

The Native Meaning of...Symbology, Myths and Legends

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A lot of research and work was brought into this website for many years, it's here for our customers to enjoy and to be informed. We'd appreciate it not to be copied and/or used for any other purpose.

BEAR

Meaning: The Bear is a symbol for power, courage, physical strength and leadership. Warrior's e.g. are known to wear bear claw necklaces which meant protection. In Haida culture the Bear is referred to as "Elder Kinsman" and was treated like a high ranking guest.



Legend of the Bear:

In West Coast culture, there are several legends telling of a Chief's daughter being abducted by a bear. The high ranking woman had been out in the woods picking berries and stepped on some Bear dung and began to curse out loud, insulting their cleanliness. Two Bears nearby heard her and decided they would not tolerate such insolence. They felt the disrespectful woman had to be punished. To do this, one Bear transformed himself into a very handsome man who approached this woman, and seductively lured her to accompany him to his mountain home. When she did, she fell in love with him and became partially Bear-like herself.

She later married him and had twin cubs. Their children were born as little creatures that resembled bears who could metamorphose themselves into human form like their father. The woman's brothers eventually found her and, in an unequal contest, killed her husband. They returned to the village but the two bear sons did not feel comfortable and eventually left to return to the forest. All Bear Clan members are descended from this woman and her two sons.

Legend of the Spirit Bear:

This legend starts ten thousand years ago when the world was covered by frozen glaciers. The glaciers were covered in ice and snow. No one knows how long it had been like that, but the first story recorded was of the Raven, The Creator. In this Kitasoo First Nations story of a Raven, long after he had descended from the heavens and created The Green. Then along came the humorous fire theft story. No one's trusted the Raven since. Then Man started popping out of seed pods along with the first woman. The Raven had created it all. And yet... The Raven was not satisfied. The Raven wanted something to remind him of the Long White Time of before. So he chose the Bear, the keeper of dreams and memory to help him out. He sought Black Bear out. He didn't have to go far, as he is always seen as a constellation of the stars in the night sky. The Raven made a pact with the Black Bear who agreed after he was given huge assurances from the Raven, that he could live in peace and safety for all time, by letting one out of every ten Black Bears turn white. This was for a reminder for the Raven of the misery of the great ice age of before.

The White Bears to this day are still called Moksgm'ol, by the Kitasoo and T'simshian people. Now, in the Great Bear Rain Forest of the Pacific Northwest, Kermodes still roam. Only now, their population is down to about four hundred in the Pacific North West, home to the Sacred White Spirit Bear.



BEAVER

Meaning: The Beaver is a symbol for persistence and determination. He is creative, stubborn, a very hard worker and understands the importance of cooperation. He teaches us to unify individual talents to reach great goals, he also symbolizes hard work and he will not quit until the job is done.

Legend: The Beaver is said to have been a woman at one time. Tsimshian legends tells of this woman who dammed a stream to swim in it. Because she refused to get out, she was transformed and her leather apron became a Beaver's tail. In Haida legend it is the Beaver who is responsible for providing the Salmon that the Raven had stolen to give back to the people. Beavers play a variety of roles in Native American folktales from different tribes. In some tribes, they are portrayed as hardworking and persevering, but in others, they represent

selfishness and stubbornness. In some stories, Beaver causes floods or droughts by building dams without considering how they will affect other animals.



BEE

The Bee symbolizes a strong sense of community and honesty and happiness. In the celebration of life ceremony, Bee dancer play an important role. They usually are busy roaming around, trying to amuse people, dance around other dancers and try to catch, touch and then sting them. It is not meant as a threat, rather a play and after another dancer has been stung, he/she will be compensated with a little gift. The bee masks are easy recognizable, always showing spikes on their face.

BENTWOOD BOX

Bentwood boxes are a traditional item made by the First Nations of the Pacific Northwest Coast, including parts of southern Alaska, western British Columbia and southern Washington, or more specific: people including the Haida, Gitksan, Tlingit, Tsimshian, Sugpiaq, Unangax, Yupík, Inupiaq and Coast Salish. The Bentwood Box is a uniquely fabricated container in which a single plank of wood is grooved where corners are desired. The wood is made pliable with heat and moisture and bent to form a four-sided shape. Wooded pegs or laces secure the two ends.

Then the box shape is attached to a bottom piece of wood, which has been grooved on its edges to fit. The top, which is optional, is grooved to fit the sides. The boxes and chests were used as storage containers, the watertight ones for holding hot rocks and water for cooking, and the highly decorated ones as symbols of wealth.



BUKWUS or PUKMIS

Meaning: the Bukwus/Pukmis is a supernatural ghost like figure, also known as the Wild Man of the Woods or the Man of the Sea is associated with the spirits of those who have drowned.

Legend: Bukwus, (also Bakwas, Bookwus, Bukwis, Buk'wus, Pugwis, Pu Gwis, Pu'gwis) is a skeletal, long-haired wild man of Kwakiutl legend, is a supernatural ghost like figure. He also sometimes known as the "King of Ghosts" or "Man of the Sea" He lives in an invisible house in the forest and attracts the spirits of those who have drowned to his home. Bukwus also tries to persuade humans to eat ghost food so that they will become like him. The Bukwus was a significant character for the Kwakiutl people.



Bukwus is sometimes mistakenly identified with the Salishan Sasquatch.

Bukwus And Bigfoot: There has been much confusion about Bukwus being another name for Bigfoot. Bigfoot is also a spirit being to many Native American tribes but Bukwus is an undead being, the ghost of a drowned person. Bukwus will turn other people into more Bukwus. Bigfoot doesn't do that. Both creatures are believed to be hairy. Some people insist to this day that Bukwus are gentle, shy, hairy "forest devils", indicating that Bukwus is indeed Bigfoot. I personally do not think Bukwus is Bigfoot, but I won't argue for or against and will just let people believe what they want to believe regarding such.

