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Tlingit Beaded Regalia***

Megan A. Smetzer
University of British Columbia

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Megan A. Smetzer

Threads of Resistance: Unraveling the Meanings of 19th Century Tlingit Beaded Regalia
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Although not the first to make the connection, Ensign Albert Niblack of the U.S. Navy wrote most succinctly in 1888: “There seems nothing unreasonable in tracing the origin of much of the dance and ceremonial paraphernalia to customs originating in war.”¹ Since that time, numerous scholars have suggested and disputed links between Tlingit carved and painted armor and ceremonial regalia. Beaded regalia, on the other hand has been almost entirely neglected in Northwest Coast ethnographic literature due to notions of authenticity and cultural degeneration. In 1945, anthropologist Erna Gunther for example, explained beaded dance collars as a mere disguise for western-style shirts.² By examining the changes wrought by colonial processes in the contact zone of Southeast Alaska throughout the 19th century, I shall consider in more detail the possible links between 18th century wooden armor, specifically neck armor and wood and hide breastplates, and 19th and early 20th century beaded dance collars and tunics. I will suggest that the layers of meaning are richer and more complex than previously believed. The impact of colonialism, both Russian and American, spiritual and secular, changed the object of physical protection to one of cultural continuation.

While recognizing the complex interactions within Tlingit communities, and with other Native groups on the Northwest Coast and interior, for the purposes of this paper I shall focus primarily on the relationship between colonizers and colonized. Mary Louise Pratt’s notion of the contact zone is central to my argument. She defines it as “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict.”³ Early interactions within the contact zone led to the incorporation of new materials into armor, and later, the development of new forms of regalia such as the beaded dance collar and tunic. Originally, following Robert Young and Homi Bhabha, I described this process as “hybridization.”⁴ I have since rejected this notion due to the racist history of the term as well as the fact that it suggests a mingling of two essentialized wholes. I am struggling to find a new way of understanding or describing objects that demonstrate the selective incorporation of ideas and motifs from new sources, in a way that recognizes their role in resisting colonial incursions and shaping indigenous identity.

Early travelers to Southeast Alaska describe pre-contact Tlingit armor as consisting of a heavy wooden helmet, a wooden visor or collar, and an animal hide tunic worn under a garment made up of thin slats or rods of wood held together with sinew. Many of these objects were embellished with carved or painted animal crest figures. Pre- and early contact armor served several purposes, protection from clubs and spears,

¹ Niblack, Albert P. *The Coast Indians of Southern Alaska and Northern British Columbia*. New York: Johnson Reprint Co, 1970, 268.

² Gunther, Erna. *Art in the Life of the Northwest Coast Indians*. Portland: Portland Art Museum, 1966, 72.

³ Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London and New York: Routledge, 1992, 6.

⁴ Young, Robert J. C. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995, 25.

identification of the warrior's clan affiliation, and, last but not least, to inspire fear in one's enemies.

The 18th century advent of the Russian, American, and British fur-trade on the Northwest Coast, particularly the introduction of firearms, led to rapid changes followed by the eventual obsolescence of armor. Urey Lisiansky, a Captain in the Russian Navy, present at the 1804 destruction of the Tlingit fort at Sitka, noted early alterations to Tlingit armor: "Their war habit is a buck-skin, doubled and fastened round the neck, or a woolen cuaca [vest], to the upper part of which, in front, iron plates are attached, to defend the breast from a musket-ball."⁵ Not only were the iron plates a new modification, but, according to Lisiansky, the woolen vest, was introduced by Americans. Within a few years of contact the Tlingit began altering their old designs through the use of new materials to accommodate a different kind of warfare. In addition, Lisiansky noted a shift in the use of war helmets, which he referred to as masks: "These masks were formerly worn by the Colushes [Tlingit] in battle, but are now used chiefly on festivals."⁶

This connection between warfare and the potlatch, and even more specifically, between armor and ceremonial regalia is not a new one in terms of Northwest Coast literature. Helen Codere's 1950 publication *Fighting with Property* suggests the Vancouver Island Kwak'wakw'wakw potlatch was a substitute for war, and is most often cited by contemporary scholars. Anthropologist Sergei Kan disagrees with Codere's assertion stating that it "does not seem to apply to the Tlingit, who waged war against and potlatched with each other throughout most of the 19th century."⁷ He does indicate, however, that competition played a central role in Tlingit ceremonies. In terms of art displayed and worn during the potlatch, Aldona Jonaitis in *Art of the Northern Tlingit* provides a useful synopsis of the many scholars who have made the connection between pieces of armor and painted and carved ceremonial regalia. Although Jonaitis disputes the connection between war helmets and conical hats worn as regalia she suggests that:

Although one can, at this point, neither prove nor disprove any historical connection between warfare and the potlatch, it could be that any metaphors of militarism expressed during a ritual the primary significance of which was societal cohesion, had a more symbolic than historical meaning.⁸

Returning to Lisiansky's observations it seems clear that as armor was rendered ineffective due to the introduction of firearms its use became symbolically rather than physically protective.

