Transformations of meaning: the life history of a Nuxalk mask

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Abstract

As items of material culture are exchanged between two different cultures the cultural perception and meaning of those objects is transformed. During the 1800s collectors and ethnographers from around the world came to the Northwest Coast of British Columbia to collect items of material culture from what they believed to be the dying races of people who lived there. This process transformed the meaning of ceremonial objects, such as masks, for the people who lived there. Masks that were once sacred ceremonial items, kept hidden except during special ceremonies, became specimens of Native art to be put on display in museums. The life history of one Nuxalk mask caught up in this process is presented here. The paper is a biography of a mask of Alk’unta’m, one of the most important of Nuxalk supernaturals. It traces the life of Alk’unta’m as it moved from a small village in the Bella Coola Valley to New York, one of the largest cities in the world.

Keywords

Bella Coola; Nuxalk; Northwest Coast; masks; ceremonial objects; art.

Introduction

The meeting and interaction of two cultures can bring changes in the way objects are perceived. Once people become aware of being observed and of alternative ways of looking at items of their own material culture, a shift in consciousness can occur that will transform the meaning and significance of objects. An example of this can be seen on the Northwest Coast of British Columbia in the late 1800s when ethnographers, such as Franz Boas, came to record and collect items of material culture from what they believed to be the dying races of people who lived there. Among the most sought-after items were ceremonial masks. The collectors arrived during a time when the local population was declining rapidly. This resulted in many items of a ceremonial nature surviving the demise of the social system they were once a part of. The result was a change in context and perception of the cultural significance of these masks not only for the society which obtained them but also for the society which created them.
This paper is a cultural biography of a Nuxalk mask. It follows the life history of this mask from its original context in a small village in the Bella Coola Valley of British Columbia (Fig. 1 and Plate 1) to a new context and meaning in the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. It examines the exchange of ideas about the meaning of this object between two very different cultures and how that interaction changed both cultures’ perception of masks. At the turn of the last century such exchanges were taking place all over the world, as museums set about obtaining collections of material culture from what they believed to be ‘primitive’ cultures. The new context given to this mask, and others collected during this period, resulted in a change from it having only contextual meaning as performed during ceremonies to a meaning which was intrinsic to the mask.

Figure 1 Map of North-west Coast of British Columbia showing Nuxalk territory.
The Nuxalkmc live on the Central coast of British Columbia (Fig. 1). In the earliest literary sources (Goeken 1886; Boas 1886, 1891, 1898; Jacobsen, A. 1891; Jacobsen, F. 1894, 1895; McIlwraith 1948) they were referred to as the Bella Coola. The name ‘Bella Coola’ comes from the Heiltsuk term ‘Bilxula’, which was used to refer to the speakers of the Nuxalk language (Boas 1898: 26). While only the inhabitants of the Bella Coola
Valley used to refer to themselves as the Nuxalk, it is now the name preferred to refer to the entire population (Kennedy and Bouchard 1990: 338). According to McIlwraith, who conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork in the region during the 1920s, the Nuxalkmc once occupied forty-five villages (1948: 5–16). These villages were located along South Bentick Arm, at Kwatna Bay, at the head of the Dean Channel on the Dean and Kimsquit rivers and at the head of North Bentick Arm on the Bella Coola river (Fig. 2).

The Nuxalkmc are a Salishan-speaking group, surrounded on three sides by Wakashan speakers and on the other by Athapaskan speakers. This makes them a linguistic isolate (Baker 1973: 10–14). It has been suggested that this situation is the result of a once continuous distribution of Salishan-speaking people, which extended from the Georgia Strait northward, being interrupted by an expansion of Northern Wakashan speakers (Suttles and Emendorf 1963; Kinkade and Powell 1976: 91–2). Archaeological research

Figure 2 Map showing the location of village sites in the Bella Coola Valley. (Based on McIlwraith 1948: 1).
conducted in the Bella Coola Valley suggests that the valley may have been occupied for some 10,000 years (Hobler 1990).

