal villages that were far more temporary than those of their home villages made up of permanent cedar plank housing. As they moved on, other groups could move in and do the same.

By never taking more than they needed, not only was there no waste, but also plenty of fish were available to incoming groups. Currently, the laws for tribal fishing versus commercial/sport fishing are vague and one sided. It has become a race to fill a quota where each side thinks that they are getting short changed. The opposing groups should share fishing grounds by usufruct to alleviate tensions. Returning to a more natural equilibrium where the fish

would be caught based on need and actual use, rather than on quota and competition. There would be more fish to spawn naturally, more fish the next season, and consequently, a larger portion of salmon for the fishermen to share. Native peoples should not have to fight for their right to fish at all of the usual and accustomed places. All of the waters need to be open to those who can prove their respect for not just the fish, but also their fellow humans.

Representing just such ideals were the Chinookan seasonal villages where all of the salmon was prepared. Most of the take was eaten fresh and cooked either by roasting or boiling. The rest was dried and smoked or just air dried. The women of the village took the salmon flesh stripped from the bone, minced it and spread it out in the sun to dry.

It dried quickly in the parched air above Wind Mountain. They crumbled it again, and adding a little water, squeezed it through their hands until it was a homogeneous mass, which they spread out to dry again. Next they added steelhead oil and sometimes dried berries, and, having lined their special one-foot-by-two-foot baskets with dried and stretched salmon skins, they rammed the dried fish meal in as tight as they could with three-foot-long black basalt pestles, which came to be called salmon packers (Rubin 168).

The labor that it took to create the pemmican-like substance was well worth it as it could be stored for years whereas smoked or simply dried salmon would rarely make it through a full year. Through their acts of conservation and preservation, the Chinook people were able to utilize every amount of salmon caught. Succeeding in fish usage meant that there was no waste, and their provisions through the wet winter months would be steadfastly secure. Also, salmon that weren't needed were left in the river to procreate for the next seasonal round.

Along with ideal exploitation of each run's catch, the ceremonies and specifically the *tgelau* or taboo attached to fishery were also important to the realization of the next year's good returns. Sent forth by their ancestors who in turn learned of their ways from the realms of the myth age, salmon taboo regulated every aspect of fishing from the ways in which they were caught to how and who prepared the fish. One thing that all of the Chinook speakers had in common was their unwavering respect for the salmon. Not only as a means for sustenance, but also as a spiritual guide.

The difference between a year of famine and a year of surplus was only explained by the adherence to certain taboos involving the treatment of the salmon. The key player in most of the mythology is Coyote. Like in many Native American stories, he is a trickster, but also very powerful with his decisions. He set forth the Chinook *tgelau* "for catching salmon at each place, how many, and when to throw them ashore, and how to cut them, an almost endless list of rules, different for each location. To disobey meant no more fish would come" (Rubin 17). Keeping the society healthy and fed depended on the ability for each individual to follow the divine rules told on by generation after generation. To call the practice of their taboos superstition is only partly correct. Indeed, fear did play a large part in making sure that rules were followed, however, the ability for these people to maintain practices not only allowed for their own success, but it also ensured a healthy river system, and abundant salmon populations.

The First Salmon Rite was and still is the most important of the fishing ceremonies. The correct enactment of it decided how well the people would fare in coming salmon runs. It was performed for each of the first days of the individual runs and with the first fish brought to shore. "The ceremony involved a complex removal of the heart for roasting and a breaking of the fish in pieces for boiling" (Wihr 44). The first caught fish could not be cut into until the afternoon,

and then production could commence. With ritual timing the pieces of fish could be distributed to the children as a symbol of generations to come that would return to feast on the river's creatures. After the necessary rituals were finished, the taboos only became more intricate. Some may be explained by health and sanitary precautions, but many were based on steep traditions, superstition, and their mythology.

The Clatsop men, for instance, were forbidden from jumping over or even stepping over a net that lay on the banks. Perhaps this is because of the slick conditions surrounding the river. After the subsequent fish were caught they must be divided into a top and bottom cross-section and set up to smoke on a system of poles. The spits were made up of four vertical sticks with two horizontal sticks across the top, and then the back or dorsal side of the fish must then be placed on the top with the head and tail intact, and still attached. The fishermen were prohibited from striking the salmon with a club like many of the other groups. Rather, they must throw sand in its eye and push it in to damage the brain and ocular nerve (Rubin 17). To strike the salmon would break its backbone, which was also taboo. Familiarity with their fish would lead to an understanding of its biology. Breaking the backbone could puncture internal organs that may contain parasites or disease, therefore making the meat useless for consumption, or if damage went unnoticed, this could lead to illness within their family.

