

For Indigenous Minds Only

A Decolonization Handbook

*Edited by Waziyatawin
and Michael Yellow Bird*



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REMAKING BALANCE DECOLONIZING GENDER RELATIONS IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Chaw-win-is
(Ruth Ogilvie)

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A. Introduction

This chapter discusses decolonizing traditional Indigenous gender roles and remaking balance within our communities. Before I begin I will share a family chant and situate myself appropriately. Fundamental to the life of Nuu-chah-nulth *witwaak* (warriors—the singular for “warrior” is *wiuk*) is preparation. It is more than just physical and more than strategies and tactics in times of war. Preparation includes physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual readiness. In seeking spiritual support Nuu-chah-nulth *witwaak* would often *tsiikshitl*. To *tsiikshitl* is to chant/pray with a *khuukhmin* (rattle), humbly asking *Naas* (All Creation/Creator) for strength and spiritual guidance. Specific chants/prayers belong to specific families or *muhdii* (house or longhouse family). Before he began any endeavor of significance, Too-tah, my eldest known ancestor, would *tsiikshitl* to start things off in a good way. As a descendant of Too-tah, I choose to begin here with a translation as it holds meaning for our family by reminding us to be strong and clear-minded at all times, be they full of conflict or in a state of peace. It reminds us to readily accept our circumstances and to be prepared for any challenges that we may need to confront:

Peace and war,
I'm all for peace,
Peace and quiet.
When the world is calm,
I am for the world.
When it gets ugly
I'm prepared for War,
I am for the world
I'm all for Peace and War.

It is important that I situate myself in this discussion of traditional roles and gender in a contemporary Nuu-chah-nulth context. My name is *Chaw-win-is-uxsup*, which means, "Boulder on the Beach Woman," and I am a granddaughter of *Cha-chin-sun-up*, "Putting the Land in Order," the current *tyee wiiuk*, or highest ranked warrior of Checlesaht. My grandfather and I have roots in both Checlesaht and Tla-o-qui-aht, both of which are located at the northern end of what is

now known as Vancouver Island, British Columbia.

In addition to these ancestral connections, I have a personal history of being outspoken against many political and economic initiatives undertaken by my home communities. It is my belief that many of the bureaucratized processes engaged in by our current leaders, such as the current British Columbia Treaty Process (BCTC) and various fishing and rights litigation, work only to undermine our traditional governance capacities and responsibilities. Some people would characterize me as a "troublemaker," while others in the community feel that I give voice to their unspoken and valid concerns about the co-optive actions of many of our leaders. I have experienced lateral and sexualized violence as a result of speaking out against the BCTC and corruption in elected leadership. This disclosure is important any time an Indigenous woman acts politically or changes personally. Her credibility is questioned and she may become a target for lateral or physical violence.

ACTIVITY:

Are there differences in the way women and men leaders are perceived and treated in your community? If so, what are they?

Is it safe to be an outspoken woman in your community? If so, how are outspoken women supported? If not, how are outspoken women treated negatively and who benefits from the silencing or suppressing of outspoken women?

Next I will address some of the issues facing Nuu-chah-nulth women today in relation to our traditional roles and positions.

B. Gender Oppression at the Hands of Colonialism

The women of Tla-o-qui-aht and Checlesaht are confronted with internalized oppression and sexualized violence every day, from the more overt instances of rape, incest, and beatings to less overt oppression like silencing. These acts of internalized violence are a direct reflection of persistent colonial and patriarchal conditions and influences. This means that colonialism is rooted in a society controlled and led by men. Without decolonizing, thereby unraveling these influences from within our communities, they continue to dominate the lives of both Indigenous women and men.

In a Nuu-chah-nulth context, all of these colonial forces have acted against our people, and our reactions have been consistently internalized. Although Nuu-chah-nulth people have not been in contact with the European settlers for as long as other Indigenous Peoples, like others in Canada and the United States we have felt the full brunt of colonial imposition and law, especially over the last 150 years. All members of Nuu-chah-nulth families are survivors of the Indian residential school experience.

For example, the Alberni Indian Residential School, located in Nuu-chah-nulth territory, was particularly notorious for its cases of physical and sexual abuse, but it is important to remember that these acts of individual abuse cannot be our only concern. As heinous as those crimes were, we cannot ignore

the removal of Nuu-chah-nulth children from their families and the breakdown in personal, family, and community relationships that followed. Not only were traditional social practices and political institutions disrupted, but also in many cases Indigenous people were prevented from being able to develop healthy relationships with one another. This has had devastating effects on personal and community well-being that continues today. Today, as in the past, abuse is the most overt expression of these dysfunctional relations. We must also consider the subtler implications of colonialism, for they are what is underneath our attitudes and our actions towards one another and to this land. To use a Nuu-chah-nulth metaphor, Wickaninnish says that our people are *hoquotisht* (our canoe is tipped over) and we are disoriented, we have lost our way.