BUTTERFLY

Meaning: The butterfly is a symbol of change, joy and color. The exquisite butterfly was considered a miracle of transformation and resurrection.

Legend: A Tolowin woman went out to gather food. She took her child with her, and while she worked, she stuck the point of the gradle-board in the ground and left the child alone.

A large butterfly flew past, she started after it and chased it for a long time. She would almost catch it and then just miss. She thought perhaps I can't run fast enough because of this heavy thing and she through away her deer skin robe, but still she never could quite overtake the creature. Finally she through away her apron too and hurried



on, chasing the butterfly until night came. Then, her child forgotten, she laid down under a tree and went to sleep. When she awoke in the morning, she found a man lying beside her. He said you have followed me this far, perhaps you would like to follow me always. Without thinking of her child at all, the woman rose and followed the butterfly man. By and by they came to a large valley who's southern side was full of butterflies. When the 2 reached the edge of the valley, the man said: "no one ever has come through this valley alive. But you will be safe if you don't loose side of me. Follow closely"

They traveled for a long time. "Keep tight hold of me, don't let go" the butterfly man said again and again. When they had come half way through the valley other butterflies swarmed about them in great numbers. They flew every way all around the couples head and their faces for they wanted to get the Tolowin woman for themselves. She watched them for a long time, holding tightly to her new husband - but at last, unable to resist, she let go of him and reached out to seize one of the others. She missed that one and she tried to grab now one, now the other, but always failed

And so she wondered in the valley forever, days and lost. She died there and the Butterfly man she had lost went on through the valley to his home And now, when people speak of the olden times, they say that this woman lost her lover and tried to get others but lost them and went crazy and died.

Based on a tale reported by Roland Dixon, 1904

COPPER BREAKING

The "Copper" was used by the First Nations people as a form of money and wealth. It was made out of "Native" copper which was found in the land where they lived, and superficially resembled a shield. Considered very rare and hard to obtain, raw copper was traded from the Athabaskan Indians in the Interior Plains, or from the white man in later times. Coppers were beaten into shape and usually painted or engraved with traditional designs. Most Coppers were fairly large, often 2 to 3 feet tall and a foot across.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Copper is that they were given names so that their worth and heritage could be passed on. A Copper was only worth what it was last traded for, and it could only be traded for a larger amount the next time around. Consequently, some Copper values became highly



valuable - worth the total of 1,500 to 2,000 blankets, a couple of war canoes and hundreds of boxes and bowls. No matter what the original value was the next person who wanted it had to trade more in exchange for it. Only the richest and most powerful could afford the price of an old Copper. Many Coppers were in rather shabby condition as a result of having been used in quarrels between Chiefs.

To the Kwakiutl, the ownership and display of a Copper became an essential for the proper conduct of a marriage or important dance ritual. A man whose family's honour had been injured by the actions or remarks of another would publicly have a piece cut from a valuable Copper and give the piece to the offender. That person was obligated to cut or "break" a Copper in return. The broken pieces could be brought up and joined into a new Copper or used to replace pieces missing from a "broken" one. The most valuable Kwakiutl Coppers tend to be rough and patched since they have the longest history and have been broken the most often. Coppers that have been broken have a certain prestige value that is quite independent from their monetary value.

"Breaking Copper" is a challenge, it is also a shaming, and it is also about banishment. There are a lot of layers to this. Some people have described this as a way to protest. But it's beyond that.

Braking apart a copper shield is a long-dormant ritual shaming practice. Also known as "copper cutting," the ceremony involved taking a copper — a traditional symbol of the wealth and alliances of Kwakwaka'wakw chiefs — and smashing off a piece of it to be left behind as a challenge. The copper is a symbol of justice, truth and balance, and to break one is a threat, a challenge and sometimes can also be an insult.

The mining of copper dates back long before the arrival of Europeans. It was mainly mined by the Tsilhqot'in nation and traded north as a form of medicine — a "gift from the heavens". But occasional Chinese shipwrecks near Haida Gwaii also meant that even larger copper sheets were found, and those were made into decorated shields and became a symbol of power and prestige and a record of good deeds.

In potlatch culture, the plates were enlarged when a chief distributed wealth broadly in the community or carried out good. So to break a copper into pieces - a ritual not practiced for decades - became an act of shaming, banishment and a symbol of a wrong needing to be addressed. Usually, just the threat of breaking it was enough to bring feuding factions together.

COUGAR

Cougars play a mystical and secretive role in Native American mythology. On the West Coast, some tribes believe seeing a cougar or hearing its screams is an evil omen, and cougars are often associated with witchcraft. On the other hand, among tribes on the East Coast, cougars

are considered noble animals with powerful hunting skills. In the legends of these tribes, Cougar or Panther sometimes features as a leader or warrior of the animal people. And among some tribes, Cougar is believed to have powerful hunting medicine and considered one of the six true directional guardians, associated with the north and the color yellow.



CROOKED BEAK OF HEAVEN

Meaning: The crooked Beak of Heaven is a mythical creature, part of the Hamatsa (Cannibal Dance Ceremonie) - it's one of the giant man eating birds

Legend: Central to the Hamatsa ceremonies is the story of some brothers who got lost on a hunting trip and found a strange house with red smoke emanating from its roof. When they visited the house they found its owner gone, but one of the house posts was a living woman with her legs rooted into the floor, and she warned them about the frightful owner of the house, who was named Baxbaxwalanuksiwe, a man-eating giant with four terrible man-eating birds for his companions (including Gwaxw gwakwalanuksiwe'/man-eating raven; Galuxwadzuwus/ Crooked-Beak of Heaven; and Huxhukw/supernatural crane who cracks skulls of men to suck out their brains). One version of the story describes the giant with mouths all over his body.