Another taboo that could also be an impetus for disease prevention was how if large amounts of salmon were caught on a single day, all of that fish must be consumed within the dwelling in which it was roasted. The strictest taboos involved those who were prevented from touching and even eating the salmon. This included those guilty of murder, anyone who was responsible for human burial and corpse preparation, girls reaching puberty, women who were menstruating, and widows or widowers (Rubin 17). The Chinook were, and still are, firm

believers in “contagious” magic, or magic/luck that could be communicated through touch. Anyone thought to be unclean, like those mentioned above, was subject to guidelines that completely, irrefutably banned them from coming anywhere near the caught fish. As they are purely theoretical, ideas about why the Chinook did what they did really only become important when studying fishing practices absent of such rules. It is not so much to put emphasis on why their religious practices were maintained, but to appreciate that these ways in which they fished were consequently allied to the achievement of the populations of both the fish and the people.

Just as current governmental guidelines protect society from food borne illness, Chinook taboos—not only as a practice of religious ritual—also protected the people. When the ancestors figured out that certain actions on the fish as a result led to problems in body and mind, the best way to ensure safety was to instill cosmic convention. This is not dissimilar to new governmental regulations activated after disease. Except in the Chinook case, the penalties of transgression were divine on multiple levels, rather than as it is today acts of financial penalization.

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Post European-American contact nevertheless began the complete decline and eradication of the Chinook culture. An end to their ability to practice religious routines led to the decimation of the salmon population. They couldn't maintain their daily life because their lands were taken away from them. Faced with devastating disease, and removal to reservations, they were required to slowly shift to hunting for furs to satisfy the unquenchable Euro-American desire for pelts. Ronald Spores of American Indian Quarterly discusses in his article on Chinook Indian removal between 1850 and 1856 the statistical information on the Clackamas Chinook population and the proceeding drastic decline following Euro-American contact. He shows how a strong people

were demolished and relocated to reservations. Spores details the various treaty arrangements made between Willamette natives and the U.S. government to cede traditional lands, and the compensation proposed therein. Mentioned are the changes in subsistence for the displaced peoples, and how they—instead of practicing traditional fishing customs—had to survive on flour provided at a fee of four to seven cents per pound. No longer the independent successful people, their only “alternative was the annihilation at the hands of ‘new Americans’ who steadfastly refused to tolerate ‘undesirables’, to treat them as equals, or to incorporate them into white society” (171). The now reservationized Chinookans were faced with a necessity to make enough money to buy flour that they previously had no use for. Now they were not near their river homes and the salmon were left to the intruders.

The perfect symbiotic relationship between healthy culture and healthy river systems becomes very apparent when one half of that equation is removed. Chinook taboo, mythology, and unwavering respect for the salmon allowed for an environment that could support a population rich in so many ways. When Euro-Americans made contact though, they saw land and water that needed to be shaped and bridled for their own purposes. To be masters of that realm meant to get rid of the natives, and to cut, destroy, reroute, and in every way possible, make the area their own. In the process, not only the Chinook suffered, but the rivers and the salmon that swam in them did as well. Using empirical data, Gordon Winant Hewes of the University of California, discusses the salmon run yields, tools used, and fishing methods on the Columbia River. By using records collected and estimated for the period around 1770 and 1780 he looks at possible contributors to the destruction of the river systems and subsequent demise of wild salmon runs. “Grand Coulee dam, 350 feet high, has eliminated at one stroke some 1100 miles of salmon streams in the upper Columbia Basin” (235). Damming of the rivers was one of

the worst culprits of salmon depopulation on the Columbia. Before the introduction of fish ladders the salmon were unable to make their runs upriver to spawn, many died en route, and the few that made it were caught without inhibition.

By 1850, the traditional aboriginal Chinook were no longer. Pushed off of their lands in numbers far smaller than in their heyday, the divisions of Chinook speakers became an amalgamation of multi-ethnic peoples living confined to reservations or forced to forgo their individual cultures and become assimilated members of European culture. Inclusion into this foreign culture nearly eradicated the Chinookan way of life. No longer able to support their families, many soon began to depend on governmental allotments to live. Despite cultural emulsification, the people had found a level of success, but those who claimed that success based it on financial improvement, rather than cultural preservation (Leavelle 433). Currently, the speakers of *kiksht*, a Wasco-Wishram dialect only number at three. Two of those speakers are in their nineties, and when they die, there is a good chance that the language will die with them.

A loss of native dialects is not the only victim of relocation and termination. Historically, according to a graph from Oregon State University, in 1770 the salmon entering the Columbia River was numbered between 6.5 million on the low end, and up to 16 million fish. By 1990 the numbers taken show the harsh decline of salmon numbers post Chinook/European contact. Disturbingly, the fish entering the Columbia registered a paltry one million on the low end and only going upwards to two million salmon (Oregonstate.edu). The Washington State Fish and Wildlife data shows in 2005, 60,600 Chinook salmon (only ten percent of which were wild) entered the Columbia, 54,500 into the Willamette, and 12,600 into the Clackamas River (wdfw.aw.gov). Statistical mastery is not required to determine the fallout of river manipulation, pollution, and over fishing. The people who once fished these rivers without hardship are no

longer free to fully enact their innate responsibility for the fish and the streams. True, legislation allowed for the taking of portions of the yearly salmon quota by the native people with the Medicine Creek Treaty, but the remainder has been lost to rampant misuses both in the past one hundred years, and even today.