The changes occurring in Southeast Alaska due to the presence of fur traders and the Russian Orthodox Church during the late 18th and first half of the 19th centuries did not significantly alter the basic structures of Tlingit culture, although the material aspects shifted as access to Western goods increased. The sale of Alaska to the United States in 1867, however, accelerated the rate of change through the increased colonial pressures

⁵ Lisiansky, Urey. *Voyage Round the World in the Years 1803, 1804, 1804, and 1806*. New York: De Capo Press, 1968, 238.

⁶ Ibid. 150.

⁷ Kan, Sergei. "The 19th Century Tlingit Potlatch: A New Perspective." *American Ethnologist* vol. 13, no. 2 (1986): 202.

⁸ Jonaitis, Aldona. *Art of the Northern Tlingit*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1986, 49.

exerted by American military forces, Presbyterian missionaries, and the formation of a civil government.

Within 15 years of the Alaskan purchase, several Tlingit communities, including villages in Saginaw and Security Bays in 1869 and Angoon in 1882, were bombed in retaliation for misdeeds born of cultural misunderstanding combined with the overzealousness of some American military officials. Presbyterian missionaries arrived in the 1870s and pressured the Tlingit to give up their language and other markers of culture in order to become good Christians. The civil government, established in 1885, aided the missionaries in their self-appointed task through the passage of laws and other means designed to force the Tlingit to exist within a different system of governance.

At the same time, within Tlingit communities, social hierarchies were weakening as many high ranked leaders succumbed to widespread epidemics of small pox, and others converted to Christianity. This in turn led to increased potlatching, as those Tlingit who gained new wealth in the growing cash economy attempted to increase their rank. Throughout this tumultuous period, the Tlingit were selecting and rejecting aspects of colonial culture. I believe that beaded dance collars and tunics, combining both physical and symbolic qualities derived from the Russian and American colonizers developed out of this complex milieu.

Several threads woven through the 19th century contact zone bind beaded dance collars and tunics to early armor, many of them tied to the notions of resistance and identity construction I outlined earlier. On a purely physical level, dance collars and tunics resonate with the past in terms of design. The majority of collars resemble a bib, which is similar to a type of early armor, collected by Lisiansky, in which a bib shaped piece of walrus skin is suspended from the wooden collar in order to protect the neck and chest.

Tunics have more regional variations as those from Sitka, the community with the longest history of contact, most resemble early armor in their frontal depiction of the individual's crest. By comparison, tunics from Yakutat reflect their long history of intermarriage and trade with interior Athapaskan speaking peoples. Unlike armor, however, dance collars and tunics, were worn by men and women at the turn of the 19th century. And to lay to rest Erna Gunther's acculturationist assertion that collars were mere covers for modern shirt collars, many turn of the 19th century photographs show them being worn over Tlingit made regalia, including many E. W. Merrill images from the so-called last potlatch held in Sitka in 1904.

These physical resemblances between armor and beaded regalia are reinforced historically through the overt resistance of some Tlingit to the suppression of their culture by Presbyterian missionaries. Sergei Kan notes that in the 1880s there was an upsurge in the membership of the Russian Orthodox Church, which had leveled off prior to the purchase of Alaska. He suggests that Tlingit joined the Orthodox Church because they were frustrated by the fact that they did not gain greater access to American wealth by joining the Presbyterian Church. Kan also attributes the shift to the parallels in Tlingit ceremonialism and that of Russian Orthodoxy, both of which use ritual, song and sacred objects, unlike Presbyterianism, which attempted to suppress most aspects of Tlingit ceremonialism. Moreover, Russian Orthodox priests had less power than the Presbyterians to enforce change due to their altered status as guests in United States territory after 1867. By adopting Russian Orthodoxy, some Tlingit were resisting radical

changes, and at the same time, as Kan notes: “by appropriating Christian rituals, the Tlingit were trying to add a new source of spiritual power to their own arsenal.”⁹ The point I wish to make is that some Tlingit selected those aspects of other cultures, which they perceived to have power, in order to strengthen their own belief systems, and rejected those that threatened to destroy their cultural identification.

At the same time that Presbyterian missionaries were suppressing Tlingit language and culture, they were teaching girls domestic skills such as sewing and beading at the industrial schools established in the communities of Sitka and Haines in the 1870s and 1880s. They also encouraged Tlingit women to sew and bead moccasins and other objects to sell to tourists as a means for entering the cash economy. I would suggest that dance collars and other beaded regalia flourished at this time due to the ambivalent situation created by Presbyterian efforts both to contain Tlingit culture and encourage new artistic skills. Beadwork may have been perceived as an acceptable means for displaying Tlingit culture since missionaries approved of it in its souvenir form.

Throughout the 19th century, Tlingit appropriated Russian, American, and British military uniforms. This may be read as a subtle form of resistance and identity construction in a way similar to the adoption of aspects of Russian Orthodoxy. Travelers to and residents of Southeast Alaska attributed the wearing of these garments to the Tlingit love of display and vanity, a typical colonial reaction. Sitka Jack, a high ranked Tlingit man, is most often cited as an example:

We know a certain chief who changed his clothes several times while the transient tourist steamer was lying at the wharf, in order to display his suits (Russian), and other remarkable garments, all mainly for show. No peacock ever strutted around with more vanity than he.¹⁰

Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimicry provides a deeper understanding of the phenomena. He suggests that mimicry of colonial powers is menacing because it is a “double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority.”¹¹ Colonial writers interpret Sitka Jack’s actions as child-like and naïve, when in fact a much more complex situation existed.