C. Heshook-ish Tsawalk (Everything Is One) and lisaak (Respect)

The losses we have experienced make it difficult for Indigenous men and women to emerge with any clear sense of how to live according to Nuu-chah-nulth teachings and laws. Many of these teachings and laws are simple yet very important and rather complex. A foundational Nuu-chah-nulth principle is *heshook-ish tsawalk*, which literally means “everything is one.” Another foundational principle is *iisaak*, or “respect.” Together, *heshook-ish tsawalk* and *iisaak* provide a strong basis for how to act in the world, with respect for all creation and the knowledge of unity and interconnection. On a broader scale, if our current leaders took these principles seriously, we would not be overfishing, or overharvesting within our territories,

and we would take our responsibilities seriously as well. Actualized in our practices, recognition of unity of, and respect for, all things requires that we ensure the sustainability of our territories. It means that we must also stop non-Indigenous people from disrespecting and exploiting our lands as well. It means that we treat each other with the same reverence we demonstrate when uttering these words: Heshook-ish tsawalk and iisaak.

Our conceptions of unity and respect have been shattered by the way colonizers have mistreated us, our lands, the animals, and all that we hold sacred. In Nuu-chah-nulth life this plays out in a number of ways. For example, the *ayts-tuu-thlaa* is a coming-of-age ceremony that teaches a woman her responsibility to family, community, and land. It also teaches the men in the community what their role is in relation to the women—who are called “givers of life”—that they are vital to community health and well-being. Connected to this teaching is the value of mothers. I have been taught that women are the foundation of our *muhdii* (house)—if they are content and healthy, then the rest of the family will be as well. I will add that “givers of life” not only means women who have or will have children. Women are givers of life in that they live and work towards solutions, settling

business, and prioritizing needs in our communities. A Nuu-chah-nulth example of this is during the whale hunt, when often men were gone for weeks or months at a time. It was the women who knew what the needs of the community were and it was

incumbent upon the men to directly consult with them.

Eurocentric patriarchal thinking sends a different message. In Europe and later Canada, women were regarded as the property of men and were not recognized politically or legally as persons until the early twentieth century. Today, our people live in confusion because patriarchal power is legitimized, despite decades of liberal feminist activism. We often mimic these behaviors uncritically within our own communities. Yet, because we have not completely lost our old

ways, this all leads to a clash of colonial and Indigenous worldviews.

D. Examples of Patriarchal Oppression

How this all plays out in Nuu-chah-nulth territory is certainly detrimental to the overall health and well-being of our communities. I wish I could say brutal rapes were uncommon occurrences, but the sad reality is that they are not. Just a couple of weeks before several peers and I embarked on the Nuu-chah-nulth Stop the Violence March in 2006 in response to the rape of a young woman of Tla-o-qui-aht, another young woman was beaten by her boyfriend. They were both from the same Nuu-chah-nulth community. She joined us on the march

with her head shaven by medical personnel when she needed stitches, and with her broken arm in a cast. Clearly, her participation in the march expressed her desire to move out and away from this place of internalized oppression and return to a place of hope.

The Stop the Violence March took place in May 2006 in response to the brutal raping and beating of a young woman from Tla-o-qui-aht. The assault occurred just two weeks after her family held an *ayts-tuu-thlaa* ceremony for her. The women of Tla-o-qui-aht were outraged and decided to take action, organizing a march within their community to demand the stop of violence. As young people, each from different Nuu-chah-nulth communities, we took up our responsibility to carry this message throughout all of the fifteen Nuu-chah-nulth nations. This march was a living example of *haa-huu-pah* (sacred teaching/sacred stories) that evolved directly from the political organizing of the women of Tla-o-qui-aht and spread throughout our nations.

The fact that these acts of internalized violence can still occur in Nuu-chah-nulth communities that are regarded by many as being “culturally strong” is very indicative of the prevalence of patriarchal values and the relative weakness of our culture at present to defend our most vulnerable community members. Therefore it is incumbent upon all of us to regenerate the ceremonies and teachings that show us how to live in reverence for all life and to have respect for women

as well as respect towards one another; *hishiimstawalk* (the people are one). For example, after consulting with an older relative about the march, he insisted that we “give back” our teachings about women through the *ayts-tuu-thlaa*. He explained it was important to relay who we are and what our values are as Nuu-chah-nulth Peoples according to our original principles, and in that we would find that *traditionally* violence against women was never tolerated.

ACTIVITY:

Is gender violence common in your community? What forms does it take?

Thanks to anti-colonial intellectual Franz Fanon, we understand that decolonization must be a foundational layer in developing a movement towards freedom and justice for colonized peoples. But what form does decolonization for Nuu-chah-nulth People take? In the broader socio-political scheme we see that there are Indigenous People who participate in mainstream party politics and work within the confines of state-centric legal and political processes, including court cases, current treaty negotiations here in British Columbia, and economic development ventures in which we are sitting at the table with governments as “stakeholders,” not as sovereign nations. Others pursue social programs and money, framing our problems primarily in socio-economic terms. To date, most of these processes have not achieved even their own

modest goals of socio-economic equality, land claims, or Aboriginal rights and title recognition. These mainstream efforts have succeeded only in reinforcing the status quo within Indigenous communities.

My focus here is on a more radical program of decolonization, specifically located *outside* of state-centric processes, in an attempt to address the issues of internalized oppression, sexualized violence, and patriarchal gender relations within Nuu-chah-nulth communities. As Glen Coulthard writes, “The best of today’s Indigenous movements articulate a far more substantive relationship between identity and freedom insofar as they are attempting to *critically reconstruct* and deploy previously disparaged traditions and practices in a manner that consciously seeks to refigure a lasting alternative to the colonial present”

[*emphasis added*]. For example, when we organized the Stop the Violence March in 2006, we consciously did so outside of state funding or support. Further, we did not go into the communities as counselors, offering our services in order to conduct anti-violence workshops. We believed those Western approaches to be highly individualized and certainly not grounded

in Nuu-chah-nulth ways of healing. We simply went to each community abiding by our law to “never take more than what you need,” bringing camping gear and enough money for food and gas for boats. We made the decision to do this in an attempt to break free of the colonial restraints that are often attached to funding and “help.”

