

HAIDA TOTEM POLES: REFLECTIONS OF A SOCIETY

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SUMMARY

The Haida Peoples of Haida Gwaii found on the Northwest Coast of Canada had a rich culture. They had a deep appreciation of the land and animals that surrounded them and were a very spiritual people which was reflected in the material culture that they produced. The article aims to study and understand one of the largest of the Haida creations, the totem pole, by exploring Haida religion and mythology, their culture, their food consumption, and their natural environment as well as performing a structural analysis of a number of poles and the representations found on each. The Haida had totem poles used for different purposes such as frontal house poles, and funerary poles. This study will look at the various types to try to observe how these reflected social and religious culture.

RIASSUNTO

I popoli di Haida Gwaii della costa nord-occidentale del Canada hanno espresso una ricca cultura. Rivolgevano alla terra e verso gli animali che li circondavano molta attenzione e una grande considerazione. Era un popolo con una spiccata spiritualità rintracciabile nella loro cultura materiale. L'articolo si propone di studiare e comprendere una delle più grandi creazioni Haida, i pali totemici, attraverso l'indagine della religione Haida, della mitologia, del consumo di cibo e dell'ambiente naturale; viene inoltre proposta l'analisi strutturale di alcuni pali totemici e delle singole raffigurazioni. Gli Haida utilizzavano pali totemici per diversi scopi, per esempio come elementi sul fronte delle case o come pali funerari. Lo studio esaminerà le varie tipologie per cercare di comprendere come i diversi tipi corrispondevano alla cultura sociale e religiosa.

The people of the Haida First Nation of Haida Gwaii have long been admired for their impressive wood carving skills. Amongst the most impressive of their wooden carvings are totem poles which can be found in museums around the world today. These serve as examples of elements that interpreted life, which we could refer to as open architectural objects generating forces of a ritual character and with great social importance and symbolism that is expressed through the figures and decorations that they contain. One can observe similarities between these structures and large prehistoric structures on other continents such as large rock structures of a social and religious character full of metaphoric significance. One can attempt gain a better understanding through a structural analysis of the poles combined with the oral information that is available today which could help to clarify their meaning and provide us with more data about the conceptual and ideological matrix of the Haida way of thinking.

Haida Gwaii consists of a group of islands found along the north-western coast of British Columbia, Canada. Lying 240 kilometres north of Vancouver Island and separated from the mainland by about 50 to 150 kilometres by Hecate Strait,

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Fig. 1 - Houses and Tote Poles, Skidegate Village. Photographer: E. Dossetter, ca. 1881

Haida Gwaii are the most isolated islands in Canada (HORWOOD 2006, pp. 11, 13). Despite having numerous islands, most of these are quite small being hardly more than large rocks and therefore would not have been spaces occupied by the Haida as living spaces but perhaps hunting spaces as they provided ideal locations for nesting sea birds and nursing marine mammals. The name Haida Gwaii means “Islands of the People”.

The arrival of the first people to Haida Gwaii is something often debated by archaeologists. There is evidence to suggest that the earliest migration of humans to the Americas could have occurred along the coastal corridor during deglacia-

tion if not earlier but afterwards it is difficult to find out exactly when and how people arrived in the archipelago (FEDJE 2005, p. 3).

Archaeology of Haida Gwaii dates back to the late 19th century but poor preservation conditions such as bacterial degradation of organic components caused by the acidic nature of forest soils means that many of the artefacts have been lost over the years. Fragile remains like wood, skin, bark and leather are poorly preserved at most sites and last only a few years to decades in the ground at Haida Gwaii. Bones and shells are more durable but they too are vulnerable to acidic and bacterial degradation, thus, the best sites that allow for preservation are shell middens, composed of large quantities of shell build up in places like campsites and villages where they were consumed in large numbers. Shell middens can reduce the soil acidity in immediate soil and can allow for the preservation of bone for thousands of years. Waterlogged environments known as 'wet sites' are also useful in terms of the preservation of wooden artefacts but in most cases, the only materials that will survive for vast periods of time are those with extremely durable material such as stone tools, highly burnt bone, post moulds and other depression or pit features (FEDJE 2005, p. 147).