According to another version, the brothers lured Baxbaxwalanuksiwe into a pit and threw hot stones on top of him until he died. With the death of the giant, the men gained mystical power and supernatural treasures from him. These included wooden whistles, a bear mask, bird masks, costumes, and a Hamatsa pole, all used in later actual rituals.

In practice the Hamatsa initiate, almost always a young man at approximately age 25, is abducted by members of the Hamatsa society and kept in the forest in a secret location where he is instructed in the mysteries of the society. Then at a winter dance festival to which many clans and neighbouring tribes are invited the spirit of the man-eating giant is evoked and the initiate is brought in wearing spruce bows and gnashing his teeth and even biting members of the audience. Many dances ensue, as the tale of Baxbaxwalanuksiwe is recounted, and all of the giant man-eating birds dance around the fire. Finally the society members succeed in taming the new "cannibal" initiate. In the process of the ceremonies what seems to be human flesh is eaten by the initiates.

DZUNUKWA

Meaning: Dzunukwa (Wild Woman) also Tsonoqua, Tsonokwa, is a figure in Kwakwaka'wakw mythology. She is an ancestor of the Namgis clan through her son, Tsilwalagame. She is venerated as a bringer of wealth, but is also greatly feared by children, because she is also known as an ogress who steals children and carries them home in her basket to eat.



Her appearance is that of a naked, black in color, old monster with long pendulous breasts. She is also described as having bedraggled hair. In masks and totem pole images she is shown with bright red pursed lips because she is said to give off the call "Hu!" It is often told to children that the sound of the wind blowing through the cedar trees is actually the call of Dzunukwa.

Legend: Some myths say that she is able to bring herself back from the dead (an ability which she uses in some myths to revive her children) and regenerate any wound. She has limited eyesight, and can be easily avoided because she can barely see. She is also said to be rather drowsy and dim-witted. She possesses great wealth and will bestow it upon those who are able to get control of her child.

In one myth a tribe tricks her into falling into a pit of fire. The tribe burned her for many days until nothing was left, which prevented her from reviving herself. It is said that the ashes that came off this fire turned into mosquitoes. At the end of a Kwakwaka'wakw potlatch ceremony, the host chief comes out bearing a mask of Dzunukwa which is called the geekumhl. This is the sign that the ceremony is over.

EAGLE

Meaning: The Eagle symbolizes grace, power and great intellect. It is a sacred and noble creature representing power and prestige to the First Nations people of the Northwest Coast. It symbolizes wisdom and has a special and direct connection to the creator. Eagles mate for life and are therefore also seen as a symbol of lasting love and dedication. It is told that the Eagle end their own life in despair when the mate is lost. Eagle feathers are used in the most important ceremonies, a display of respect, courage, Chieftainship and wisdom. The Eagle is the ruler of sky.

Legend: A Kwakiutl legend has it that the eagle once had very poor eyesight. Because it could fly to the highest treetops, however; a chief asked the eagle to watch for invading canoes. Anxious to assist, the eagle convinced the slug, which in those days had excellent

vision, to trade eyes temporarily. The slug agreed, but when the eagle's sentinel duties were finished, the eagle refused to trade back eyes. Thus, goes the legend, not only is the eagle's sharp vision accounted for, but also the slowness of the slug.

The Eagle also serves as a messenger between humans and the Creator. In some Northwest Coast tribes, the floor used to be dusted with eagle down at potlatches and other ceremonies as a symbol of peace and hospitality. Because eagles are considered such a powerful medicine animal, the hunting or killing of eagles was restricted by many taboos. Eating eagle meat was forbidden in many tribes; in some legends, a person who eats eagle meat is transformed into a monster. In some Plains Indian tribes, feathers were required to be plucked from a live eagle so as to avoid killing them.



FOOL

Meaning: The Nułamala “Fool Dancer” are messengers and assistants to the Hamatsa and help enforce the laws of the Winter Ceremonies. Membership in the Nułamala Society is hereditary. The Nułamala along with the Grizzly Bear dancers cut and distribute food to make sure that the Hamatsa are fed properly. Both societies are the “policemen of the Tseka Winter Ceremonies”. The Nułamala will attack people by throwing stones, hitting with sticks and even stabbing and killing with lances and war axes.



According to the Kwagu'ł “Fort Rupert Tribe”: Nułamala dancers are initiated by a supernatural people who are called Atłasamx that live on an island floating on a lake inland from Dłaxsiwa'yi. They have enormous noses and their bodies are filthy.

The Nułamala when he performs does not dance, but when excited, runs about like madman, throwing stones, knocking people down and making his cry, which is “Wi! Wi! Wi!”. They turn right instead of left and make their circuit around the fire in the opposite direction of other Winter Ceremonies.

The distinguishing feature of most Nułamala masks is an exaggerated nose. They usually have long eyebrows that slant upwards towards the center and droop down to the sides. They have wide mouths that display a foolish grin. Nułamala dancers are very sensitive about their

noses and if someone touches or plays with their nose in front of them, they will become very excited and might chase that person in anger for impersonating their habits. In Potlatch ceremonies today, the Nułamala wears a mask and may use a grey blanket that conceals a pocket that hides pieces of green seaweed which is thrown at the guests and sometimes wiped on certain people. The Nułamala is an ancient dance and is one of the first Winter Ceremonies that the Kwakwaka'wakw had ever performed.