The establishment of an Indian police force by the American government was another way in which Tlingit men could attain power, both symbolically and physically. Photographs of men wearing police uniforms in front of their homes point to the importance attached to the position both within Tlingit communities and colonial structures. Like the adoption of Russian Orthodox practices that signify power, the wearing of uniforms both within and outside of the context of the potlatch symbolized the acquisition of perceived power. I would suggest that in addition to military and police uniforms Tlingit wore regalia, such as dance collars and tunics, reminiscent of their own military prowess earlier in the century, thus strengthening both their resistance to outside incursions and their identity as powerful people within the contact zone.

⁹ Kan, Sergei. “Memory Eternal: Orthodox Christianity and the Tlingit Mortuary Complex.” *Arctic Anthropology* vol. 24, no. 1 (1987): 36.

¹⁰ Jones, Livingston. *A Study of the Thlingets of Alaska*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1914, 93.

¹¹ Bhabha, Homi K. “Of Mimicry and Man. The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse.” *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994, 88.

The invigoration of Tlingit cultural practices, as demonstrated by the increase in potlatching, which was a significant physical manifestation of this symbolic resistance, threatened the disciplinary power of the colonizers. The potlatch, in practice as well as in dress, combined elements from Tlingit and colonial cultures and served the dual purpose of reinforcing Tlingit hierarchies and consolidating American anti-potlatch sentiments. As the 19th century came to a close, the territorial government, headed by Governor John G. Brady, as well as Presbyterian missionaries such as Sheldon Jackson, increased their efforts to eradicate the potlatch because they saw it as a threat to their attempts to “civilize” the Tlingit. After years of lobbying by American officials, Sitka Tlingit leaders agreed to a proposed ban on potlatching with the stipulation that they could hold one last potlatch. The several week-long event began in December 1904 and brought together nearly 1000 Tlingit from communities up and down the coast. Governor Brady saw the event as a means for gathering together Tlingit communities to discuss their future in the territory and settle old differences between clans. The Tlingit saw it in a completely different light. As noted in the *Daily Alaskan*: “The old Indians who never took kindly to the white man’s religion are happy, and they are using the opportunity to impress upon the younger members of the tribe what they regard as the necessity of maintaining their old customs and traditions.”¹² Ironically, resistance and the strengthening of Tlingit identity were carried out with the full approval of the territorial government.

As the photographic record attests, this was one of the most significant events to come out of the 19th century contact situation in Southeast Alaska. In addition to fulfilling obligations between Tlingit groups, this was an opportunity to demonstrate the strength of Tlingit culture to outsiders, regardless of the American desire to destroy all trace of the Tlingit lifestyle. The presence of several professional photographers, as well as the nature of the photographs suggests that the Tlingit commissioned some of the images, and controlled their content. Relationships between Tlingit groups were commemorated as different clans posed together, clan ownership of specific regalia was recorded, and identity, both individual and group, was emphasized through the wearing of regalia. Beaded regalia was ubiquitous, and not only set Tlingit apart from one another, but highlighted the differences between the Tlingit and outside observers at the potlatch events. Beaded dance collars and tunics were worn by many of the participants, and when combined with beaded cartridge belts, beaded Russian-style sailor hats, and rifles, the militaristic symbolism is obvious. The evidence strongly suggests that beaded collars and tunics were an important means of demonstrated cultural strength. Tlingit were no longer allowed to wage war, but through the creation of a new type of ceremonial regalia, they displayed a link to their powerful past. By using introduced materials to create an object that recalled warfare and power, the Tlingit created a new kind of object – something that symbolized resistance to the changes being forced upon them and, at the same time, strengthened their Tlingit identity, but in a subtle manner that did not bring those powers to bear down more forcefully upon them.

Northwest Coast literature has overlooked the role beadwork has played in Tlingit culture for a variety of reasons. In this paper, I hope to have demonstrated that beadwork took on an important symbolic function at the turn of the century. As pressure to assimilate increased, some Tlingit appropriated aspects of colonial culture and developed

¹² Quoted in Hinckley, Ted. *The Canoe Rocks: Alaska’s Tlingit and the Euramerican Frontier, 1800-1912*. Lanham: University Press of America, Inc., 1996, 338.

means of resisting the destruction of their beliefs. Dance collars and other beaded objects took on symbolic power that resonated within Tlingit communities, but went unnoticed by missionaries, government officials, and ethnographers as the lack of written evidence suggests. Identity was marked out, cultural devastation was averted, and it all happened under the radar of colonial power. Even today dance collars play a role in defining Tlingit identity and suggest a form of cultural resistance within the framework of western institutions as they are worn by high school and college graduates over their graduation gowns.

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