As a result of these poor conditions, totem poles generally lasted no longer than 100 years. The different degrees of degradation of those which survive today limit their study and comprehension. Regardless, there are many replicas made by modern day carvers who have reclaimed their culture and attempted to draw on techniques and motifs of the past. However, these will never be the original poles nor will they have the same functions and meanings.

The Haida had a rich tradition of oral histories which was an integral part of their culture and key to their identity as a people (FEDJE 2005, p. 119). It provided a link to the past for the Haida for individual families and entire villages. Levi Strauss (LÉVI-STRAUSS 1963 *land*, vol. 93 (1), pp. 1-11) argues that the oral histories were often used to unlock high level culture constructs or as illustrations of theories.

Their stories were never written down and so were not designed by appear in books. John Swanton, a linguist who travelled to the island of Haida Gwaii in 1900 and 1901 on behalf of his mentor, intended to stay for half a year. He was so impressed by the literature that he encountered on the island and in the end stayed for a full three year desperately trying to transcribe what he could of Haida mythology. His work failed to impress his colleagues and peers and so much of it remained unpublished. It is due to him that we are fortunate to have records of the stories we do, however, these fail to capture what would have only transmitted by hearing the stories in person. The myth tellers were well trained individuals who carefully relayed these stories to those who would hear them (BRINGHURST 1999, pp. 14-15).

Though much of these stories and histories have been lost since the arrival of the first Europeans, they are still highly valued especially when considered alongside archaeological evidence as they can tell us a lot about culture and customs. Stories provide us with knowledge about origin of lands, resource ownership, crests, songs, names, how medicinal plants were used, facial paintings, names of locations and places, travels, marriage patterns, relations between groups,

motivations for actions and events, spiritual beliefs and practices, and various other types of information unavailable to us through other sources of information (FEDJE 2005, p. 122).

The arrival of the first Europeans in the eighteenth century had a great impact on the Haida. Initially the Haida who enjoyed the wealth that came with fur trade and experienced an economic boom. They were also introduced to metal woodworking tools which had a major influence on their material culture and what they could do in terms of their monumental art and architecture (MACDONALD 1989, p. 20). While they already had established styles and prototypes, their newfound wealth and tools allowed for larger and more impressive works.

Over time, diseases, illegal alcohol, firearms and money all played a part in the destruction of the Haida (HORWOOD 2006, p. 19). By 1830s the first series of smallpox epidemics struck the northwest coast killing roughly half of the Haida population by the end of the decade (MACDONALD 1989, p. 20). The first outbreak of smallpox was followed by more including a series of epidemics in 1862, which was the worst, and in 1875 and they were also affected by the measles (BRINGHURST 2011, p. 33).

By 1884 Methodist missionaries had arrived in Haida Gwaii in attempt to start a campaign to convert smallpox survivors this coincided with the year Potlatches, important ceremonial celebrations that took place in the communities were outlawed in Canada (BRINGHURST 2011, p. 33). In the beginning, the impact on the first nation's cultures was negligible but towards the late 19th century with the decline of the population and severe disruptions to their traditional way of life, many had been converted to Christianity (MUCKLE 2006, p. 69). Missionaries hoped to change the traditional ways of the First Nations people and encouraged them to abandon these. The residential school system was set up in British Columbia which acted under the presupposition that assimilation was best for first nation's people and the best method of assimilation was to remove children from their homes and teach them the ways of the Euro-Canadian society in schools they could live in (MUCKLE 2006, p. 70). These schools attempted to cut cultural ties such as language, family and traditional ways of life and re-educate children in a Christian, Euro-Canadian way (MUCKLE 2006, p. 71). There are numerous accounts of children being physically abused for speaking their native language and also being taught that their parents were evil which caused many family breakdowns (MUCKLE 2006, p. 70). In the end, these schools were seen as a failure and many churches that were involved have since apologised, however, the last residential school did not close until 1984 (MUCKLE 2006, p. 71). Since the second half of the twentieth century, there has been a renewed interest in Haida culture, greatly on the part of new Haida generations who today carve totem poles, hold potlatch ceremonies, and continue to share the myths of their ancestors.

