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I Introduction

- 1 As diverse as the gods and heroic legends of the early peoples on the various continents appear, they almost all have in common with one another the fact that, in addition to gods and humans, animals also play a comparatively important role.¹ And the idea that the gods or spirits prefer to adopt the shapes of animals, is found among almost all peoples of the earth. Indeed, nowhere could this idea appear more distinctive than among the inhabitants of the Northwest Coast of America. There, every year, according to the belief of the Indians, the various deities still come down to Earth in many shapes and at various times, showing themselves to humans and taking part in the celebrations held in their honor. Most of these gods are well disposed toward humans. Indeed almost every family claims descent from one god or another, so that to a certain extent a cordial communication is formed between gods and humans.
- 2 Apart from family gods, people also believe in evil spirits which can bring misfortune to humanity, but their power is a lesser one and they can be expelled and rendered harmless with relative ease by the medicine man and the mighty spirits of all types which are in alliance with him.
- 3 Several intelligent and, as they allege, inspired men in each tribe take the role of representatives of the gods. They form secret societies so that their secret arts and teachings, their mummary and masques are not disclosed to the uninitiated and to the people in general. These performances are supposed to instill, especially amongst youth and women, beliefs in the old traditions about the communication of the gods with humans and about their own intimate connections to the gods. In order to convince the possible doubter, members of the secret society take recourse to all kinds of mysterious procedures which to a civilized person must appear extremely crude. For example, they mutilate their bodies, tear apart and consume corpses, tear pieces from the bodies of living persons, and the like. Bordering on disorder, the excessive

personal vanity observed among the Northwest Indians, as well as the addiction to turn oneself into someone who is considered famous and respected and to be regarded as something special, may also have served as a motive for joining secret societies, since each of their members enjoys great standing of that kind.

- 4 Hundreds of masks were and still are in use, each one of them representing a spirit found in the legends. In presentations they appear individually or in groups, depending on the requirements imposed by the legend that is to be depicted, and the marveling crowd views the persons wearing the masks not only as representatives of the gods and actors, but as the gods themselves who have descended from Heaven to Earth. Therefore each performer must act out every detail of everything the legend tells of the spirit. If the performer does not wear a mask, as is often the case among the Hamatsa (Eaters or Biters) or among the Pakwalla (Medicine Men), the spirit which he represents has entered his body and the one who is possessed by the spirit is in turn not responsible for what he perpetrates under these circumstances. However, since the use of masks surrounds the performance with a certain mysterious aura and at the same time allows the performer to remain unrecognized, particularly sacred ceremonies are carried out much more frequently with masks than without. In each secret society certain laws govern how often and how long a mask can be used. Among the Kwakiutl the masks must not be disposed of for four winters, the principle time for that type of ceremony, under the most severe penalty. After this time they can be destroyed or hidden in the woods, so that no uninitiated person can find them, or they may eventually be sold. The production of the masks is undertaken only in secret, usually in the seclusion of the deep woods, so that no uninitiated person discovers the maker. How earnestly this secret is preserved is shown by the following example: In the village of Nouette on northwest Vancouver [Island], an Indian was once busy carving a mask in the woods, when his half-grown son, who had noticed that his father frequently went into the woods, sought him out in his place of seclusion one day. The father became so angry over this, that he immediately killed his son so he couldn't turn into a traitor of the sacred acts.
- 5 The dance is accompanied by songs which celebrate with ostentatious words the power of the deity and the exploits brought before the audience in the performance.
- 6 At the main performance all present sing along, since the song is usually known to most and is repeated over and over in recitative fashion. There always seem to arise new songs and new performances in one or another village, in that some kind of oral legend told by the forefathers to some intelligent youth, who still does not possess his own song, will be poetically treated. For each man who takes part in the performances and ceremonies must also make his debut with a song of his own. In this way new songs and dances are constantly created, the material of which is of course always taken from the family deity of the singers and poets concerned.
- 7 Besides the masks other insignias of the secret societies are worn, which I will discuss later.
- 8 Of the dances which to my knowledge do not belong to the four secret societies, the Nauwalok or Nawalok, that is to say, great spirit dance, should be mentioned. This dance is usually performed in late fall and involves several Indians wearing masks lining up behind a curtain. The mask type used in this most often represents the Mis-missallami (the sun god)—a mask in the shape of the sun with half-closed eyes and a revolving wheel which is supposed to signify the movement of the sun. Most of the other masks