ACTIVITY:

**What do you know about your community’s traditional roles and responsibilities?
How have patriarchal values impacted these traditional roles?**

With the idea of gender balance in mind, how might your traditions need to change?

E. Decolonization Is a Program of Action

If Indigenous Peoples recognize that decolonization is a program of action that can both unravel the negative effects of colonialism and restore the values and principles of our ancestors, then we must focus our energies on the social formation of our societies, including the decolonization of gender roles. If

the women in my family are calling for the remaking of balance between men and women, then it is my responsibility to take up that task for the sake of my children and family. In this chapter I focus on my own Nuu-chah-nulth communities. I will refer to the Tlao-qui-aht and Checlesaht communities more closely as my Nuu-chah-nulth family protocol requires of me.

The method or model moves from self, to family, to community.

Here are some present-day examples that I will examine more closely with a critical eye on our gendered traditional roles. The task of decolonization under our current conditions may require that we de-gender our traditional roles as we remake them. It is often expected that women's roles are defined within the home fires—in other words, cooking, cleaning, and child rearing are seen as nurturing roles and appropriate for women only. This narrow perception of a much broader term has been drilled into our families through residential schools where boys and girls were segregated and made to work strictly within what the church thought was appropriate work for boys and girls; girls learned domestic chores and boys learned about trades. It is because of this that I prefer to speak of “remaking” rather than “restoring” balance through a process of critical engagement of traditional Nuu-chah-nulth values and roles. Both of these examples come from a recent proliferation of *nuushitl* (potlatch or gathering), in which the roles of chief, beachkeeper, warrior, and spokesman for the chiefs are passed on. Currently, it is being taught that traditionally these roles were passed on to firstborn sons

in our family. Some elders remind us that it was not always the firstborn son who assumed the responsibilities of a role or position. For a variety of reasons, these roles were passed on to “the most capable” person in the family.

In traditional Nuu-chah-nulth society all young people were raised with certain fundamental values and principles; however, those who were expected to assume greater community responsibilities were given very specific teachings to prepare them for their positions. Even if the firstborn son was given specific teachings, he may not have been the most capable. A younger sibling might be found to possess the appropriate qualities necessary to lead, including generosity, fair-mindedness, and humility. In other cases, the heir to a particular role might be inappropriate because he lived an unhealthy life or acted disrespectfully to others. We have *haa-huu-pah* (teaching stories, sacred histories) about chiefs who were greedy and unkind; each faced extreme consequences including death for this kind of negligence towards the *muschim* (people) and the land. Unlike today, leadership in a traditional context was accepted as being more about a serious responsibility than it was about prestige, popularity, or power.

ACTIVITY:

How were leaders generally selected in your traditional society? What traits were looked for in a leader? Were there exceptions to the general rules and processes? If so, under what conditions would exceptions be made?

A common example of the dilemmas currently faced by traditional leaders is as follows: A Nuu-chah-nulth man would like to pass on his position of leadership to his son. These traditional positions of leadership require commitment and time, as well as proper mental, spiritual, physical, and emotional health. Unfortunately, his son struggles with an alcohol addiction and unhealthy relationships with women. In other words, he is not ready or able. As tradition currently dictates, the leader must ask that the next in line take up that position for his brother. In many cases there may be no more sons and so a daughter is then asked to *hold* the position until a grandson is born and then ready to take on the traditional role of leadership in the family. In other words, this traditional leader's daughter is considered only on a temporary basis. Why? A woman in a similar situation said to me, "Today, the men at home only respect other men in leadership—they won't listen to me, even though this goes against our teachings about *hakuum* (respected women, leaders)." I explained that I understood the rampant violence and everyday sexism to be a deterrent for her to take this on.

She explained further, "Not only that, but what makes me not good enough to take this position on, instead of merely holding it—is it just because I am a woman?" Apparently it is. She went on to explain that currently in Nuu-chah-nulth communities there are a few women who hold positions of leadership until such a time that men are ready to assume the roles, but in holding these positions they are not empowered and are often dismissed or forgotten. I agreed. In another community, however, when the *tyee hawiilth* (hereditary chief, *ha'wiih* is the plural of this term) decided to pass his position on to his daughter, she refused to simply hold it until an appropriate man came along. As I have already indicated about preparation, appropriate men do not just come along; they are raised. In the absence of formal child-rearing practices that prepare our youth, she has emerged as the most capable person. It is encouraging that her family has decided to back her up.

Another example relates to the passing on of the role of *tyee wiiuk* (head chief warrior). For six

generations our family has *earned* the position of *tyee wiiuk* in Checlesaht. As far as I know, *witwaak* have always been men. My grandfather, Cha-chin-sun-up, was the last one to earn that position, and in April of 2008, he decided it was time to pass on this position to one of his sons at the *nuushitl*. My uncle was at first hesitant to commit to this new role, and I was also skeptical, as he rarely participated in Nuu-chah-nulth ceremonies or gatherings. A recent conversation I had with him added more details to my understanding that are relevant here.