In Haida mythology cosmos were divided into three zones: sky, earth and the underworld. They believed in the existence of two lands: the mainland and Haida Gwaii which was supported by a supernatural being called Sacred-One-Standing-and-Moving who rests on a copper box supporting a giant cedar that grows at the centre of Haida Gwaii. This tree is a living being that unites the three cosmic zones as the roots reach into the underworld, the trunk comes from

the earth and the braches reach into the sky. To them, it was extremely important that harmony was kept between these cosmic zones or it would have disastrous consequences on the world (MACDONALD 1989, p. 16).

The Haida classified and ranked all creatures, natural and supernatural. In the mineral kingdom, copper was at the top of the hierarchy and the most important object of symbolic wealth; in the vegetable kingdom it was the red cedar which provided houses, poles, clothing, utensils and canoes; and in the animal kingdom, which was of great importance to the Haida, killer whales were the chiefs of the sea, bears of the land and eagles of the sky (MACDONALD 1989, p. 16). Humans gave prayers and offerings of food to these animal chiefs to ensure successful hunting, fishing and gathering.

It was also believed that animals possessed souls like those of humans and each had their own groups which were also organized into moieties. Animals were thought to have their own territories, houses, canoes and chiefs and when they were in their own dwelling places, they lived in their human form, using masks only when they went outside. When Haida wore masks and mimicked animal sounds, they were actually trying to enter the mental state in which they believed they had become a part of the animal society (MACDONALD 1989, p. 17). The belief in reincarnation was also accepted as what happened after death and the souls of the dead made their abode between incarnations on earth and in the houses of supernatural chiefs. Children were usually carefully observed in an attempt to understand who they were reincarnating (MACDONALD 1989, p. 17).

Haida mythology is based on grand themes found throughout the Northwest Coast area but as with their painting and sculpture, there are particularities unique to the Haida. The most important myths were those of the raven cycle which began with chaos, portrayed by the existence of a single reef piled high with su-

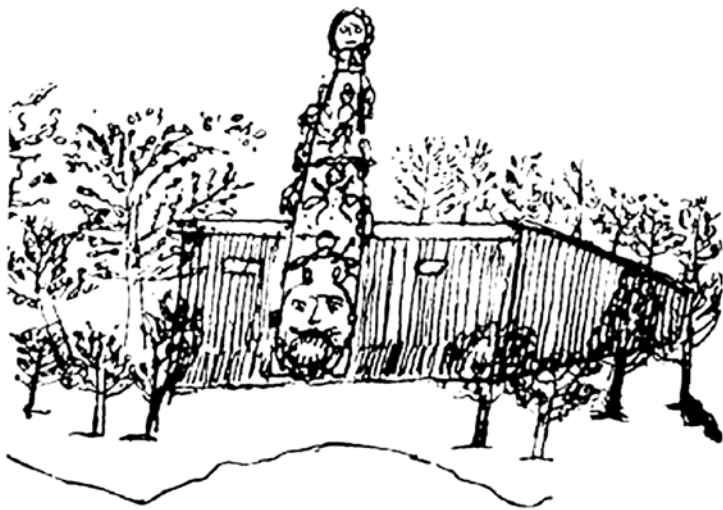


Fig. 2 - Dadens house with frontal pole. From the Journal of John Bartlett, 1791 (Bartlett 1925)

pernatural beings that was surrounded by nothing but sea and sky. Raven used black pebbles to create Haida Gwaii and white crystalline ones to create the mainland and the supernatural beings swam from the reef to the shores. Raven was not the prime creator in these myths but rather someone that obtains elements of the universe from other beings in order to transform or transport. Haida mythology also attributes the Raven as having been the one to release them from a giant clamshell which he dug out of the ground.