The mask that will be examined in this paper is that of Alk'unta'm (Plate 2). He is one of the most important deities in Nuxalk oral tradition (Boas 1898: 29). According to Boas he is one of the rulers and creators of mankind. Alk'unta'm ‘decided to alter and populate the world and accordingly created four supernatural Carpenters’ (McIlwraith 1948: 34–5). These carpenters created people, animals, plants, mountains, the moon and the stars. When summing up the character of Alk’unta’m, McIlwraith says, ‘he is a superman, creator of life, supreme god in the sense that he is chief of the supernatural beings, but not an all-powerful deity’ (1948: 39).

I chose to use this mask to illustrate the kind of impact a change of context can have on the meaning and social significance of an object because Alk’unta’m is of such importance to the Nuxalk people. As early as the 1820s Native people on the Northwest Coast

![Plate 2 Mask of Alk'unta'm. Height 73.5 cm, width 47 cm, depth 26 cm. Catalog no. 16/1399, American Museum of Natural History. Photo by Lisa Seip.](image)
were creating items for sale to Europeans and some of these items were masks (Wyatt 1994: 1). What makes the mask of Alk’unta’m suitable for this type of biography is that it was not carved for sale. It began life as a ceremonial object but later its context and cultural significance changed radically. This paper, on the one hundredth anniversary of Alk’unta’m’s collection, will follow these changes and discuss the events that had the most impact on Native and non-Native perceptions of masks.

**Original social context of Nuxalk masks**

In order to have a better understanding of this particular mask of Alk’unta’m it is important first to establish the original social context of masks in general for the Nuxalk people. Before missionaries came to the Bella Coola Valley, people conceptualized masks as physical manifestations of supernatural entities. Masks were always used in the context of ceremonies and were closely associated with the costume a dancer wore, such as cedar-bark neck rings and staffs. They were never intended to be seen out of this context. In other words, no Native person in the Bella Coola valley at this time would have ever taken a mask out of its sacred place at any time other than for a ceremony. They certainly would not have hung a mask on the wall of their house. The social customs of the Nuxalk at the turn of the century dictated that the selling or revealing out of context of masks would result in the death of the owner (Jacobsen 1997: 34). Fillip Jacobsen recorded how Chief Klallamen sold him a large collection of masks in 1893 for the World’s Fair and lost his life as a result. According to Jacobsen (1997: 34) when people found out the Chief had sold his Sissauch masks a meeting was held where they unanimously decided that he should die at the end of a year. Chief Klallamen told Jacobsen his fate and died when the appointed time arrived.

The masks were part of sacred ceremonies that only the initiated could participate in. This meant that items of a ceremonial nature were kept hidden from the uninitiated. If an uninitiated person were to see any of these secret objects they would either have to be killed or initiated into the Kusuit, the secret society (McIwraith 1948, vol. 2: 3–20). Thomas McIwraith observed that ‘the uninitiated do not realise that the representations are produced by means of masks, the work of human hands; instead, they believe that the figures displayed are really those of supernatural patrons who have come to earth to assist their protégés’ (1948: 7). This was the original social context of the mask of Alk’unta’m.

**The birth of Alk’unta’m**

Masks of Alk’unta’m are carved to be a physical manifestation of his spirit. According to the Nuxalk people, ‘when carving a design, the masmasala’nix [the spirit of the four carpenters] gives them the idea which they are working out’ (Boas 1898: 33). When danced the masks are accompanied by a large ball-topped hat made of cedar roots which is painted with one of the wearers’ ancestral crests (McIwraith 1948, vol. 1: 354). The associated regalia consists of cedar-bark neck rings, a cedar-bark dancing apron and other items depending on the story being told in the ceremony. The mask and costume form a means
of communication that the observer can interpret based on the association of the objects worn by the dancer.