During a two-hour discussion with my uncle, we both raised concerns that we needed to deal with outside of the more public family meetings. I asked my uncle what Cha-chin-sun-up said about him taking on that position. He told me Cha-chin-sun-up reassured him that it "is just a title," that he didn't have to do anything with it. Although my grandfather may have been trying to alleviate some of the pressure for my uncle, I explained that I did not agree that it was just a title, that all the *haa-huu-pah* he had passed on to me about *wiiuk* meant more than symbolic representations. They represent a way of living and acting within communities and on the land. My uncle appreciated me explaining the history behind *witwaak*—that they are responsible for protecting the most vulnerable of our communities and for enforcing Nuu-chah-nulth laws.

As the conversation proceeded he explained further as to why he was experiencing conflicted feelings about taking on this role of *tyee wiiuk*. Underneath it all he was angry and frustrated with the silence around unresolved physical and sexual abuse in the family. I found out that recently another woman relative confided in him that she had been abused by a male relative as a child. This woman did not want to participate in the *nuushitl* because she did not want to run into this person for fear of further trauma and shame. There it was. The truth in my uncle's story is one of contradictions. It illuminated the fact that there are still women in our family who have been abused and are afraid of the consequences of coming forward about it.

He explained to me that as a man, he experiences rage and anger and does not feel that he is empowered to protect the family today. It struck me then to

tell him that as tyee wiiuk, he does have the power to remove anyone from the nuushitl who is abusing any substances or any people, difficult as that may be. We both realized the potential for healing this might have for family members who have been living with the pain and silence of their abuse for years, some for thirty years or more. I explained this was the reason why tyee wiiuk could not just be a title, but must be an active role for justice and balance in our community.

My uncle explained that he felt better after realizing that the values and commitments of being wiiuk are consistent with his personal values of how his father taught him to be a “good man.” I then brought up the fact that he must choose, in consultation with our chief Hyuushistulth, ten warriors to stand with him. I asked my uncle how he felt about some of the men who were up for the wiiuk positions. He replied, “Well some of these guys I wouldn’t want to back me up. They are either addicted to alcohol or drugs, or wife-beaters.” I asked if he thought that following tradition, in this case when wiiuk can only be men, made sense to him. He said, “If this is the culture, then I don’t want anything to do with it!” I explained that I felt similarly, that I understood that focusing on gender rather than capability is a problem that our family needs to deal with. There are women in our family who are physically fit, educated, and actively decolonizing. At this point in time, these women are the

ones most capable to back him up, even physically.

Near the end of our discussion, we considered that in order to properly heal, our family must address the issue of internalized oppression and sexual violence in an upfront, honest, and safe manner. We considered how it might affect everyone if we empowered the witwaak to prevent abusers from coming to the nuushitl—to physically block them and thus publicly shame them, and to make the behavior known and demonstrate by our actions that abuse is not okay and that we will not tolerate it in our family.

Now I must be clear here: people in our communities who have abused often have done so as a result of experiencing abuse themselves as an aftereffect of colonialism, especially those abused in residential school. This does not mean, however, that these individuals should be allowed to continue abusing or that they are somehow not responsible (although this often gets confused in our communities). This is where witwaak can be utilized to enforce our laws at the request of their chiefs and the people, especially at the level of the collective community. This, I am saying, is a place to begin. For my uncle, becoming our tyee witwaak is both empowering and full of possibility for change. I could see in the way he carried himself that day that he was relieved to see some light being shed on the issue of internalized oppression and violence and that he could have a positive impact on the lives of the women and men in our family.

ACTIVITY:

Do women in your community feel unsafe attending ceremonies or community events for fear of abuse? If you are a man answering this question and do not know, ask the women of your community. Do your current leaders take action to protect the most vulnerable in your community? If not, how could people in your community begin to address these issues?

I understand that many of our people are affected by psychological, physical, mental, and spiritual colonialism and respond with token acknowledgments while ignoring real problems that can render our traditions as meaningless symbols of a mystical past. However, there are young women in our family who are strong, physically fit, and actively decolonizing their minds, bodies, and spirits. The fact that these positions are still being handed down to men who are unprepared (or to women to hold until an appropriate man is ready) is not only an indication of the unhealthy state of our communities and our social and political institutions, but also an indication that we must have the courage to challenge our traditions when necessary. Furthermore, we must not discourage critical reflection, especially among our young people

who bear the burden of remaking balance in our communities.

Next I will describe what the Nuu-chah-nulth concept of witwaak is, generally. I intend to demonstrate, without divulging too much culturally specific information, a rudimentary understanding of the fundamental principles of being witwaak, and how they are connected to *huupukwanum* (Nuu-chah-nulth governance), and being *Qui'asminaa* (Indigenous or real human being). Second, I will articulate the issues in which gender currently dominates our attitudes towards roles within community, like witwaak. I will then conclude by proposing some ideas about what remaking balance in our communities means and might look like.

ACTIVITY:

Did divisions of labor between men and women make sense traditionally? Were there exceptions?

Do the traditional divisions of labor make sense now? Why or why not? How critical is truth-telling in questioning tradition?