The second cycle of raven myths is related to the acquisition and control of food sources and in these myths the raven is often accompanied by an eagle while travelling. This is the basis for the moiety divisions of Raven and Eagle. As Raven was tied to the creation of the world, these myths belonged to everyone but individual myths were based on archetypal themes, many of which involved marriage alliances and access to wealth (MACDONALD 1989, p. 20).

It is not known exactly when the Haida people first began carving totem poles as the wood decomposes easily and rarely lasts for over 100 years making it difficult to find any surviving remains of early poles. Nonetheless, oral histories indicate that the monumental carvings predate contact with Europeans. The earliest recorded sighting of a carved pole was made by John Bartlett, a fur trader from Boston, in 1791.

The figures on a pole are usually interpreted as statements about the group membership and identity of those who erected them and are often referred to as crests. These crests can depict animals as well natural phenomena (e.g. clouds or rainbows), and supernatural beings, most of which were rendered into the animal form (HORWOOD 2006, p. 20).

Poles were typically erected during potlatch ceremonies when their stories could be told and the right of the family to claim the crest was publically witnessed. If a pole had fallen, it would take another potlatch to raise it again so they were usually left where they had fallen to decay back into the earth. Of greater importance were the poles raised in honour of chiefs by their successors. Those who commissioned the poles told the artist which crests to depict but evidence suggests that artists were given freedom in how they chose to portray these and often put in their own hidden meanings and visual puns (HALPIN 1981, p. 17). Therefore, to fully understand the meaning of a pole, one would have to know the owner as well as the carver. Totem poles were treated with respect and honour (STEWART 1993, p. 9).

While people often refer to a low ranking individual as being 'the lowest man on the totem pole', this is considered to be incorrect. It is commonly accepted that the most important figure on the pole was actually the bottom figure. The importance given to the figure could be due to the centralised position; it would be the first figure that one encountered upon approaching a pole. This figure was generally the largest as well and often carved in greater detail or with more care as it would be viewed from the closest point. The importance could also be attributed to the fact that the bottom crest or representation supported all of the other figures on a pole.

Normally poles are considered to belong to one of eight main types: frontal poles, memorial poles, mortuary poles, house posts, corner posts, welcome figures,

shame posts and grave markers. Frontal poles stood at the front of a house and sometimes contained an opening through which the house was entered. Memorial or Commemorative poles were those erected in honour of someone who had died by their new successor. Mortuary poles were those containing the remains of the dead: House posts were carved posts that supported the main beams of a house. Corner posts held up the edge of a house serving a supportive function much like house posts. Welcome figures sat on the beach to welcome guests arriving by canoe. Shame posts were carved to bring shame or ridicule someone, most often a rival chief of the one who commissioned the pole. This could be due to an unpaid debt of other incident but publically acknowledged it for all to see and know. These were taken down if restitution was made. Grave markers were placed where people were buried (HALPIN 1981, pp. 17-23; STEWART 1993, p. 25). For the purpose of this paper, we will study only five of these eight types; those which are more common and contain more information. The five types studied will be frontal poles, memorial poles, mortuary poles, house posts, and corner posts.

The tallest known examples from the 19th century was 24 metres tall and can be found in the Royal Ontario Museum but most were smaller, between three and eighteen metres (HALPIN 1981, p. 23). However, of the types observed here the tallest on average are the frontal poles which reach between six and twelve metres and seem to average at around ten. Memorial and mortuary poles are similar in size with the examples of memorial poles studied here reaching roughly ten metres in height and the highest mortuary pole approximately nine metres. Memorial poles seem to have a greater range as we have an example in the catalogue that measures somewhere around three metres in height. Corner posts are the second smallest with the examples here being roughly four to five metres. Finally, house posts are the smallest with a range from two to four metres. The size of house and corner posts would have been limited by the size of the house that they supported or were found in and therefore it is expected that we would find such heights.