FROG

Meaning: The Frog is a very important Symbol in the Northwest Coast Art and Culture. Since he is living in two worlds, water and land, the Frog is revered for his adaptability, knowledge and power to traverse worlds and inhabit both, the natural and the supernatural. Frogs are used by Shamans as spirit helpers who provides the voice of the people. Frog's songs are believed to contain divine power and magic. When a frog is touching his tongue with another creature (which is often shown in Native Art) it represents the exchange of knowledge and power.



Legends: Many legends are attached to this whimsical little animal. The Tlingit of Alaska tell of it's distribution in a story about a chief's daughter who made fun of Frog. She was then lured into his lake by Frog in human form, who then married her. Her angry parents drained the lake and scattered Frogs in every direction. Some B.C. First nations told that Frog announces the end of the winter dance season. It is said that when the last snowflakes of winter touch the ground they turn into Frogs. Then the Native people know that there is only six weeks until the Salmon begin returning to the rivers and summer begins.

One story about Frog tells he was volcano woman's only child. One day Frog saw evil men hunting only for pleasure rather than necessity. When the men noticed Frog they killed him. Volcano woman erupted in her sorrow and fury, crying great tears of lava. She destroyed the earth, but in time it would be born again even stronger and more fertile.

Yet another Frog legend says a village was starving because no one could catch any fish or game, so a warrior went out to try to find some food. No one had been successful for a long time. The warrior met a bird who instructed him to follow, so he could help him. The bird brought him to a Frog, who let the warrior wear his skin. With the Frog skin, the warrior was able to get enough food for the whole village but, as time passed, the warrior was fully transformed into a Frog, and he went to sea. There he could live and catch fish and other seafood. Until his days were no longer he provided these foods to his village.

GROUSE

The grouse plays an important part in ceremonies of the First Nations of the Pacific Northwest. The dance of the grouse is about protection, bravery and courage. The grouse uses lots of fluster and flapping to appear bigger and to grab attention away from their young should danger be near. It's therefore also seen in healing and other sacred ceremonies. The grouse represents the great dance of life: Joy, power, healing and protection, but always careful and never too adventurous, always warning you to listen to and trust your inner spirits (gut feeling). Grouse will without hesitation sacrifice themselves to protect their young and is a very giving creature.

HAMATSA INITIATION

In the old days the Hamatsa initiate, after becoming possessed by the cannibal spirit, would be leaving into the woods. A while later, and this while can take up to months, he comes back to the village, yelling and screaming. At this time, the healers in the Hamatsa society would calm, tame and capture him

After the mourning songs you can hear madzis (whistles) blown again and again. Once the whistles start, this indicates that the Hamat'sa ceremony has started.

The whistle sounds are said to represent the sound of Baxwbakwalanuksiwe' moving through the woods. He has so many mouths on his body that when he walks it sounds like the whistles that we hear.

Today the Hamat'sa initiate comes through the front door together with his hiligaxste'. She helps in the taming or calming of the Hamat'sa. While he is going around the dance floor, he is surrounded by attendants who have rattles, and the sound of the rattle helps to soothe the new Hamat'sa. The hemlock regalia are taken off the initiate and the attendants dress him in his cedar bark regalia. In the olden days only a Hamat'sa had cedar regalia that was dyed totally red. His cedar bark regalia include two neck rings, skirt, wristlets, anklets and headpiece. He then begins to dance around the fire, which is burning in the middle of the dance floor in the bighouse. Three songs will be sung for him before he becomes wild and xwasalił (yells "hap, hap") as he is held by his attendants and they circle the dance floor one time, then he goes behind the dance screen and you hear the clapping of the wooden beaks of the Hamsaml - cannibal bird attendants of Baxwbakwalanuksiwe'.

HAWK

Hawks are believed to be a symbol of courage and strength and power. Because of that, some tribes do honor the Hawk and do associate it with protection in war and pray to it before any fight they might have to fight. In particular in the native North American culture, e.g. the Cheyenne, the Hawk has the power of observation, it will warn you and it tells you to lead when the time is right.

HERON - Blue Heron

The Blue Heron brings messages of self-determination and self-reliance. They represent an ability to progress and evolve. The long thin legs of the heron reflect that an individual doesn't need great massive pillars to remain stable, but must be able to stand on one's own. In the native culture of the Pacific Northwest Coast First Nations, the Heron is known to be a “lucky charm” for successful fishing. He is a symbol of grace, elegance, patience and good luck. At the same time Heron's are known to be loner and in some tribes are associated with weakness for flattery and vanity.

Heron's are prompting you to look deeper into aspects of your life and asks you to ground yourself regularly. In so doing, it will bring out your innate wisdom and show you how to become more self-reliant. It's teaching you how to become comfortable in uncertain situations. Therefore it would be prudent to watch for opportunities so that you can quickly grasp them and move on.

HUK-HUK

Meaning: The Huk-Huk (or Hok-Hok) is one of the mythological Hamatsa (Cannibal dance) bird masks. There are three of them: One is the Crooked Beak (Galokwudzuwis), a monstrous human eating bird that produces great fear. Then there is the Man-eating RAVEN (Baxbaxwalanuksiwe) who eats his victim's eyeballs - followed by The HUK-HUK (Huxwhukw) who uses it's long beak to crack open human skulls and suck out brains.



Legend: Huk Huk is a long beaked bird monster who is a part of the great household in the sky which is controlled by the Chief cannibal spirit, Bakbakwasnooksiwae. The Hok Hok is portrayed in dances of the Hamatsa society in the important Kwakiult winter ceremonies.

Central to the Hamatsa ceremonies is the story of some brothers who got lost on a hunting trip and found a strange house with red smoke emanating from its roof. When they visited the house they found its owner gone, but one of the house posts was a living woman with her legs rooted into the floor, and she warned them about the frightful owner of the house, who was named Baxbaxwalanuksiwe, a man-eating giant with four terrible man-eating birds for his companions (including Gwaxw gwakwalanuksiwe'/man-eating raven; Galuxwadzuwus/ Crooked-Beak of Heaven; and Huxhukw/supernatural crane who cracks skulls of men to suck out their brains). One version of the story describes the giant with mouths all over his body.