Alk’unta’m is a part of a cast of supernatural entities that together explain to the audience how the world was created. It is in this way that hereditary stories are passed on from generation to generation through public performance. For example, if a chief holds the rights to Alk’unta’m and wants to pass this story on to his son he holds a potlatch at which the story is enacted with the use of the masks. The audience would understand from the performances that the costumes, including the masks, are the supernatural patrons of the protégés. The masks of Alk’unta’m are part of a system of transmitting hereditary stories.

According to Boas, Senx (the Sun) and Alk’unta’m ‘might be called the rulers of mankind. In most traditions they are described as trying to destroy man, notwithstanding the fact that they are considered the creators of mankind’ (1898: 30). Boas (1898) recorded and published many oral traditions associated with Alk’unta’m. One of these is of how the salmon were brought to earth. Boas describes how ‘the salmon were obtained by a man who gambled with Alk’unta’m, the stake being the salmon. Alk’unta’m lost, and the man took the salmon down from heaven... Alk’unta’m also gives to man the power to cure disease by the means of the water of life, which the shaman sprinkles on the sick person’ (1898: 30).

In the early years of its life the AMNH (American Museum of Natural History) Alk’unta’m mask was hidden from the uninitiated and never seen out of the context of a ceremony and an entire costume. I want to emphasize here that for the Nuxalk at this time a mask could not be seen on its own. Although it was the face of the spirit it was still only one part of a larger costume. The idea of this item having meaning apart from its associated regalia, story and ceremony is not yet there. It is not until the arrival of fur traders elsewhere on the coast during the late 1700s and the appearance of ethnographers in the 1800s that the Nuxalkmc begin to change their cultural perception of masks. Although there are early accounts of people in other parts of the Northwest coast offering items, such as masks, for sale to outsiders (Beaglehole 1967: 1414), there is no record of this occurring in the Bella Coola Valley prior to the 1880s. Few if any Nuxalk masks can be found in the earliest collections of Northwest Coast masks.

Events preceding the collection of Alk’unta’m

During the 1800s life changed dramatically for the people of the Bella Coola Valley. New visitors to the valley changed the way the Nuxalk looked at masks of Alk’unta’m. These new people brought new religions, new laws and deadly new diseases. Three major events which played pivotal roles in the change of the Nuxalk cultural perception of masks occurred before Alk’unta’m was collected in 1897. These are: the smallpox epidemic of the winter of 1862–3, the arrival of missionaries shortly after and the banning of the potlatch in 1885.

Of these events the smallpox epidemic of the winter of 1862–3 was the most immediately devastating. That winter saw the population of the valley decrease from the 2,000 people estimated in 1835 (Duff 1965: 39) to 402 in 1868 (Boyd 1990). This was not the first smallpox epidemic or disease to come to the coast (Boyd 1990, 1994, 1996; Harris 1994).
During the late 1770s there is known to have been a smallpox epidemic along the coast but there is no specific documentation that this epidemic reached Bella Coola (Boyd 1994: 8; Harris 1994: 606). If the epidemic did reach the Bella Coola Valley there may have been significantly more people than the approximately 2,000 recorded in 1835, inhabiting the valley prior to the 1770s. Boyd (1990), for example, estimates that the population of the Bella Coola valley was approximately 2,910 people in 1774.

According to McIlwrath, before the smallpox epidemic of the 1860s there were over forty-five villages in the valley (1948, vol. 1: 5–16). By 1885 the population had crashed and most settlements were abandoned. Relict populations hung on at six or eight of the valley settlements and reduced numbers remained at Nuxalk villages in South Bentinck Arm, Kwatna and Kimquit. By 1925 only Koomkoots, the present settlement of Bella Coola, had a permanent year-round population. For the Nuxalkmc the crest designs and ancestors depicted in the masks are inherited privileges. If an owner dies without passing a privilege on via the potlatch system, no one has the right to dance the mask or tell the story that goes with it. Whole lineages of families disappeared in the epidemics. As a result, survivors might end up with many masks in their possession, but not have the rights to dance them, thus making the masks unusable. The masks thus survived the social system for which they were created. Many masks could no longer be publicly displayed, and their ownership was unclear. The collectors therefore arrived at an opportune time, for the Nuxalkmc were more willing to sell masks they held in their possession, but did not have the rights to use.