show the sun god in the shape of an eagle, the shape in which he prefers to visit the earth. While the remaining dances are performed only in winter, this dance by way of exception can also be staged in July. Thus, I came to the Kwakiutl village of Nakortok in July 1885. When the Indians realized that I especially wanted to have the masks belonging to the Nawalok dance, they immediately began the dance in question, and, since several masks had already served their time in this season, they could now be purchased. The ceremony began with a number of men blowing on wooden flutes now in the houses, now in the woods from morning until late at night, to the greatest horror of the youth. It was explained to me that the sun god, in the shape of a large eagle was now leaving the sun and approaching the village. With this the dance came to an end. After its conclusion I acquired the masks, which according to requirements had been used during four winters.

- 9 The age at which a young Indian can be adopted into a society is usually the beginning of puberty. On west Vancouver [Island], among the Ahts, a youth of this age is led into the woods where half the inhabitants of the village, covered in wolf skins and wolf masks and provided with the above-named pipes, continually blow on them and perform the so-called wolf dance. Then the children are told that the youth was abducted by the wolf in order to give him a *skokom tamtam*, that is, a strong heart or belief. This act in its altered form is the Nauwalok of the Bella Coolas. The Catholic missionaries there call it "the Indian christening of the boy," while the Indians themselves call it their Klokwalla. A closer and more thorough knowledge of the various customs in the secret societies is naturally very difficult for the foreigner, for even among the participating Indians only few have an understanding of what is happening in their midst. Only those who are members of a secret society can describe their proceedings, but do not readily disclose anything, because otherwise their secrets would cease to be secrets, and also because betrayal can be punished with severe penalties, even with death. In addition, the Indian does not trouble himself very much with reflection. In order to get out of an embarrassing situation in which the enquiry puts him, he easily says things which are very far from the truth, or, since he himself does not know much, he often gives a much distorted personal view in order not to expose himself. Therefore, the surest way to learn at least some of these things is and remains for one to take part in the ceremony and then try to find out the truth through occasional skilful questioning.
- 10 In the following description some of my points will conflict with the reports of Dr. Boas in the *Archiv für Ethnographie* concerning these secret societies. However, I believe I can take full responsibility for what I say, since I know a great deal from my own observations and have learned much from my brother Philip, who lived among the Indians for five years, speaks their language, and has familiarized himself with the customs and practices of the people.
- 11 II The Hamatsa
- 12 Among the secret societies mentioned, the Hamatsa are the most respected and most famous, on the one hand because they must be of high descent, on the other hand because of their actions, which in the eyes of the people make them somewhat demonic and feared persons. I have, for example, heard expressed among the inhabitants of west Vancouver [Island] great fear of the Kwakiutl, and only because of the Hamatsa. On my second collecting trip to the Northwest Coast of America I almost daily had the

opportunity to associate with members of various secret societies, and I have heard of the existence of only four secret societies of this kind.