According to another version, the brothers lured Baxbaxwalanuksiwe into a pit and threw hot stones on top of him until he died. With the death of the giant, the men gained mystical power and supernatural treasures from him. These included wooden whistles, a bear mask,

bird masks, costumes, and a Hamatsa pole, all used in later actual rituals. Variations of the myth abound within the Kwakwaka'wakw culture, but this man-eating giant was aided by an old hag, Qominoqa who gathered bodies for him to consume.

Hokhokw or Hoxhogwaxtewae or Hoxhok-of-the-Sky is one of the Kwakwakawakw giant cannibal birds that are the attendants of Baxwbakwalanuxwsiwe, the Canibal-at-the-end-of-the-world, and part of the Hamatsa (Cannibal Dance) ceremony.

HUMMINGBIRD

Meaning: The Hummingbird teaches you to appreciate and love the miracle of living and to help you focus on the positivity in your life. They represent friendship, playfulness and are a symbol of good luck. They are seen as messengers of peace, heal body and soul and guide you through life's challenges. Hummingbirds are very independent and seem to have an unlimited energy supply. They symbolize wonder, love and beauty.

Legend: One story of Hummingbird tells of a warm, spring day. Summer was coming and the wild flowers were in full blossom. A young girl and her mother waded through the green grass, enjoying the bright colours. They stopped as Hummingbird joined them; bussing and darting from flower to flower. The little creature fascinated the child. She asked, "why does such a tiny bird want to fly so fast? Why doesn't it just stay at one flower instead of visiting every one?" Her mother sat down on a hill overlooking the field and said, "let me tell you the story of Hummingbird."



Many years ago there was a fragrant flower that rose every spring to display her beautiful petals and bright colours for all the world's creatures to enjoy. The people and animals waited anxiously each spring for this special flower to appear. On that day they knew the warm, kind rays of summer had arrived. Raven saw how much joy this flower brought to the world, so the next spring when it appeared, he transformed it into a tiny bird. The bird had the colours of the green spring grass and the flashing red of a setting sun. Raven gave the bird a special gift - to fly like sunlight flickering through tall trees. He also gave it a message to take to all the flowers. That's why today we see Hummingbird buzzing from flower to flower, whispering a message. Hummingbird is thanking each flower for making our world a more beautiful place. The mother looked at her child and said, "as you grow up, remember that like each flower, each person has gifts to give the world. In return that person will be thanked by the birds, animals and flowers for helping to make our world a better place for every one."

KINGFISHER

Meaning: Kingfisher is generally viewed positively, as a messenger and a sign of good luck to come. Kingfisher are very bold in their actions, the kingfisher will dive headlong into the water to catch small fish. It teaches us how to plunge into the unknown with confidence and not with fear. It is a symbol for success and prosperity



KOLUS

Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations peoples say their ancestors ('na'mima) came in the forms of animals by way of land, sea, or underground. When one of these ancestral animals arrived at a given spot, it discarded its animal appearance and became human. Animals that figure in these original myths include the Thunderbird and his younger brother the Kolus, the Seagull, the Orca, the grizzly bear and the Chief ghost. Some ancestors have human origins and are said to come from distant places.



KOMOKWA

Meaning: The Komokwa is a mythological creature, symbolizing wealth, healing power and is able to for see the future.

Legend: The Komokwa or Kumukwe is of major importance in Kwagwiltz mythology. He was the king of the undersea world, master and protector of the seals who were a symbol of wealth. His name means "wealthy one" and he ruled from a great rich house under the water. The house contained great wealth in



blankets, coppers and other treasures. Many humans of legendary history attempted to reach this kingdom. Those who achieved their goal became wealthy and powerful, returning to their home village with magical boxes full of treasure.

The Komokwa is the master of the seals. The posts and beams of his house are living sea lions. Sometimes he appears on the surface of the sea, but his head is so big that it looks like an island. He is responsible for the rising and ebbing of the tides, as well as the riches these tides deposit on beaches, and those claimed by the vagaries of sea weather, both material and human lives. One terrific story recounts how he eats human eyes as if they were crab apples. Komokwa has the power to see into the future, heal the sick and injured, and bestow powers on those whom he favours.

LOON

Meaning: The Loon symbolizes serenity and tranquility. They teach us to listen to and learn from our dreams, because if you believe in them, the might come true and your hopes and wishes will be fulfilled.



MADZIS

Madzis (Whistles) are an important part of the Hamatsa initiation.

After the mourning songs you can hear madzis (whistles) blown again and again. Once the whistles start, this indicates that the Hamat'sa ceremony has started.

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MOON

Meaning: The Moon is associated with transformation since it controls the tides and illuminates the dark. It is seen as a guardian spirit.

Legend: The Nuu-chah-nulth whose year features thirteen Moons, honour Moon, and his wife Sun, as the most powerful of beings, the bringer of good luck and plentiful food. This is one of the instances in which Moon is male and Sun is female. Moon's facial expression is more delicate and serene than Sun.

The son - Wulticixaiya - of Moon in a Haida (Queen Charlotte Islands) story rescues his sister from marriage to pestilence. Nuu-chah-nulth purification ceremonies were customarily undertaken during the waxing of Moon. Moon plays a part in the peace dance of the Kwakwaka'wakw peoples (of north-eastern Vancouver Island and the adjoining mainland), in which a human leaves the ceremonial big house and returns transformed into Moon. Moon also appears frequently in the winter ceremony of the Nuxalk. Most tribes thank Raven for the gift of Moon, and sometimes stories describe Moon as a chip off of Sun, which Raven clumsily dropped. Moon frequently appears grasped in the long straight beak of Raven, in reference to the famous myths regarding the theft - and eventual release into the sky - of Sun, and sometimes Moon, by Raven.