Shortly after the smallpox epidemic the missionaries arrived. For the most part they were well received. The first missionary in Bella Coola was Reverend William Henry Pierce. He came in the winter of 1883 at the invitation of Chief Tom Henry of Bella Coola. Pierce says that ‘Tom placed his house at’ his ‘disposal to be used during the day for school and to hold services there on Sundays’ (Pierce 1933: 45). During his entire stay in Bella Coola Pierce stayed with Chief Tom. Pierce encouraged the people to burn their old ceremonial gear in order to become Christian. One day, in the winter of 1883, Chief Tom agreed to do this. Pierce describes the event as follows:

After his conversion he became very anxious to burn all his idols which he said he had been serving for thirty years. Accordingly, one Saturday he informed me privately that it was his intention to destroy them all that night after everybody had gone to bed, and he requested that I remain up with him to be a witness to the deed. At midnight two boxes were brought in, both filled with heathen treasures of all kinds, such as the secret whistles which belonged to the man-eater dances, dog whistles, wild dance whistles, aprons, head dresses, leggings etc. These boxes he told me, had been handed down for several generations and had travelled from place to place during the heathen dances. Their frequent use could easily be detected by looking at the top and bottom of each box which had worn so thin that they would bend with the slightest pressure. . . . At two o’clock in the morning, everything had perished in the flames. We then knelt down to pray.

(Pierce 1933: 45–6)

The missionaries were invited into the community at a time when people’s faith in the old ways had been greatly shaken by the smallpox epidemic (Pierce 1933). Many Nuxalkmc
converted to Christianity although some continued in their old faith. All Nuxalk were encouraged by the missionaries to sell or burn the masks and abandon their old ways.

In 1885, on the advice and encouragement of missionaries and Indian agents, the Canadian government outlawed the potlatch and began the repression of native languages among native school children (Braken 1997; Cole and Chaikin 1990). The potlatch, while ill defined by the law, included all Native ceremonies where dancing and the giving of gifts occurred. The potlatch ‘was seen by many missionaries, Christian Indians and Department of Indian Affairs field agents as a barrier to the assimilation of the native peoples into European and Christian society’ (Cole and Chaikin 1990: 2). Cole and Chaikin describe the potlatch as:

the occasion at which a traditional name, rank or hereditary privilege was claimed through dances, speeches and the distribution of property to those invited. The group hosting a potlatch displayed certain of its hereditary possessions, which included songs, dances and masks, recited the origins of these rights and the history of their transmission, and bestowed the new rank and name upon the member now entitled to use them. The ceremony was completed by distributing gifts, really payments, to the guests. The guest group, by witnessing the claims made, validated and sanctioned the status displayed and claimed. This was vital; the claims had to be publicly witnessed to be valid. At the same time, there was reciprocity to the ceremony. The guests were confirmed in their own status by the order in which they received their gifts, by the amount presented to them and often by the seating arrangements.

(Cole and Chaikin 1990: 5)

It was during potlatch ceremonies that masks like Alk’unta’m were danced. To forbid these ceremonies was in essence to forbid the public dancing and display of masks in a meaningful manner. Although many Nuxalk continued to potlatch after the law was passed (Spencer 1906: 485–8), the implementation of the law placed further pressure on Native people along the coast of British Columbia to re-evaluate their belief systems. Their ceremonies and beliefs about the world and how it is organized were under attack. This changed people’s perception of their religion and associated ceremonial items. Those who continued practising their religion became outlaws. The penalty was jail and the confiscation of their ceremonial items (Cole and Chaikin 1990).