In terms of the figures featured on a pole, those with the greatest number are frontal poles whose total number spreads from 7 to 14 depictions. Mortuary poles contain the second most figures with an example containing five and one containing six. In house posts studied we find examples of poles with four and six figures. Memorial poles tend to have fewer with examples containing between two and five figures. Corner posts tend to contain the fewest figures. While we have one example of a corner post with six figures, this is an unusual case. The other pole contains only one which seems to have been a more common number for this type of pole.

Crests are representations of various figures found on poles and each has a different meaning. Each of the figures selected would have had some personal significance for the family or owner of the pole as well as the carver who was able to take some artistic liberties in the selection of the images. However, there was also social and religious significance attached to each figure and these would have been understood by the Haida in relation to their religion and beliefs. There are also animal traits and characteristics that would have been appreciated by those who shared their environment. As the Haida interacted closely with nature, they

would have observed these behaviours on a day to day basis and this most definitely would have had some impact on not only what they chose to depict on poles but also how they chose to depict them.

The 26 poles studied for this work fall into the following five types: House poles, memorial poles, mortuary poles, corner poles, and frontal house poles (Fig. 3).

PREDOMINANT FIGURES ON POLES

Anthropomorphic figures account for twenty-nine percent of the total number of figures found on poles. Bears are not far behind making up twenty-three percent of the total and various bird types form sixteen percent of the total (Fig. 4).

A common pattern can be observed in the layout of the various figures on a pole. However, this is most easily visible on Frontal Poles as observed in the table below (Fig. 5).

Looking at the above charts one can easily observe several common features regarding the structural layout and position of figures on a pole. While no two are identical (unless replicas) and some seem to follow a different set of rules, it is most common to find watchmen and birds (eagles, ravens, and mountain hawks) on top of poles. Humans and other figures are found in the middle and bears are generally found dominating the lowest position at the bottom. Poles seem to have a clear division into three parts based on this positioning with three distinct classes of images, each with obvious symbolism.

As one can note we do find exceptions and there are differences among pole types such as corner poles or house poles which purposely often fail to display any figures in the middle. The groupings of figures appear as categories in a tripartite conception of the universe. So, while different parts or figures on a pole may be read as individual myths or stories, or representations of a family, the entire pole must also be read as a reflection of the Haida understanding of the world in three parts and their mythology in its entirety featuring the sky and the heavens, earth, and the subterranean or underworld.

How do totem poles reflect Haida societal structure and religion?

As has already been discussed, in Haida mythology and religion the world is understood to be divided into three: sky, earth and the underworld. They believed that harmony and balance must be kept between these cosmic zones so that the world could continue functioning as it should without slipping into chaos and destruction. The structural layout of a totem pole reflects this mythology. Naturally, the highest point on a pole would represent the sky and it is on this section that we commonly find birds such as eagles, ravens or the mythical mountain hawk, and watchmen. The raven appears in Haida myths like *How the Raven Stole the Sun* and in this myth becomes almost symbolic of the sun itself and therefore a cosmic figure. The middle, that is, the earth, is where we observe human figures and other animals found on land. Finally, the bottom of the pole, the underworld, is typically occupied by bears or even whales. It is not only the three zones that we see represented but also the idea of balance and harmony. While the size of crest figures may vary, there is a fairly uniform composition with the three parts being roughly equal in size.

Fig. 3

House Pole	2
Memorial Pole	6
Mortuary pole	2
Corner Pole	2
Frontal House Pole	14

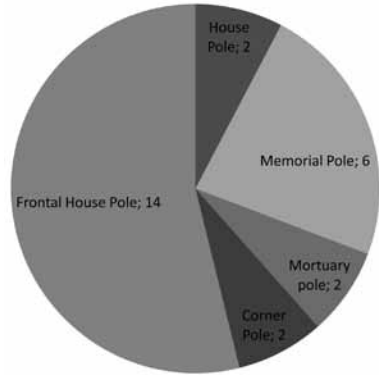
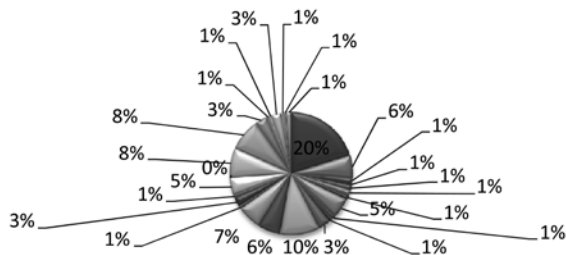