F. Witwaak: Traditional Conceptions and Current Realities

In Nuu-chah-nulth territory, we still have access to our haa-huu-pah about women and men and the roles we held within our society. These haa-huu-pah are gleaned from the oral histories of our elders. Personally, I rely on my family elders who are often aunts, uncles, and my grandfather Cha-chin-sun-up. There are also many others who are not Nuu-chah-nulth who have influenced my understanding about these roles as well. The common link seems to be an underlying attitude of *common sense* and practicality, as well as a general understanding that *taking action* is fundamental to being wiiuk. This goes to the heart of what it means to be Indigenous—to be from a particular place on this land. Our actions must make sense in our homelands. What I describe here will not be exactly what you experience in your homelands, but we share many common traditions along with the experiences of colonization. If there is to be any aspect of our traditions that does not change, let it be a commitment to the land and respectful and reciprocal relationships with all our relatives.

A wiiuk is the culmination of the things a warrior does and the actions a warrior takes, not necessarily a warrior's gender. Witwaak were members of our society who faced their fears through constant ritual and practice (self-discipline), and they did so *unflinchingly*. This does not mean they do not feel fear, but that they willingly confront their fears, preparing themselves for any kind of conflict. Witwaak were an integral part of our communities. In the past there were no debates as there are today regarding the relevance and purpose of the witwaak in our societies. They worked with the *ha'wiih* (hereditary chiefs, respected people) to ensure the *hahuuthlii* (roughly translates to all the lands, waters, and resources within a ha'wiih's area of responsibility) and its Peoples were secure and they could live on the land for generations. At its root, wiiuk means to be brave or courageous; it means facing your fears. This requires that witwaak prepare themselves daily through physical and spiritual practices and in this way make themselves ready for whatever state the world is in, whether it is at peace or at war.

My great-grandfather Kaynaiya was pierced with a spear through the skin of his back in an initiation ceremony so he could become tyee wiiuk. The spear pierced the skin laterally through both sides and overtop his spine. At each end of the spear two witwaak grabbed on and held Kaynaiya steady as he danced around both fires of the longhouse. Cha-chin-sun-up remembers his father showing him the scars and hearing about this initiation ceremony. This ceremony was important to demonstrate his unflinching willingness to take on this responsibility as tyee wiiuk—to show that he could be relied on to fight to the death, endure great physical danger, and continue to abide by the laws of the hahuuthlii and to protect the muschim. Witwaak like Kaynaiya were strong mentally and strong physically, disciplined and rooted in the ways of the hahuuthlii. Although Kaynaiya was initiated and trained to be wiiuk, he did not engage in actual warfare with other nations. By Kaynaiya's time, paper and verbal negotiations with the colonialists became the struggle of the day.

This haa-huu-pah shows us how the witwaak carried themselves by demonstrating love, courage, strength, discipline, and honor, as well as always showing sensitivity to be willing to adjust their battle strategies to the present needs of the hahuuthlii and the muschim. From the haa-huu-pah I have gathered from my own family and community, the witwaak were usually men. There are no stories that have emerged around women witwaak that I have found. It is important to note that there is still no evidence to suggest that women cannot not be witwaak. Witwaak means living in a way that is pushing through fear, acting in a way that holds up the collective well-being of the community, and supporting the most vulnerable of our communities. None of these are exclusively male traits.

During our family's most recent nuushitl, I was assigned by my uncle to be witwaak, to provide security alongside the men at the nuushitl. I agreed without hesitation. As I stepped onto the floor to protect the sacred space on which the business was being done, I realized how much I had to work at being taken seriously. Men and women appeared to be uncomfortable with me, but children appeared to be quite open

and young women appeared hopeful *for their own sense of place*. By the end of the day, those who were not accepting my presence as witwaak began to shift their attitudes, in part because I had proven myself on that day to take this role seriously and to act with dignity and iisaak. The men I worked with, the other witwaak, did not flinch either, but instead treated me as an equal. In order for women to take on these roles, both women and men have to rid themselves of many old ideas. This requires effort individually (as with this book) and in community. This is the question that applies to my family and our fulfillment of our roles and responsibilities. Can we truly afford to ignore a

whole segment of relatively healthy, able, and willing warriors and leaders simply because they are women? It seems that today we have become comfortable with the status quo, that the internalized oppression has become normalized. If our situation warranted, I doubt that we would be so quick to tell women to stay in the kitchen and to put down a weapon. Currently we are lulled into thinking that our situations are not desperate, that we are not at war. This is dangerous in that what may actually underpin these assumptions is the desire to assuage our own guilt for not acting as warriors, for not acting on behalf of and in accordance to our laws in protecting our hahuuthlii and one another.

ACTIVITY:

What was the role of the warrior in your community? What was the name used in your language? What does it mean?

Why has the role of the warrior been cast aside? Is it no longer truly relevant? Or has it been re-cast as a soldier for our own colonizing nations?

Can women fulfill these roles? If yes, why? If not, why not?

G. Thinking About Tradition Critically

Tradition with rigid gender roles is one thing and we are warranted in re-examining their utility, but many have also observed the distortion of our traditions within a colonial context. Traditional beliefs often go unexamined as to their relevance in today's context. For example, we rarely ask whether we are in fact upholding a right-wing Christian ethic about women's roles rather than a traditional view of women and their place in community. This leaves women constrained, as it has with most of the women in my family. Today we adopt Western patriarchal attitudes towards leadership and sometimes we attach tradition to these notions of leadership and roles. For example, I remember an elder telling me that it was not traditional for women to speak or be involved in politics. This was *after* I had spoken publicly at a small event about the issue of violence in our communities. He explained that politics are too powerful for women to withstand and that the women stood behind the men who could withstand this powerful energy. Wow—I thought, then maybe I am in the wrong line of work! Joking aside, there have been many times when I have been “kindly” advised that I should not speak publicly, but I am aware that most of it has been because I am speaking out about something unjust. Yet I notice it is okay for women to speak when they are saying something nice. This has certainly been the case in Nuuchah-nulth territory as both our men and women have

been influenced by the dominant society's culture, and religious and political institutions. Recently, a Nuuchah-nulth woman took the floor at a tribal council meeting and spoke out passionately articulating the need for our elected leadership to stop ignoring the issue of violence against women in our communities. The fact is she had to take the floor because there was no space made on the agenda to address this pressing issue.