The three events outlined above all contributed to the changes taking place in Nuxalk perceptions of their religion, ceremonies and material culture. The smallpox epidemic reduced their population by perhaps 80 per cent. The missionaries and government officials, in their bid to assimilate the Natives of the Northwest coast, outlawed their ceremonies. Ethnographers and collectors came from around the world to witness and record ‘dying cultures’ and the Nuxalk, like many other Native people of the Northwest coast, became known far beyond their home territories. It is in this atmosphere that the mask of Alk’unta’m was sold.

Alk’unta’m’s one hundred years in the American Museum of Natural History

In 1897, Franz Boas came to Bella Coola with George Hunt as part of the Jesup North Expedition. Its aim was ‘to investigate and establish the ethnological relations between
the races of America and Asia’ (Boas 1897a: 2). Eleven years previously Boas had met with and interviewed nine Nuxalk men who toured Europe with Fillip Jacobsen (Cole 1985: 68–92). Boas and Hunt enlisted the assistance of Fillip Jacobsen, who by then lived in the Bella Coola Valley (Cole 1985: 148), and eventually collected close to sixty Nuxalk masks for the American Museum of Natural History (Boas 1897b). Boas did not record either the seller’s or the carver’s names, possibly because Jacobsen was acting as middle man. The purpose of this collection was to illustrate the peculiar mythology of the Bella Coola. Boas states that ‘all the collections which have been made heretofore do not bring out clearly the principal characteristic of the mythology of the Bella Coola’ (1898: 27). It is not surprising therefore that he chose to collect the mask of Alk’unta’m (Fig. 3), one of the most important Nuxalk supernatural beings.

Along with the mask of Alk’unta’m Boas collected the masks of SENX (the sun) and Snulk’ulxa’ls, ‘an old man who formerly ruled over the House of Myths, but who has given up his place in favour of SENX and Alk’unta’m’ (Boas 1898: 30). He also collected the masks of Alk’unta’m’s sons and daughters; the four carpenters he created to create humans and teach them the arts of carving; Nono’osqa, the mother of the flowers and her assistants, as well as many other supernatural entities which illustrated the mythology of the Nuxalk. Along with these masks he collected texts of the oral traditions that went with them.

Once the mask of Alk’unta’m was purchased by Boas its significance and context changed. Boas’ motivation in collecting items of material culture from the Northwest Coast was so they could be preserved ‘in a large and accessible museum’ before they were ‘lost to us’ (Boas 1897c). Alk’unta’m was purchased in this collection of masks to illustrate the unusual mythology of the Nuxalk to museum visitors. In the exhibit the masks were surrounded by other items of material culture from the Bella Coola Valley. His method of displaying ethnological specimens in the context from which they came was a

Figure 3 Drawing of Alk’unta’m. Based on Franz Boas’ drawing of 1898 (Boas 1898).
revolutionary idea in the late 1800s (Cole 1985: 115). However, this new context and meaning was very different from the original context from which Alk’unta’m came.

When a ceremonial object is removed and taken into a new culture it takes on a new meaning. The mask of Alk’unta’m, once a hidden ceremonial item, now became an ethnological specimen – part of a museum exhibit alongside items from other ‘primitive’ cultures from around the world. This form of display presented a non-Native perception of these once sacred objects as examples of exotic ceremonial culture (Price 1989). As time passed, so did the perception of these items. By the 1920s the meaning of Alk’unta’m and other masks from around the world transformed again. They were no longer just ethnological specimens but works of ‘primitive art’.

Near the end of the collection period, around the 1920s, non-Native artists around the world became aware of ‘primitive art’ and began to exhibit it in art galleries (Price 1989: 82–99; Clifford 1988: 189–214). Masks shifted to being considered as an art form. This new meaning was reinforced by art exhibitions in Paris, the Denver Art Museum in Colorado, the National Gallery and National Museum of Canada, and shows in New York, and San Francisco (Wyatt 1994: 2). This new appreciation of native art led many ethnographers, like Boas, to examine the collections in more detail (Boas 1927). For Franz Boas the purpose of this analysis was not only to discredit cultural evolutionism, but also ‘to stress the roles that culture, history, and the artist’s psychology and creative processes play in the development of an art style’ (Jonaitis 1995: 4).