One story of Raven and Moon, probably Salish, tells of its origin as a matchmaker:

Long ago in different villages by the sea, a young boy and girl grew into adults. Raven and Eagle knew the two would be perfect mates. Unfortunately, the paths taken by the young man and woman seldom crossed. He was an artist who spent his days in the forest searching for images to use in his carvings. She was a storyteller who stayed in her village teaching children. Raven and Eagle devised a plan to bring them together. They enticed each of them to take walks along the beach at night. It was a good plan, and would have worked except that in those days there was no light in the night sky.

Every evening the two lovers-to-be passed in the dark; neither knowing the other was there. Undeterred Raven entered a camp and stole a burning log from the fire. It was heavier than he had expected. As he tried to fly away, it dragged along, leaving behind a bright streak of firelight on the surface of the sea. Eagle, seeing raven's problem, came to his aid using his strong wings helped lift the burning light high up into the night sky. There, it became a round flowing moon called matchmaker. When the man came down to sea, he was drawn towards matchmaker's light reflecting on the water. The young woman, starting from the other end of the beach, was also lured into the shimmering light. When the two met, they saw each other for the first time and illuminated by matchmaker's soft light, fell instantly in love. Raven and Eagle were very pleased. Ever since then they have kept the Moon fire burning so that when lovers walk by the sea at night, they can still share matchmaker's glow sparkling on the water.

MOSQUITO

Meaning: Mosquitoes are viewed as enemies of humankind, often used in dances to annoy and poke people, they symbolize inconvenience, disturbance and irritation in your life. However, female mosquitoes are considered contributor to the cycle of life since they are taking our blood to nourish their babies while male mosquitoes mainly nourish from nectars.

Legend: Kwagiulth legend tells about the Mosquitoes as follows. "The Cannibal at the North end of the World" who was enticing all the humans with a rainbow coloured smoke. He would then capture them. A clever Chief dug a huge pit fathoms of fathoms deep and tricked "The Cannibal at the North end of the World" who fell into the pit turning to rainbow coloured ash. The Chief cast a spell on him saying; "You will no longer harm my people as 'The Cannibal at the North end of the World' but you shall be a Mosquito".

OCTOPUS

Meaning: The Octopus is believed to have power over sickness and health. It's of great importance in some Nations, including the Haida and Tlingit who are calling it the Devilfish. In the Kwakiulth First Nations, it's also believed to have power over the weather and called Xa'niyus.

OWL

Meaning: The Owl is associated with the souls of deceased ancestors and are viewed with high respect. They symbolize wisdom, intuition and prophecies and sacred knowledge.

Legend: Owls are very often seen as the bogeyman. The story goes that children have to be kept inside at night and are told not to cry too much because otherwise the owl may carry them away. Also, the bony circles around an owl's eyes are said to be made up by ghosts. Sometimes owls are said to carry messages from beyond the grave or deliver supernatural warnings to people. On the Northwest Coast, the owl is often used as a totem pole crest. It's also very often part of dances among the tribal dance traditions. Hearing owls hooting is considered an unlucky omen.

Owls are often seen as eerie harbingers of death but in some tribes, e.g. the Hopi tribe, the great horned owl is a humourless lawman. In some other tribes the owls are portrayed as bumbling good-for-nothings who are banished to the night-time hours as punishment for their annoying behaviour.



OTTER (River wolves)

Meaning: The Otter is a symbol for intelligence, resourcefulness and playfulness. They are seen as a symbol of laughter and light-heartedness. They are known to be accomplished fisher, and therefore often are depicted with a fish. Otter's are the predator in the water, they are gutsy enough to fight a bear in the water with no problem, that's why they are called RIVER WOLVES.



Legend: Many years ago the Otter learned that life was too short to fill with nothing but tasks. Instead, she chose to take a playful attitude towards things she had to do. Now when she is searching for food, she turns it into a game of hide and seek with her children. They dash along the sand, splash in the surf and scramble among the stones in an explosion of energy and curiosity. When it is hot they swim in the cool ponds or lie in the shade, watching clouds drift by. Sometimes otter does things just for fun, nothing more. A grassy bank is turned into a slippery slide or a shallow bay becomes the scene of a frenzied game of tag. But there is still time to be serious. When it comes to important things, like protecting her family, she focuses all her energy on that. But when she is done, she takes time to enjoy her children and discover the grace and beauty of the world around her.

POTLACH

A classical potlatch was a formal, predictable affair which celebrated an important event: a marriage, the rising of a totem pole, the ceremony in which the heir to a social position claimed his inheritance. Guests invited to witness the ceremony accepted gifts from the claimant; by so doing they indicated publicly their approval of the transfer of title or privileges. A declining native population meant that often there was no obvious heir to a title. As a result individuals of undistinguished birth claimed high positions. On occasion they were successful, because by working in a cash economy they could amass a wealth of goods to support their claim. Among some tribes, especially the Kwagiulth, rival factions laid claim to vacant positions resulting in fiercely competitive potlatches.

RAVEN

Meaning: The Raven is known to be the transformer, trickster and creator. In the Kwakwaka'wakw culture the Raven is known as the messenger of the sky and famous for being a somewhat mischievous glutton. He's always out to please himself and to have a good time. He's very adventurous.

Legend: Known in legends as the one who released the sun, moon, and stars; discovered man in a clamshell; brought the salmon and the water; and taught man how to fish and hunt.