Fig. 4

Human figures	31
watchmen (group)	9
watchman (single)	2
snag	1
sea bear	2
moon	2
orca	2
whale	8
seal	2
mountain goat	1
beaver	5
bear	16
bear cub	9
grizzly bear	10

sculpin	1
mountain hawk	4
cormorant	1
eagle	7
owl	
raven	12
frog	13
potlatch cylinder	5
puffin beak	1
insect	1
unidentified mammal figure	4
wolf cub	1
unidentified bird	1
children	2

- Human figures
- watchmen (group)
- watchman (single)
- snag
- sea bear
- moon
- orca
- whale
- seal
- mountain goat
- beaver
- bear
- bear cub
- grizzly bear
- sculpin
- mountain hawk
- cormorant
- eagle
- owl
- raven
- frog



	Tanu House (1)	Cumshe-wa (3)	Tanu (4)	Masset (6)	Nin-stints (7)	Skedans (8)	Tanu village (9)	Masset Star House (10)	Masset House 26(11)	Moon House (14)	Monument for Stilita(19)	Property House (20)	Drum House (23)	Masset (24)
Top	3 watchmen, eagle	3 watchmen, cor-mont	3 watchmen, eagle	raven	3 watchmen, raven	3 watchmen, mountain huak	3 watchmen, eagle	3 watchmen	3 watchmen, eagle	sea grizzly	Eagle	single watchman	Bear	single watchman
Middle	bird, whale	whale with human woman	human fig. With frog	frog, sea bear and cub, human	grizzly bear, frog, bear cub	mythical animal, human figure	human fig, human fig, with whale	bear with frog in mouth, bear holding human	bear, beaver	bear with human face	whale, human with frog in mouth, shaman mother-in-law	super-natural snag, bear eating frog	grizzly, human fig. and eagle, grizzly holding frog	raven with seal
Bottom	bear	grizzly bear	Whale	bear with frog in mouth, grizzly bear with sculpin	grizzly bear	grizzly bear	sea bear	raven with human fig.	bear, beaver	bear with 2 cubs	bear	bear eating hunter	raven with human fig.	bear with unidentified fig.

Fig. 5

How can we account for choice of figures and the placement of each of these figures and why do certain crests seem to repeatedly appear in the same position or 'zone' of the pole?

Of the three most prominent figures on totem poles, bears are animals that have obtained a universal importance in art. It is not just amongst the Haida that they feature as an important figure in art and mythology but in North American and Eurasia as well. Of all of the hunted animals and carnivorous creatures they are the most revered. Some authors have suggested that this is because they have characteristics that lend themselves more readily to anthropomorphization than other animals (HALLOWELL 1926, p. 148). These include sagacious qualities; their omnivorous habits; the ability to raise themselves on their hind legs in a human-like manner or sit down against a tree with their arms at their side; their plantigrade locomotion which leaves a mark similar to that left by a human foot; and even their excrement is similar in appearance, though larger, to a human's. Looking past the physical traits that bears share with humans, there are emotional connections as well. Bears have a range of facial and bodily expressions that are quite human in nature such as the whining and pleading that can be observed when they are being attacked by another animal. It is said that tears may even appear in their eyes. Bears in captivity are even known to masturbate (HALLOWELL 1926, pp. 148-149). Bear mothers typically have around two or three children, thus a similar number to what would be observed in many human families. A bear's ability to hibernate and live without food for months on end and then re-emerge from what would seem to be death to be reborn in the spring is another aspect that likely lead to human fascination with the animal. From an economic perspective the bear was never of vital importance to the Haida but they provided food, warmth (furs), and bones which could be used for creating tools. Perhaps these human-traits, their ability to hibernate, and their usefulness all contributed to their attraction to the Haida as well as other first nations groups.