- 13 More recent researchers, especially Dr. Boas, believe to have discovered still more secret societies among the Kwakiutl. According to the statement of the latter, the Hamatsa and Nuttla Mattla together with a third society, the so-called *Bärenspieler* [literally, Bear Players], all belong to a single society (*Archiv für Ethnographie* 3[1]:11), while on the other hand an entire series of secret societies are supposed to exist, societies of old men, old chiefs, married women, young girls, and even children, which in the view of the author are all closed societies. This appears to me almost unnatural under the circumstances there. The Nuttla Mattla form a society entirely unto themselves, both in connection with their insignia and their acts, to which I will return. I will note only one thing here: that, as mentioned above, the goal of the secret societies is quite clearly to fix in the children and all the people outside the society a belief in the spirits and gods and in the inspiration of the initiated. Thus, a secret society among the children and women seems impossible to me. I admittedly did see ceremonies among the west Vancouver [Island] people and among the Kwakiutl in which women and children held dances for themselves, but these never bore the mystical stamp of the performances of a secret society, rather they were solely amusements, which appears to me much more natural especially in view of the fact that the Indian tribes are extremely social and receptive to cheerful ceremonies and amusements.
- 14 The Kwakiutl and the neighboring tribes recognize among the Hamatsa several men (occasionally also women) in each village who practice a kind of cannibalism. The right to become a Hamatsa can only be gained through high birth or marriage into families which possess the privilege. In addition, the Hamatsa must be inspired by the spirit which he represents in the dance. This inspiration happens only in winter. For this the Hamatsa, completely naked, is led around the village, from house to house, by his comrades for several days. I saw this myself in 1881 in Fort Rupert. The preparation for at least a part of the Hamatsa is, according to several statements, supposed to be a four-year one. During this time the person concerned wears a (red-colored) cedar bark ring, made especially for the occasion, passing under the left arm and over the right shoulder. During the last four months, he must live alone in the woods, making the people believe he is visiting the great forest monsters, such for example as Päh Päh Kwalanusina (called Beck Beck Kvalanit among the River Inlet Indians). The Hamatsa try to strengthen these beliefs in every way, by imitating every evening the voices of the deities with pipes and wooden flutes outside the village for some time before the initiate leaves the woods. The pipes are very artfully worked, sometimes provided with four different notes which can be sounded at the same time. Other pipes are arranged like a bellows. These the Hamatsa carry under their arm and by pushing out the air produce various sounds which imitate the voices of specific animals. The Hamatsa sell their pipes to foreigners only very unwillingly, since no one outside the tribe has any idea that the alleged voice of the deity can be produced with such an instrument.
- 15 My brother sent me the following Hamatsa song in the Bella Coola language and a translation of it:
- 16 “The Bella Coola Indians call the Hamatsa Alla Kotla after the spirit from which they claim to be most inspired.

- 17 “When the novice is inspired by the spirit Alla Kotla (who seems to be an emissary of the spirit Beck Beck Kvalanit), he believes he hears a strong, storm-like roaring: the earth is shaken by the powerful voice of Alla Kotla. The candidate is seized by the spirit and taken by him into the air or into the interior of the earth, where he almost suffocates from lack of air and where there are deep abysses. No one knows where the Alla Kotla goes on such wanderings and no one is allowed to follow him.
- 18 “After returning to the surface of the earth the spirit commands the novice to bite those present in the dance house, otherwise the novice is devoured by the spirit.
- 19 “Another spirit, Sek Seik Kallai, which is present at such ceremonies, inspires the people to dance. Nus Alpsta is the third spirit present on such occasions. This one also seems to be an emissary of Beck Beck Kvalanit, but intends to bring only evil upon the people by trying to trip up the dancers. The novice recognizes him easily by the grunts which resemble those of a bear. All this is taught to the candidate for months before the dance performance by the older Hamatsa who is his teacher. Admonitions about the rules of conduct occur with as great zeal and earnestness as is scarcely ever the case in our religious instructions.

The Alla Kotla or Hamatsa Song

I.

Bakotla-juts doksno litsdaska Kilits ma kotsen

Askelusem ma lits dai.

II

Al ilmelak simako di nois-nolta nao as Allo kwalla tom
you ta jako sim skita.

III

Allivam lutsun dai

Sek-Seik-kallai skobam

lakhamal to mam soll koa

hoihets Bahots to mam dets

Alti nu tunikt sit dai.

- 20 Translation:

1

We hear a grave piece of news. I see where he is—indeed this is it, what I want to possess—thus, I shall receive this spirit. The spirit (Alla Kotla) wants me to rise with him into the clouds, he threatens me, if I do not go with him, he will devour me.

2

I see a man (or a man is seen) on the path where the cedar bark rings are found in numbers. The new Alla Kotla receives the spirit where the cedar bark rings are found in numbers. Alla Kotla sees the place where all spirits are.

3

Sek Seik Kallai does not want Alla Kotla to come to misfortune; rather he wants Alla Kotla to go to the great house where so many of the people sit. Go over to the good side of the house where the path is good and where you won't fall. Nus Alpsta is on the other side of the house. Don't go there.