The story of "Raven Steals the Lights" is legendary. An old man lived in a house on the bank of a river with his only child - a daughter. At this time, it was pitch black everywhere and no one could see anything. So whether she was beautiful or not, there wasn't a way anyone could tell. Thus begins the tale of the Raven and the Sun. It's said that the old man kept the Sun locked in a box inside a box, which had yet another box containing an infinite number of boxes until finally there was one so small that all it could contain was all the light in the universe.

The Raven was not satisfied with the state of darkness since it led to his blundering and bumping into everything. This slowed him down in his pursuit of the good things in life, which was what he loved more than getting into mischief. One day he crashed into the old man's house and he heard the man and his daughter talking about the light. He decided he wanted the light for himself so he waited for the daughter to leave the house. He transformed himself into a pine needle to slip into a bucket of water. When the daughter drank the water and swallowed the pine needle, the Raven transformed himself into a tiny human being inside her. When he emerged, he was a very odd looking child, but it was too dark to notice his long nose and the few feathers still clinging to him.

As the Raven/Child gained the affection of the old man, he devised a plan to get the Sun. He asked for the largest box in the house and upon being refused, he cried and screamed so loudly that the Grandfather gave him the box. After all it was only one and there were so many more. It took many days, but after a few well-executed tantrums the Raven/Child removed all the boxes. When only a few were left, a strange radiance began to suffuse the room. The Raven/Child begged to hold the light for only a few moments, and even though the Grandfather had come to love the Raven/Child with only a glimpse of him, he gave him the light. As the light was passed to him, the Raven/Child transformed into a huge Raven. He snapped up the light and flew up the smoke hole of the house into the darkness of the world.

The Raven now rejoiced with his new possession and was having such a good time that he did not see the Eagle come upon him. In a panic, he swerved and dropped almost half the light he was carrying. It fell to the rocky ground and broke into pieces. They bounced back into the sky and remain there to this day as the Moon and the Stars. Meanwhile, the Raven was pursued to the edge of the world and, exhausted, he finally let go of his last piece of light. It fell to the East and that is how the Raven gave us the Sun.



SALMON

Meaning: The Salmon symbolizes prosperity, renewal and fertility. They are one of the most important and highest respected animals of all since they have been the primary food source from the beginning of time to the Northwest Coast First Nations.



Legend: The Pacific Northwest Coast people believed that Salmon were actually humans with eternal life how lived in a large house far under the ocean. In the Spring, they put on their Salmon disguises and offered themselves to the villagers as food. The tribes believed that when entire fish skeletons were returned to the sea, the spirits would rise again and change into Salmon people. In this way, the cycle could begin again the following year. Since the villagers feared that the Salmon people would not be treated respectfully by White people who had no knowledge of the taboos and regulations, they did not want to sell Salmon to the first White men.

Salmon is considered the staple food of many coastal communities, brought to the rivers seas by the Raven. The Haida tell of how Raven stole the salmon from the Beaver people by rolling up their stream and landscape like a carpet and flying away. It was so heavy that he could only fly a short distance at a time. He would stop wherever there was a tree to rest. The Beaver people transformed themselves back into Beavers in order to stop him. They would gnaw down the trees that Raven stopped at and each time some Salmon and stream would escape the rolled up landscape forming great streams and rivers of Salmon. Not only was the salmon a favourite food of the Raven, it also became a favourite of the Haida.

In Kwagiulth culture, twins alone have the right to the Salmon dance. To give birth to twins was a sacred gift bestowed on a mother and was believed to have come from the Salmon people.

SEAL

Meaning The Seal is a symbol for curiosity, creativity and imagination, they teach us to embrace our natural sense of explorations and playfulness. They can dive to incredible depths so are known to be fearless and agile creatures, very trusting and playful.



SEA LION

Meaning: The Sea Lion is the symbol for wealth and abundance in many Northwest Coast tribes. Sea Lions are often represented on potlatch regalia and are considered a source of hunting and fishing power. The Sea Lion was hunted for food and its skin was used for clothing and fishing floats. Headgear, worn by hunters, were decorated with the whiskers of the sea lion by many Northwestern Tribes.



Legend: In some Nuu-chah-nulth tribes, Sea-Lions are very important, they are seen to be Earth diver, bringing mud from the bottom of the ocean for the Raven to use to create the earth. In the creation legend, the Raven enlisted the Sea Lion for help and in exchange offered him a fur coat so he can swim in the coldest waters without getting cold.

SISIUTL / SEA SERPENT

Meaning: The Sisiutl is a symbol for healing power and magic. It's closely associated with war and strength, the Sisiutl is known to be invulnerable and to provide protection from harm. The Sisiutl is one of the most powerful crests, and mythological creatures in the mythology of the Kwakwaka'wakw, Nuu-chah-nulth and various other Tribes and figures prominently in their art, dances and songs. Sisiutl is the god of warrior invincibility, a magic war-canoe that can go underground and guardian of the house of the sky people. Sisiutl are frequently depicted as a two headed sea serpent or snake with a human-like head in the middle of the body. All three heads are surmounted by "horns of power" The humanoid central head likely symbolizes Sisiutl's supernatural shape-shifting powers Sisiutl could also change size from a few centimeters to a span sufficient to block off a bay. As a transformative creature of vast shamanic power, the Sisiutl could travel in and across all boundaries: land, water, & air. There is a belief among the Coast Salish that Sisiutl employ orca/killer whales for transportation. It is so powerful, that contact or even seeing one, was believed to cause sickness or death. According to legend, looking at the sisiutl can turn a person into stone. However, if one kills a Sisiutl, it has healing powers. Images or sculptures of Sisiutl were employed to guard canoes and cedar plank longhouses. Warriors traditionally wear the sisiutl's emblem for protection in battle. Thunderbirds are one of the few predators of Sisiutl