Birds are undoubtedly important to the Haida and this accounts for their inclusion on the pole. As we have already explained, families belonged to one of two moieties in society; that of the raven or eagle. Their inclusion in one or the other dictated how they carried out certain important aspects of their life such as who they were allowed to marry. An observation of two of the most commonly featured birds and those which make up the two moieties: eagles and ravens, reveals interesting characteristics that would likely have engaged the Haida and created interest. Eagles have the ability to see from great distances and to watch them hunt from the sky is fascinating. This bird can circle high in the sky and then swoop down to catch a large fish from under the surface of the water. Even from a position directly above the water it might be impossible for a human to see the same fish. Their call, as already noted, is high pitched and piercing and could be compared to that of a human child or woman. Their physical size is also impressive and intimidating.

Ravens, while smaller, are one of the most intelligent bird species and these along with crows have been studied and appreciated for their problem solving abilities even today. These birds have been known to adapt in quickly to new situations. Ravens have been known to mimic other species including humans to

develop effective techniques to acquire food. They also have the ability to develop tools but means of curving a metal wire for example into the form of a hook to fish food out of a tight space. Ravens are also capable of imitating human sounds and voices and even go as far as repeating words or phrases after spending enough time with people. In mythology ravens are associated with creation myths and it is responsible for much of why the world is the way it is. These aspects would have made the bird appealing and may play a part in the selection of these animals to be included on totem poles and in mythology.

Regarding the placement of these figures, it seems quite logical that some of the predominant figures would be positioned at the top of the pole. For example, the watchmen figures were meant to look out and act as protectors or guardians to those who inhabited the dwellings in front of which the poles were placed. This high position would put them at the ideal position to carry out this task. It has been noted that on Haida Gwaii as well as throughout the world, high points have always been used as look out points to scope out potential prey or danger. The Haida used these advantageous positions to look out over the sea and observe potential attackers that came by boat from the mainland. Birds are flying animals that one often finds perched on top of trees and in the sky and therefore the position on top of the poles could be seen as quite practical. Some figures are more difficult to explain in this simple manner, however, such as bears which have no place in the sky.

On the other hand, when one observes the base of the pole, the figure closest to the ground, one most frequently sees bears either holding another figure or alone. However, other figures also appear including beavers, whales, and occasionally, birds. This position is connected with the subterranean world; the land of the dead and chthonian. As noted, the position may be simply attributed to where one would actually observe these animals in nature. Bears are land animals that reside on the earth but that hibernate underground or in caves, as well as beavers who not only reside on land but dive under water; whales are also found under the water and in a deeper realm than other animals. However, once again we find it difficult to explain why birds would appear in such a position.

This simple explanation fails to take into account the animals that are found out of position and it also fails to appreciate why the Haida might associate each of these particular figures with one of the three zones which their mythology is comprised of.

The heavens or sky section of a totem pole is represented by birds as well as other figures that appear on top such as the occasional celestial body. The placement of birds at the top, as already has been suggested, could be viewed in simplistic terms as a reflection of where one observes them in nature. Nonetheless, it could also be related to their importance. As has also been discussed, a high position is often associated with importance and power. This placement at the top of the pole may reflect the importance of the animal in society.

The pole section in the middle which we could associate with earth is situated, naturally, in the centre of the pole between the heavens and then underworld. This section of pole is where we find the greatest number of human figures which is a clear reflection of the realm of men or the living. The other animals that are

contained here are a mix but it is common to see them linked to human figures in some form or another. One representation that is featured quite commonly amongst the others either next to them, in their mouths or in between is that of the frog. As we have already discussed the frog is often representative of shamans in Haida art as they were seen as an animal that possessed the ability to cross over to realms: earth and water. A shaman had the same ability, that is, the ability to communicate with all three of the universal divides. The frog is not only found in the middle but frequently in the mouth of bears at the bottom. This interspersion of frogs throughout poles may represent the shamanic ability to speak with beings from these three worlds. This becomes even more likely when we consider that the frog is most commonly found in the mouth of other beings which is often said to be symbolic of the sharing of ideas or speaking. The fact that the frog then could be seen as a representation of a shaman who despite his importance is still human, would help explain his being found in the middle which we associate with the space of man.