The transformation of masks from examples of ‘primitive’ cultures into objects of art brought a transformation in the way native carvers perceived themselves and the objects they created. When Alk’unta’m was collected the name of the carver was not mentioned. This was a common practice in the collecting of primitive artefacts. Price states that:

after a Primitive artifact has been removed from ‘the field’ (whether by sale, theft, or some other variant of the transfer to Western ownership), it is customarily issued a new passport. The pedigree of such an object does not normally provide detailed information on its maker or its original (native) owners; rather, it counts only the Western hands through which the object has passed.

(Price 1989: 102)

In the Bella Coola Valley the non-collection of the name would have been the product not only of the collector, but also of the seller. At the time Alk’unta’m was collected, if informants were asked about who carved a particular mask, they would not have been able to give an answer. The reason for this is that the carvers did not sign their work or publicly announce themselves as the makers of it because that would have taken away from the mystery of the dances. The carvers were holders of secret knowledge that was not to be publicly shared (McIlwraith 1948, vol. 1: 3–20).

This is very different from the situation today. Carvers now want their names to be associated with the masks they carve for sale. The new buyers in the art world are looking for works of art whose value is judged by the names of the artists who made them. The new owners do not hide their masks in cedar boxes only to be brought out on special occasions – they hang them on the wall for all to see. When the owners of such masks are asked about their meaning they may not know the stories that were once associated with similar masks of the past. They have a different kind of knowledge: how much it is worth in dollars, who
made it, where it came from and its potential future value. People who collect Northwest Coast art today do so on many other levels: ‘on one level, they are touched by and respond to the power of the work itself; on another level, they are giving implicit support to what the artists are striving for with their art and their cultural activity’ (Wyatt 1994: 4).

As time moves on and Native and non-Native perceptions of masks evolve, so does the role of the Native artist. ‘Artists of the Northwest Coast serve as ambassadors of a living and evolving culture, and their work speaks not only to audiences outside and within that culture but also to a deep inner core of feeling in all of us’ (Wyatt 1994: 4). Today contemporary Northwest Coast art serves as a bridge between two different cultures. That non-Native Canadians are now embracing and honouring Native people’s traditions represents a significant change in their perception of these masks.

While the contemporary atmosphere is transforming the meaning of masks like Alk’unta’m there are still concerns about how Native masks are being displayed. Although the AMNH mask of Alk’unta’m is not currently on display many of the Nuxalk masks collected with him are. There is very little reference in these displays to how the objects were originally used or the ceremonies they were once a part of. Although Boas’ purpose in making the collection was to illustrate the peculiar mythology of the Nuxalk, there is little didactic information referring to the oral traditions he collected with the masks.

Alk’unta’m in the twenty-first century

The AMNH Alk’unta’m mask is currently kept in a well-protected atmospherically controlled storage vault where access to view him is restricted and must be arranged weeks in advance. Ironically, this protected atmosphere is very similar to the way he was once stored by the Nuxalkmc. The restrictions, however, caused disappointment for Nuxalkmc high-school students who came to New York in July 1998 and were unable to gain access to see him or other Nuxalk masks stored with him because they had not made the appropriate prior arrangements. The teacher from Acwsalcta, the Native school in Bella Coola, did not realize they needed to arrange permission in advance and would not have known whom to contact or where to begin (Shellie Farynuk pers. comm. 1998). This is because there are no clear lines of communication between Native peoples and museums about what arrangements are necessary in order to view objects. Nuxalk elected Chief Archie Poollass, told me that, in the past, even when there has been planning in advance, people they have sent to view collections in museums have had difficulty getting to see all artefacts in the collection (pers. comm. 1999). A balance must be struck between the responsibilities of protecting objects in perpetuity and the provision of access to legitimate Native representatives.