We need to think about tradition critically because of our current reality. Specifically, there are many forms of abuse of power connected to tradition that happen *because of colonialism and its effects*. The African-American scholar bell hooks writes, “In this society, power is commonly equated with domination and control over people or things.” hooks further urges us to rethink our notions of power in forms that are non-domineering. This is necessary because we have adopted an imperialist notion of power, which centers on human beings and negates all other forms of life. A Western notion of power is also structured hierarchically, in which there are humans who are more human than others, and contrary to the principle of heshookish tsawalk. For example, when colonizers first arrived in Nuuchah-nulth territory they declared the land as *terra nullius* or empty land, equating Nuuchah-nulth people with animals. According to the colonial worldview of that time, Nuuchah-nulth people were unworthy of even making a pretense of a treaty. As

hooks reminds us, a Western notion of power depends on the subjugation of some humans over others, and over all non-humans and things. Internally, we mimic these processes through culture and tradition if we do not actively decolonize. For example, with the instance of witwaak, what is it that is fundamentally principled about witwaak for us to employ in today's context? "Whoever is the most capable" does not mean gender was or has to be the focus; it means that the most appropriate person is whoever can get the job done, do

the work, or take the action that is required. Simply picking men for the sake of gender can potentially disempower these positions of leadership and law-keeping in our communities, because the people they choose are not ready or prepared to take the right actions that are required of them. It goes against the idea that commonsense thinking underlies our culture and ways. Commonsense thinking is tied to practicality, and practicality is connected to community and is what keeps a community working together towards balance.

ACTIVITY:

What are the challenges to thinking about tradition critically? How do critical insights about tradition affect the way we act? Why is this important?

H. Remaking Balance

If we begin with the premise that our contemporary worldviews are indeed jagged, where our two worlds are colliding, as Leroy Little Bear has stated, we must assume that we cannot completely restore traditions. Therefore, any claim to complete traditional authenticity should be met with skepticism. Second, tradition is tradition because it makes sense in a particular place and time. This is not to say that tradition can never be abusive or domineering, as recent history shows us it can. Our challenge then is to revive the good, let go of the bad, and forge ahead in a way that makes sense in this place and in this time. The reality of colonization today demands more people and resources than our people may have ever previously deployed. We are facing extreme events on the planet,

the depletion of oil, and the global desire for corporations to get their last fix of resources such as oil, diamonds, gas, and water before they are depleted. We need to become healthy, to overcome these obstacles of internalized oppression so we can fight these broader struggles as well.

Traditional interpretations of witwaak or gender roles in Nuu-chah-nulth societies are not sufficient by themselves to remake balance between the men, women, and youth of our communities. They are not because an effort to decolonize means we must be willing to wipe from our eyes the anthropological lens that dictates our current reality. Specifically, this means we must see our traditions as creations of living and present Quu'asminaa. We must not see our traditions as the anthropologists see them—fixed in time. The

work then lies in identifying principles of witwaak that may serve our current and political realities today, which means gender may not play the kind of forefront role that it has for at least 275 years. We need to identify these principles, which are place-based, which are rooted in our responsibility to land or hahuuthlii. When these values, principles, and knowledge are so strongly rooted, they have the potential to become instruments with which we may measure our actions, as well as confront the argument about whether something is tradition. The fundamental aspects of our governance of self and community in relation to the world is common sense. Without it, we may remain stagnant and inept when it comes to decolonizing gender. Decolonizing gender is important because thus far we do not have the population numbers to afford the luxury of sitting back while the men fight (or do not fight, but instead become complacent) for our land, our rights, justice, and freedom. And let's face it, alone they have not achieved this. What has been achieved has been done only with the love, support, and actions of women working with the men in our communities.

Indigenous resistance springs from a desire to free our minds and bodies from the affects of the ongoing process of colonialism. Decolonization as a project or process will bring us closer to the goal of self-determination, to restore our rightful place on this land as nations, striving daily for balance with all life. The Nuu-chah-nulth principle of heshook-ish tsawalk is embedded in our huupukwanum. As a concept that is embedded within Nuu-chah-nulth laws, it therefore requires that its members live and act in ways that put the well-being of all beings, human and non-human, on an equal plane. It requires that we as Quu'asminaa be prepared for whatever is needed in our current reality. This is what the women of Tla-o-qui-aht and Checlesaht mean when they talk about restoring balance in our communities. To refine our acts of resistance in accordance with the needs of the day, like decolonizing gender roles, is a necessary move towards self-determination, freedom, and justice.

The 2006 Stop the Violence Movement offers a current example of this kind of resistance combined

with action towards decolonizing gender roles. While we worked outside the imposition of state-created conditions, the young women who participated were empowered to speak against internalized violence and oppression. They were inspired to carry themselves with the respect, dignity, and honor they deserve.