Poles sat on the earth appearing as if extending from the earth like a tree. The roots of a tree reach down under the ground and this is our first tie which may make us associate with base of a pole with the underworld. As already touched upon in this chapter, bears are animals that hibernate throughout the winter and reappear in the spring. Hibernation takes place in caves or under the ground which provides us with a link between the animal and then underworld. To those who did not fully understand the explanation behind hibernation, it likely would appear as if the bear died, not moving, eating or drinking for several months. Afterwards, during a period of new growth and procreation, bears left their winter dwellings as if being reborn from the earth. The position at the base of the pole and an association between them at the underworld may partially result from this specific behaviour.

This tripartite religion or idea of a triune God has been existed in major religions throughout history around the world. The idea reflects the family (father, mother, and child) and it has a symbolism connected to eternity and the cycle of regeneration of life. The concept of time with a division into three parts, past, present, and future is also linked to tripilism (GOMES 2010, pp. 459-460). Even early in Egyptian religion, Rā was often grouped with Khepera and Temu to form a solar trinity with Khepera representing the rising sun, Rā the midday sun, and Temu the setting sun. Later, the Egyptian trinity of Osiris, Isis, and Horus became anthropomorphised gods with Osiris acting as the archetypal father, his wife Isis the archetypal mother, and Horus the son. In Greece, Plato (428-384 BCE) had already noted 'threeness' in all creation and Plotinus of Alexandria (204-270 CE) formulated a trinity consisting of Monad, Nous, and Psyche. The trinity in Christianity consists of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (NASH 2005, pp. 33-36). In some populations in Asia such as Siberians, there is a belief that man has three souls that separate when he dies. One stays in his grave next to the body, the second goes to the subterranean world of spirits and shadows, and the third rises into Heaven where it is reunited with God (ELIADE 1987, pp. 202, 203, 423).

Tripilism can therefore be seen not only in the division of poles into three main spaces: top, middle, and bottom, but also be noted in representations of the watch-

men which are placed in groups of three on the majority of the poles we have seen.

Normally, in hunting and gathering societies it is common to find a binary vision of the universe that is concerned mainly with the past and present or masculinity and femininity. However, in agricultural communities there is an understanding of ternary (GOMES 2010, p. 467). Therefore, if the Haida were a hunting and gathering society, how could we account for this 'threeness' in their religious imagery and conception of the world?

As has already been addressed, the Haida were unique in the fact that although hunters and gatherers, they managed to remain on the archipelago for thousands of years and develop a sustainable hunting and gathering system. They lived in more permanent structures during the winter in villages off of the food that they had collected during the summer. This food was carefully stored, dried, and kept not only for consumption but for trade. Planning and preparing food storages indicates an awareness of future and looking ahead similarly to what someone does when planting a crop for the future. It is not only in their food storage and winter preparations that we see this future planning but also in the



Fig. 6 - Entry or portal pole at the Nuxauk village of Komkotes (Photo by H.I. Smith, ca. 1900)

way they harvested cedar from trees. There are many instances where we can observe techniques used that use a part of the tree without actually killing it or cutting down the entire cedar. This may be a result of concern with preservation of the tree which suggests that they planned to go back to and reuse it at a later date and were concerned with its growth and continuity.

In conclusion, totem poles constituted the most expressive structural testimonies of Haida culture. As with any other artistic structure produced by prehistoric societies or ethnographies, they translated aspects of mythology and Haida religion. These aspects are translated through a complex iconography and their structure most likely reflects the conceptual understanding of those who produced such monuments.

One can still observe totem poles today in museum, in old photographs, replicas of old poles, or in modern carvings. At this time we are fortunate enough to have the UNESCO World Heritage Site of S'Gang Gwaay where we can still visit some of these fantastic structures in their original location.

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