- 21 “Sek Seik Kallai is the god for all dances, the inspirer of dance. Nus Alpsta is an enticing spirit who wants the dancers to fall (he is also one of the Hamatsa spirits).”
- 22 The first appearance of the novice usually takes place without mask. The Hamatsa wears several rings of cedar bark around his neck and usually a thin ring around the head, on the front of which hang long strips of cedar bark which hide half of his

painted black face. The head is generously sprinkled with eagle down. The wrists and ankles are also each decorated with four rings of cedar bark. Several famous Hamatsa, to whose honor slaves used to be killed, or who in recent times, when people are no longer permitted to be killed, have instead at least bitten many people, wear either a neck ring with carved wooden death's heads attached to it or such death's heads attached to a blanket which is placed over the shoulder while dancing. The Hamatsa dances in a crouching position and holds both arms turned away from himself with the palms of his hands facing up, stretching now to the right, now to the left, and the hands and finger tips quiver in unbroken movement. In most cases, the dance consists of jumping to the left and right. The wearer stares with his eyes turned up so that normally only the whites of the eyes show, and with a half-opened mouth and upturned lips, he now and again emits ragged sounds like a long, drawn-out "ah." The dance consists of four parts with four different matching songs.

- 23 During the last song, the four Hamatsa who accompany and dance with him, give him two dance rattles. These have a special form and different handle from other rattles used in dance. They usually represent death's heads or human faces. In some cases they are carved in the shape of frogs with human heads. In one Kwakiutl village I primarily found human faces with the tongue sticking out, carved onto rattles. This, an Indian explained to me, is supposed to indicate the thirst for blood. His companions, too, have a rattle each. At the end of the fourth dance the Hamatsa snatches the blanket from his body, hurls himself onto his selected victim, and bites out small pieces of skin from his breast and arms. But it is also not rare for serious wounds to be the result of such procedures. I once saw, for example, a man with a sizeable scar who suffered for six months from his bite wound. Another died because an overzealous Hamatsa bit completely through his throat.
- 24 My brother, who in 1887 was present at a Hamatsa ceremony, writes me the following about it: "At the first ceremony the Hamatsa danced with his companions four different dances to incessant song. Toward the end of the fourth dance, the spirit came over him and he became raging, ripped the dance costume from his body and screamed like an animal, while at the same time hurling himself onto an Indian who was standing nearby. The latter resisted as much as possible, but the Hamatsa appeared to possess supernatural strength. He threw him to the floor and bit a piece of flesh from his arm. During this scene, his four companions stood so closely around him that the victim could scarcely be seen. The Hamatsa continued to attack four others present, following which almost all others present took flight. The Hamatsa accompanying him tried to assuage him. However, this was unsuccessful since he had succumbed to raving madness. Finally, the shaman or medicine man was fetched, who was able to calm down the Hamatsa after a quarter of an hour."
- 25 My brother describes the scene as the most ghastly thing a person can imagine. The eye of the delirious one was bloodshot and his aspect demonic. Considering the numerous bite scars to be found on the arms and breasts of the Indians it had always been a puzzle to us how the wounds could appear so smooth, all the more since among the coastal Indians, the teeth are almost worn down to the roots, especially in older persons. This puzzle has been solved by my brother at the described ceremony, as he forced his way through the Hamatsa surrounding the last victim and observed how the Hamatsa first bit onto the arm with his teeth, then with a crooked knife, such as the Indians usually use and which he held hidden under the blanket all the while, the

Hamatsa quickly separated the piece of flesh seized with his teeth from the body. The excitement and fright causes the one afflicted to not notice this trick and the remaining audience cannot see the victim lying on the floor because of the Hamatsa surrounding it.