I. Learning through Stories

In bringing this chapter to a conclusion I want to share the story of *Chaastims* (Mink) to illustrate how we might utilize tradition *and* decolonize our gender roles to meet the demands of contemporary Nuu-chah-nulth society.

The Story of Chaastims

Chaastims wanted to go visit his father up in the sky. He wanted to be a good son and take care of things up there while his father went on a vacation. His father was responsible for watching the fire in the sky, the sun. Chaastims assured his father he could watch the sun for him, not to worry. "Just go ahead and enjoy yourself and I'll take care of things here," he said.

So his father agreed and went maybe to Hawaii to smoke some cigars and relax with his feet up on its warm sandy beaches.

Now Chaastims was a handsome guy. You know how good-looking people can be sometimes.... So Chaastims set himself about to watch the fire, taking pains to have enough wood and watching that the flames didn't get too high. As time passed he grew bored of the constant effort and attention that fire tending requires. That was when he caught his reflection in a flame and was distracted by his own reflection. "Gee I really am handsome," he thought.

As you may know, fires take only a moment of neglect before they are roaring, and hungry flames leap out. Chaastims got scared, ran away, and hid as the sun's fire grew rapidly out of control. The fire ended up burning the whole *chuuk* (island, now known as Vancouver Island) down! The land turned to ash, covering the whole island. There was only the sea left. *Tushkoh* (Codfish) got so excited he

swallowed the *huupathl* (moon) too. Today we call this *tushkyuuthl*, or what is referred to as a partial eclipse of the moon.

Now remember, this was a haa-huu-pah from the time before there were Quu'asminaa, just animals—winged ones, four-legged ones, and finned ones. There were a few chiefs who led the people then and as soon as this disaster struck they gathered the animals together to strategize what to do next. You see, we didn't like dwelling on what had been done and exasperating ourselves with why things happened—we simply needed to put our heads together to figure out the answer to the question, "where do we go from here?"

The Chiefs we remember today are *Boo-ah* (Halibut), *Ko-oshin* (Raven), and *Tlaymupt* (Woodpecker). They called all the people to gather around the shore. Halibut explained there was earth at the bottom of the sea. He called for volunteers to dive to the bottom to retrieve the earth while Tlaymupt produced two cedar baskets for the volunteers to carry the earth in. Boo-ah told the people that once the earth was retrieved he would call the two fastest runners, the two *qwayaatsiik* (wolves) named Aykutupis and Astaasapii, and they would be tasked with running around the entire island redistributing the earth so the regeneration of the hahuuthlii could begin.

The first volunteer was *Chims* (Bear). He growled he would get the earth. He seemed a logical choice as he was a great swimmer and very strong physically. He took the baskets and placed them on his shoulders and dove. The people and their chiefs waited and waited. They waited some more and then Chims popped up, shaking water droplets off his fur and panting. The baskets, however, were empty.

Boo-ah called for another volunteer. This time *Ahma* (loon) volunteered. He is known to be a great swimmer, so he took the baskets from Chims and dove nimbly into the water. The people waited and waited. They waited some more then Ahma popped up, panting, almost out of breath. The baskets were empty and so this went on for a while with different people volunteering, from the strong to the clever.

Even many of the seabirds volunteered and each

time they came up empty, without any earth in the cedar baskets. The people grew discouraged as the last few volunteers were unsuccessful. They began to lose hope and started to move away from the shore, despairing.

Then, there was a little voice that piped up—*Ko-ho* (target head duck). "Excuse me!" he said, "I'd like to try."

Boo-ah, Tlaymupt, and Ko-oshin were fair and gracious chiefs and so offered him the same chance to retrieve the earth. Some of the people snickered as he precariously perched the cedar baskets across his tiny shoulders. The chiefs ignored their snickers and earnestly encouraged the little duck to go on. The little duck dove neatly into the water and the people waited and waited. They waited and waited some more. The people started to feel alarmed, surely he had drowned! He'd been gone for too long and the people were discouraged and began to cry. As they cried they began walking away from the shore, their last hope left at the bottom of the sea—or so they thought. Suddenly, Ko-ho popped up and on his shoulders he carried two full cedar baskets of earth.

The three chiefs acted quickly and called forward the two fastest runners; the two *qwayaatsiik*. They then took a cedar basket each to redistribute the earth. The first one was named Astaasapii because he ran in one direction around the island, taking as much time as it takes for a cedar ember to burn on the longhouse fire. The other, Aykutupis, took the other basket full of earth and ran around the island in the other direction. Aykutupis took as much time as it takes for a drop of rain to fall from the longhouse eaves to the ground.

When they finished this, the earth began to regenerate. Eventually, everything grew green again. The animal people spent this time preparing themselves because they knew *Cha-chin-sun-up* (To Put the Land in Order) was coming—he was coming to turn some of the animals into people.

Chaastims is a haa-huu-pah *Cha-chin-sun-up* (we learn at the end of the story that my grandfather was named after this Great Being) shared with me

while I was in my undergraduate studies ten years ago. It is a Nuu-chah-nulth-centered example of the potential that teachings and stories have in informing Indigenous-centered strategies for decolonization within resistance movements. They can provide us with concrete examples of our worldview and highlight innovative ways to approach present-day issues within communities. Simply put, they help to get us thinking Indigenous again. I will give some analysis of this story to highlight what I think are hopeful prospects for future strategies or ways of thinking that are outside the state-centric box.