Currently, what is left of the Chinook speakers of the region make up a very small community of less than 2500 people. They are working diligently to uphold many of the sacred aspects of their cultural traditions. *Ána-ku íwachá mí-mi*, the way it was long ago, seems to be “lost [...] and today fish are stored in a freezer until a request is made for their use” (Aguilar 122). The intrusion of modern technology is not always for the better. It is technology that may one day lead to salmon rehabilitation, but if the old ways had been allowed to continue, the rivers would not be facing their ruin. Appreciation of resources does not mean exploitation, but rather alignment with, and reverence for which is used. In former times near The Dalles, Oregon, the people did not take the first fish up the run as they were emboldened and strengthened by the Spirit and therefore, deserved to pass on their strength to future generations (Aguilar 114). Wittingly or not, these people aided in the fittest salmon providing the genes for the next generation of fish, the weak were caught, while the strong made it through till the next run. As each year passed, only the best salmon would spawn, thereby allowing for an exponential advantage given to their survival of the fittest.

Now, salmon being raised in hatcheries for release into the wild make up ninety to ninety-five percent of the overall salmon population. While sick and weak fish die naturally, there is really no methodology for protection of the “perfect” bloodlines. If the fish swims, it must be fine. Catch it. Eat it. No harm done. Actually, this disregard for pureblooded, naturally healthy salmon translates into not only poor quality consumable meat, but also non-

sustainable and unwieldy improvement in wild salmon populations. If the fish cannot live outside of the hatcheries then repopulation is serving no purpose other than to put on a ruse of conservation. There is also a problem of habitat versus repopulation (Gillis 125). Adherence to continued respect for the rivers that provide the fish for sustenance and the livelihoods of so many in the area has not been practiced well enough, by any standards, since the height of Chinookan society. George A. Charley, the last traditional headman, wrote a poem that in part says “give us a place of trust, of honor; let us feel this is still. Let us use our mind and our muscle. Let our action be our own” (Trafzer 100). He asks not a lot, but as he and his people were denied these requests, there only remains a sliver of culture left to try and recreate.

The Confluence Project is attempting to do just that. Beginning in 1999 artist Maya Lin, the creator of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, with the blessing of the area’s “tribes” has begun the incredible art project spanning along 450 miles of the Columbia River. The proposed ten outdoor installations will pay tribute to the people and cultures that once flourished there. For the Chinook, Lin created an artistic representation of a traditional fish cleaning table. Made of basalt, it stands on the shore of Baker’s Bay. “Fish scales glitter on the slab’s flat top and fish blood is smeared on the sides, nearly obscuring the fine text inscribed on the slab’s polished surfaces. [...] ‘It is not about the history’ Lin says about her work. ‘It’s about *reclaiming*’” (Henderson 142). Beautiful and exquisite sculptures that bring native principles to the forefront with an idea of reconnection and reconstruction can aid in the pursuit of ethnic reparation. It is one thing to stand and look at this art work, but it is another to be moved by it into action. Ghosts of the ancestors would return to those in need of guidance. Looking at these works of art should be jarring enough to realize that if something is not done, all that will be left of the

Chinook speakers will be their ghosts, left in the spirit world, with no one to guide except those unwilling to listen.

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There is a formula that can be applied to any manner of people native to their lands. Environment shapes subsistence which shapes culture. Removal of any one of these factors upends the delicate balance of humans and nature. Modern American culture favors an idea of sovereignty from our environment. A consumer mentality has no basis in a symbiotic, intricate relationship with our surroundings. As we can head to the grocery store to pick up five pounds of perfectly portioned Copper River salmon, we can no longer appreciate the path that fish took to get to our mouths. “*Wy-kan-ush-mi-wa-kish-wit* is sacred life. For thousands of years, the salmon unselfishly gave of itself for the physical and spiritual sustenance of humans. The salmon’s spirit as not changed; the human spirit has” (“The Columbia River Anadromous Fish” ii). There is an obvious and direct correlation between the demise of Chinook and similar peoples, and the demise of wild salmon.

Oregonians and Washingtonians live in an area that was once, by historical standards a mecca of culture and stratified society. This was possible because of the bounty offered by the Columbia and Willamette River systems. What once was can easily be forgotten. By reviewing and understanding how the Chinook speaking people used and revered the salmon in so many ways, it is possible to understand ourselves, as well as the current issues that we face involving our environment. To address and follow aspects of the Chinook way of life and their approach to fishing, we may be able to model ways to protect and fully appreciate the Pacific Northwest Bounty. It was taken away from them only to be squandered and mistreated by foreign entities. Knowing about the culture almost stamped out by disease, famine, and assimilation can perhaps

lead to a future of reclamation and preservation. Then, healthy river systems, and the subsequent benefiting salmon runs will sure to follow. To eat is to live. To lose one's food is to lose one's cultural identity. Remember *Ána-ku íwachá mí-mi*.

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