- 26 As one can easily imagine, the Indians make every effort to prevent the Hamatsa from biting them. The older Hamatsa by contrast try to provoke the timid novice with especially large (sometimes 2 m long) rattles. In the local museum are two such rattles, one of which representing an owl, the other a crane.
- 27 The new Hamatsa stays in the darkest corner of the house, may not do any work and must refrain as much as possible from eating, for the custom demands that he appear pale and thin. My brother observed among the Bella Coola a Hamatsa returning from the forest, on whose head the hair was missing in various places, which was said to be the result of long fasting. But my brother believed that the hair had been removed by means of a razor. The Hamatsa enjoys such great respect that he must be invited four times by four chiefs during the festive season in winter, before he will appear at the first celebration. He then walks slowly and with dignity from his abode to the place of the celebration. No one is permitted to touch his food until the Hamatsa has received his part, since he would otherwise feel slighted, go into a rage and fall upon those present, and bite pieces from their breasts or arms. Dr. Boas asserts in his report (*Archiv für Ethnographie*, p. 11) that once a Hamatsa has bitten someone, he is forbidden to further take part in any celebrations. This can only be a misunderstanding or it is restricted to only a short period of time, for only because he is considered first in the society does the youth of high birth strive to be a Hamatsa, and at all the ceremonies, where I myself was present, the Hamatsa were the chief persons. If they were excluded from society no chief or outstanding person could take part in the ceremony, for most people of such high rank belong to the secret society. Further, Dr. Boas literally says: "Occasionally a chief holds a celebration to which he invites all the secret societies. At this celebration no one is allowed to eat before the Hamatsa has received his part, and should he decide not to eat the meal set before him, the festivities cannot take place." Since someone cannot be named Hamatsa unless he has bitten someone, I cannot understand the quote just mentioned.
- 28 Three types of Hamatsa are distinguished: first, those who devour slaves killed in their honor, which still occurred up until the 1860s; second, those who tear apart corpses with their teeth and then ostensibly devour them; and third, those who kill only dogs by biting through their throat. Among the Indians, these three acts are referred to as "amusing the Hamatsa." About female Hamatsa, it is said that they formerly had a preference for killing children. It is only thanks to the exertion of the English government that human sacrifices have gradually stopped, and even if the Hamatsa content themselves now with mere bites on the chest and arms, they must compensate the wounded person with a high price which consists mostly of woolen blankets. The second type of Hamatsa, who tears apart corpses, take down the corpses that have been interred and dried in trees and lay them in water for one or several days so they can bite them to pieces while dancing with them. The custom of using old dried corpses instead of fresh ones appears to be because at such ceremonies dangerous blood poisonings often occur.
- 29 At the performance a Hamatsa suddenly jumps out, holding the corpse in his arm, and dances with his companion around the fire to the loud cry: hap, hap, hap, hap, hap,

hap (or also ham-ham). The head of the corpse, which the Hamatsa does not release, always rests on his right arm. The dance is carried out with bent knees, in a crouching position, jumping like a raven. When the Hamatsa have hopped around the fire several times, the oldest of them throws himself on the corpse, and, violent grappling with each other, they begin to tear it apart. In this process they appear to place special weight on biting to pieces the bones so as to distort the face as much as possible with the bone splinters, especially pricking the mouth and lips in such a manner that blood gushes out.

- 30 The Hamatsa who kill dogs are especially common among the Bella Coola and Tsimshian. My brother saw among the Bella Coola in 1887 how an Indian tore out the throats of 16 dogs with his teeth. While hunting dogs, he wore a large wooden mask of a wolf-like monster with movable eyes and lower jaw. After he had injured all the dogs in the village, he pretended to be sick and seemed to throw up through the throat of the mask large pieces of flesh, which he had kept hidden under his clothing, while a second Hamatsa seized the pieces which were too large for the opening of the mask with his teeth and ripped them out. At the performance following this procedure, the shape of the monster increased ever more, in that several of the Indians crawled under the blankets, and as it wanted to flee, the Indians present noisily attempted to hold it back. That is my brother's report. I saw a quite similar scene at a ceremony on the west coast of Vancouver [Island] in 1882.
- 31 One of the first settlers on the coast, who was resident among the Tsimshian, described to me a Hamatsa ceremony among these people in the following manner. After several of the participants had hunted dogs for a while, several men suddenly appeared carrying a corpse and conducted a dance around the house with it in the above-mentioned manner. Then the Hamatsa who carried the corpse, followed by his comrades, went to a canoe and pushed off from the shore. There in the boat they began to devour the corpse. My informant believed, however, that they had previously filled the corpse with cooked deer meat and, by only devouring this, they completely deceived the Indians gathered on the shore. In earlier times the Europeans who witnessed such scenes—to our taste so repulsive and disgusting—believed that the participants were only medicine men and through that kind of performance wanted to initiate their novices. No effort was made to penetrate the spiritual life of these wild people and nobody had any idea of the existence of the secret societies discussed above.
- 32 As mentioned in the beginning, the dancers represent the deities identified by their masks. And it appears that by biting fellow citizens, devouring corpses, and killing children and dogs the Hamatsa wanted to imitate the doings of various spirits, to whom these kinds of things were attributed in legends that were common among the coastal Indians. The original legend, which has provided the subject matter for such performances and songs, goes somewhat as follows: In a fjord, there once lived an old hunter, Unoako, who had three sons who were also great hunters. Once, when they related their hunting adventures to their father, they received, based on their courage, the instruction to seek out the monster Beck Beck Kvalanit and his brothers who lived in the forest. They traveled over high mountains into the interior and reached the house of the monster, which had gone hunting with his brothers and had left only his wife and his son at home. They entered the house, but when they saw how the child greedily licked up the blood which one of them was losing from an accidental injury, they promptly retreated. However, the mother called her spouse, the monster, with