In Canada and the United States there has been much critical discussion on the question of how to display and represent the material culture of Native people (Erasmus 1988; Greer 1989; Price 1989; Clifford 1988). Debate over whether a Nuxalk mask, or any other mask for that matter, should be considered as art or an ethnographic specimen reflects the cultural appropriation of theses objects for, as Clifford points out, institutions of both art and anthropology ‘assume a primitive world in need of preservation, redemption and representation. The concrete inventive existence of tribal cultures and artist is suppressed
in the process of either constituting authentic, “traditional” world or appreciating their products in the timeless category of “art” (1988: 200). For the Nuxalkmc the masks are physical manifestations of supernatural entities, an inseparable part of their oral traditions and ceremonies. In a museum or art gallery setting the meaning of a mask is thought to be intrinsic to it. This is the basic difference between the views of some museums and those of the Nuxalkmc.

Chief Pootlass believes the masks of the Nuxalk should be contextualized with didactic information about the stories associated with them and how they were used in ceremonies. The Nuxalkmc would like to establish a relationship with museums and to be consulted about how objects from their culture are displayed and presented to others (Chief Pootlass pers. comm. 1999). He is not alone in his desire for dialogue between his people and museums. During the ‘Preserving Our Heritage: A Working Conference for Museums and First Peoples’ conference, held in November of 1988, Native peoples clearly expressed a desire for a dialogue to develop on the presentation of their art and culture (McCormick 1988).

Over the hundred years that Alk’unta’m has been in the American Museum of Natural History the way non-Native, Nuxalkmc and Native artists in general perceive the cultural significance of masks has changed dramatically. As Native people strive to maintain and revitalize ceremonial aspects of their culture, museums and collectors alike are faced with a new responsibility. That responsibility is to share the knowledge they have about the collections in their possession with the Native communities from which they came. A century ago those collections were made in the spirit of cultural preservation.

In this spirit a dialogue between Native people and museum curators has begun (Ames 1988; Grenville 1998; Hoover and Inglis 1990; Jonaitis 1995: ix; Sullivan 1989; Wright 1989; Fisher 1989). An excellent example of this can be seen in the Down from the Shimmering Sky exhibit of Northwest Coast masks at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1998. The curators’ stated goal was to ‘acknowledge the social and historical context for the production and use of the masks while at the same time documenting their aesthetic and conceptual evolution from the time of first contact with Europeans and to present’ (Grenville 1998: 14–15). While organizing the exhibit the curators met with ‘representatives of each eleven First Nations of the Pacific Northwest Coast to discuss the project and its goals and to secure support for it’ (1998: 15).

Museums have the objects and records that Native people increasingly need access to, while Native people have information on the context of the objects that museums need to display them properly. Museums are increasingly listening to and encouraging a dialogue about the display of Native ceremonial items. Hoover and Inglis suggest ‘this is more than a dialogue: it is a commitment, to genuinely include Native Peoples in the process of creating exhibits and public programs relating to their culture. Without this commitment, museums will continue to be viewed as exploiting Native Peoples and will find themselves isolated and increasingly trying to justify their monologic positions’ (1990: 285). This development will benefit the visitors to museums and enrich both cultures. Perhaps the story that is told with Alk’unta’m will change as new information about masks and stories become incorporated into museum exhibits.

Developing a dialogue with museums is important for the Nuxalkmc as they strive to revitalize their ceremonies. The ceremonial items in the collections of museums serve as a
valuable resource base for artists when creating new masks and exploring the art styles used in the past (Harvey Mack, Nuxalk carver, pers. comm. 1998). They are also important as the Nuxalk attempt to re-associate names, stories and ceremonies with the masks.

As Native and non-Native people continue to exchange views about the meaning and significance of masks, undoubtedly the meaning of Alk’unta’m will continue to change. As images of Nuxalk masks return to the Nuxalkmc and they build new ceremonial lives, Alk’unta’m will take a new place. For the Nuxalkmc he is a thread that leads both back to the past and forward in their journey to revitalize the ceremonies in which he was once such a powerful player.

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