Legend: A dramatic supernatural creature, the double headed Sea Serpent is one of the most high ranking crests in Kwagiulth culture. Its power possesses it to shift shape and transform from animal to man at anytime. As well, a Sisiutl can change itself into a self-propelled canoe which the owner must feed with Seals. Touching the serpent or even looking

at it, or a glance from it, can cause death. Legends say Shamans tried to kill the Sisiutl for its healing power and magic. It's closely associated with war and strength, death and revival, so warriors try to kill it to rub its blood on themselves to attain its skilful strength and become invulnerable. A warrior would often wear a head band or belt in the image of a Sisiutl to provide protection from harm. Flakes of shiny mica found on beaches were thought to be the discarded scales from the serpent's body. Whether carved or painted, the Sisiutl is depicted with a profile head, teeth and a large curled tongue at each end of its serpentine form and in the centre is a human head. Fins run along its back and curled appendages or horns rise from all three heads. The painted body represents scales and it may be carved horizontally, formed into a U-shape or coiled into a circle. Sisiutl guarded the entrance to the homes of the supernatural. It was painted on the sides of canoes and hung over doorways to protect the inhabitants from evil spirits.

SUN

Meaning: The Sun symbolizes warmth, comfort, light and life. It owes healing powers and brings peace to the world.

Legend: A long time ago, the Raven was pure white, like fresh snow in winter. This was so long ago that the only light came from campfires, because a greedy chief kept the stars, moon, and sun locked up in elaborately carved boxes. Determined to free them, the shape-shifting Raven resourcefully transformed himself into the chief's baby grandson and cleverly tricked him into opening the boxes and releasing the starlight and moonlight. Though tired of being stuck in human form, Raven maintained his disguise until he got the chief to open the box with the sun and flood the world with daylight, at which point he gleefully transformed himself back into a raven. Released from a box by the Raven, the Sun Chief inhabited the sky and it was believed he could be reached by climbing a chain of arrows. He descended by sliding down its long rays. When the furious chief locked the raven in the house, he was forced to escape through the small smoke hole at the top — and that's why ravens are now black as smoke instead of white as snow.



THUNDERBIRD

Meaning: The Thunderbird symbolizes supernatural power and is believed to be the dominating force behind all of nature's doings. It's a mythical creature and only the most prestigious and powerful Chiefs are allowed to have the Thunderbird as a crest especially among the Kwagiulth, Nuuchah-Nulth and Coast Salish people.

Legend: The Thunderbird is credited with creating the storms. It's believed to live high in the mountains and carry lightening bolts under its enormous wings. When he blinked lightning came out of his eyes, and when he flapped his wings thunder roared. He hunted and ate Killer Whales by using the two lightning snakes kept under his wings. They have the heads of wolves and are revered for their great hunting capability. These lightning snakes were often painted on the sides of canoes and then covered up by another coat of paint. The power emitted from these snakes would help the native whalers in their hunt. Frequently depicted in Native art, the Thunderbird is often shown clutching the Killer Whale in its talons and on top of totem poles with its wings outspread. The representation of a Thunderbird bears a striking resemblance to the Eagle except that it has curly horns on top of its head. Many legends are associated with the Thunderbird. One prominent Coast Salish legend tells of the Salish people's great dependence on the Salmon. One day, the Killer Whale swam into the bay and the Salmon were frightened away. Soon the people began to starve and called out to the Thunderbird for help. The Thunderbird swooped down, grabbed the Killer Whale and carried him out to the sea. The Salmon returned and the people were no longer hungry. Thus the Thunderbird was known as a protector of the people and deeply revered.



TOTEM POLE

Meaning: Totem Pole is the name given by Europeans to the carved wooden pillars made by Native peoples of the Northwest Coast. The word "totem" refers to a symbolic relationship between animals and humans. Just as Bears differ from Eagles and Wolves, so do people of different kin groups from one another. When the Northwest Coast person says, "I am Bear", he means that he belongs to a kinship group that has a legendary relationship with the Bear. However, this does not mean that he considers himself like a Bear, or that he has Bear characteristics, rather he's making a statement about his group membership. The figures on a Totem Pole are visual statements about group membership and identity of those who erected them. These symbols are called "crests". The beings represented on the Poles are those figures from mythical times who were encountered by the ancestors of that group who later took them as their "crests". Thus, some Northwest Coast families claim the Thunderbird as a crest who descended from the sky to take off his animal clothing and became their



human ancestor. Totem Poles are usually erected at Potlatches (gift giving ceremonies) at which time they told stories pertaining to the crests displayed on the Pole, and the right of the family to claim the crests were publicly witnessed.

WHALE

Meaning: The killer whale is a symbol for romance and harmony as Whales mate for life. The Whale is very family oriented and known to travel in large groups, never to be alone. They symbolize great luck and happiness, community and protection. They are known to always be working together, take care of each other and to always help and protect each other.

Legend: The legend of the Killer Whale is a tale of Nacitlanah who was abandoned on an island by his brothers-in-law who were jealous of his prowess as a hunter. He was rescued by the Sea Lions and taken to their village in a cave where he healed their Chief. In gratitude, the Sea Lions gave him supernatural powers enabling him to carve eight wooden Killer Whales. These Whales came to life when they were placed in the sea and avenged him by killing his brothers-in-law. As a mark of respect, Nacitlanah built a house and named it Killer Whale House. According to the legend, the ancestors visited the house located at the bottom of the ocean to obtain rights to use the Killer Whale as a crest.



WOLF

The Wolf represents loyalty, strong family ties, good communication, education, understanding and intelligence. Of all land animals, the Wolf has the strongest supernatural powers and is the most accomplished hunter. The Wolf is a very social and communicative creature; he uses body movement, touch and sound.