Chaastims represents a time when non-human beings almost walked away from life itself after all seemed lost when the island burnt down. It represents a time of great change and even greater internal conflict. Today, we can see that humans and non-humans together are approaching a time when things are “burning down” all around us—oil and gas, water, air pollution, unjust wars, and so forth. As Indigenous Peoples we are either being forced to participate or enticed to follow the ways of imperialist and capitalist nations—literally cashing in while we can. This means humans this time are at the point the animals once

were; to the point of walking away from who we are and how we live as uniquely Quu’asminaa.

We have some difficult decisions to make in regard to how we will move forward, just like the chiefs in the Chaastims story. In searching for answers some of us are encountering troubling contradictions about gender. The story does not focus on gender, but on the value of strong leadership. It demonstrates that we must always be open to the potential that leaders are often not who we expect, like the target head duck, Ko-ho. Koh-ho was least expected to be capable of diving so deep to get the earth at the bottom of the sea, but he did it when no one else could. The act of getting the earth represents reaching for the very fundamental meaning or principles of our teachings of our stories, ceremonies, beliefs, and practices as they are connected physically to earth; to land and sea. They took what was needed from the bottom of the ocean, what was already there, minus the embellishments or other debris. The two wolves spread the earth around, to regenerate the land, to regenerate the teachings to ground us. After this the land became green again and our ancestor Cha-chin-sun-up came down to “put the land in order” and this is where the work really begins.

ACTIVITY:

Do you know your community’s and family’s stories? Who can you go to, to help you re-learn them? How are they applicable today?

J. Conclusion

Women, men, youth, and elders together must set a course of action. We can build strong leadership among our women if we hold each other up, gathering the strength we already possess to maintain our rightful places on our homelands. This means we must steer clear of any divisive state-centered politics, whether they are on the far right or on the left of the political sphere. This movement can begin with like-minded men who are also willing to decolonize gender within their own lives, and who are willing to take the kinds of actions that are truly liberating for Indigenous Peoples and lands. But the emphasis may need to begin more strongly with women first putting on the table what we feel are the needs of our communities today. Second, we women must then be willing to task the men to take action on what we have outlined and according to the needs we have prioritized, community by community, and family to family. This may be a beginning of remaking balance.

Additional Reflection Questions:

1. Take some time to look over your upbringing to the present time. What do you see? Do you recognize any sexism towards women? Look at your family: how has your family been affected by sexism and rigid gender roles?
2. In what ways do men and women condone this kind of sexism in your community? Expand outwards: do you see this in the home, in the workplace, schools, ceremonial life (that you participate in), etc.?
3. How many leaders in your community are women?
4. For the men: What are some ways you can redirect your relationship towards the women in your community? Can you start a men's group to address whatever issues are relevant to your community? What issues would you think are most relevant to address?
5. For the women: What are some ways you can redirect your relationship to women in your

community? Can you start a women's group to address whatever issues you think are relevant to your community? What issues do you think are the most relevant at the moment? For example, some issues might be social, like the ways in which we suffer from the effects of colonialism; sexualized violence; health issues including ourselves and the health of our homelands; issues of self-sufficiency (as in considering how we are going to ensure the ongoing health of our homelands and communities); and political issues like land reclamation and governance.

It is important to think about a plan of action that starts with community members getting together and deciding what is relevant at the moment and how the community wants to resolve or begin resolving those issues. I will end with what I think is a very important teaching from my own people here on the West Coast, one that is not heard or taught as often as it needs to be today. When the men were out hunting or fishing they were gone sometimes for months at a time (our people caught whales and went as far as Alaska to catch fur seal). This meant that, for the most part, women ran our communities. They knew what families needed what, who was low on food, who was organizing a nuushitl or gathering, who lost a loved one, who would be getting married, etc. Therefore, when the men returned they had to consult with the women in order to understand what the needs of the community were. Once this was understood, the men had to go about bringing food, fixing someone's house, tending to loved ones, or whatever was needed. I think this history of the relationship between members of our communities tells us how efficiently we looked after ourselves. It also shows us that love is an action that is undertaken by all members of our societies towards each other and towards this land. If the work of decolonizing gender roles returns us to a way of life that is in agreement with a future for our Peoples on this land, then it is work that is worth doing.

K. Glossary

- Ayts-tuu-thlaa:** A young woman's coming of age ceremony
- Haa-huu-pah:** Teaching stories, sacred histories
- Hahuuthlii:** The land, sea, sky, and mountains that ha'wiih are responsible for
- Hakuum:** Respected woman, knowledgeable woman
- Heshook-ish Tsawalk:** Everything is one
- Hishiimstawalk:** The people are one
- Hoquotisht:** Our canoe is tipped over
- Huupukwanum:** Nuu-chah-nulth governance
- lisaak:** Respect
- Khuukhim:** Ceremonial rattle used in chant or prayer
- Muhdii:** Longhouse family
- Muschim:** "The people" of the community
- Naas:** All Creation/Creator
- Nuushitl:** Potlatch, gathering/feast where gifts are given away
- Quu'asminaa:** Indigenous people, real human beings (to differentiate between human beings and all other non-human beings)
- Tsiikshitl:** To chant or pray with a khuukhim
- Tyee Hawiilth:** Hereditary chief (ha'wiih plural)
- Tyee wiuk:** Head Chief Warrior

L. Resources

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