the words: "Come, Beck Beck Kvalanit, there are humans here, whose flesh you like to eat." To this he answered "hap-hap" (or "ham-ham"). He set out immediately with his brothers in pursuit of the three hunters, and only through the magic of the youngest did the hunters manage to safely reach home. There they told the story of their adventure, whereupon their father advised them to dig a hole next to the fire and cover it carefully with a mat. Scarcely had this been done, when the monster arrived at the house with his brothers and invited himself as Unoako's guest. In answer to the question, what they wished to eat, Beck Beck Kvalanit and his brothers asked for the last four people who had died in the village. These were brought in, put into a wooden chest filled with water, and then cooked. As the monster and his brothers prepared the meal by the fire, the hunters shoved them into the hole from behind and drenched them with the hot brew of corpses. The hole was then quickly filled with soil. Several days later the wife of Beck Beck Kvalanit appeared and enquired after her spouse. The Indians pretended to know nothing about him. But the woman did not leave the house right away, rather began to play with the Indians' children. She took them up into her arms and blew into their ears so that it appeared as if she wanted to put the children to sleep that way, as is common among the Indians. She repeated the same thing with four different children, who thereupon sank into sleep. However, when the mother wanted to wake her children, it turned out that the witch had sucked out their brains through their ears, since she indulged just as much in cannibalism as her husband and brothers-in-law. The Indians punished her by tying her to a stone during the low tide, and as the water climbed up to her head, they laid boards with fire logs around her head in order to torture her. The sparks each became mosquitoes with the same thirst for blood as the monster family.

- 33 The mask dances of the Hamatsa sometimes represent the monster Beck Beck Kvalanit (called Päh Päh Kualanusiva in the Bella Coola dialect and Hamsewie by the Kwakiutl on northwest Vancouver [Island]) and sometimes his brothers Menis and Hau Hau, each of whom had their favorite dish. That of the first was the flesh of living humans, the second corpses, and the third dogs. The wife of the above-mentioned monster is represented by a female Hamatsa. In Nouette village (belonging to the Kwakiutl tribe) in 1881 I acquired masks from two famous Hamatsa, one of which represents the much-discussed monster, the other a raven. Both had a number of wooden death's head-like carvings hanging from them. As the owner, a distinguished Hamatsa, reported to me, the Hamsewie (as Beck Beck is called in the east) jumps first onto the dance floor, accompanied by four Indians—in the usual dance costumes and provided with hidden wooden flutes—who protect the people from the monster. The song of the chorus accompanying the dance tells of the deeds of the monster, how it returns from a trip across the entire world during which it devoured many chiefs and famous men. Then the second one, the raven mask, jumps out, also accompanied by four other dancers who, like the previous one, have wooden flutes hidden under their clothing. Again, a song tells about how this second monster tortured humans in distant lands and tore out their eyes. It appears that the masks of one and the same demon are formed quite differently according to the different villages and the individual interpretations of the mask makers, just as we find the story itself occurring in many variations in the various regions. The essence however always remains the same. Thus, the uniform origin or the relatedness of the various legends can always be easily recognized. The same is also true for the legends, customs, and dances of the medicine men.

NOTES

1. This article was first published as “Geheimbünde der Küstenbewohner Nordwest-America’s” in *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 23:383–395, 1891.