



Esquimalt Harbour, 1872. Note longhouses in the foreground and trees surround the village area. Villages were built along the seashore to give ready access to fishing sites and to help with travel. Surrounding forest areas provided wildlife for easily accessible food sources, as well as allowing easy access to ritual and ceremonial sites. Look closely at this picture, as it has captured the territory of the families known as Teechamitsa, Xwsepsum, Swenghwung, Chilkowetch, Hwyyumilth, Cheko'nein, Kakyakaan, Tsuli'lhchu. Our Ancestors
In Canadian Illustrated News. Engraver E. Haberer

Sacred Trust: Our Traditions still continue...

“We’re all connected to all these..”

While speaking about our teachings, August 2009, Chief Andrew Thomas said “..it’s what’s going to give us a long life, when you follow those teachings.”

The purpose of this short article is to connect historical evidence identifying use of the land and sea resources by our Ancestors as they relate to our teachings. Secondly, it is meant to identify important elements of the Treaty of 1850 signed with Esquimalt ancestors, in particular the Kosapsum (Xwsepsum) family. One of the fundamental promises made to the Xwsepsum was to be able to “hunt and fish as formerly”. Prior to the arrival of the Xwulunitum (Whites) to our shores the entire territory was used for secular and sacred reasons. For example, if you look at the picture again, notice the forested areas surrounding the village—wilderness sites where hunting and fishing activities, gathering of plants, roots and berries by Xwsepsum occurred all year round.

Our teachings are as old as time itself—we have been here for over 10,000 years (Lominska, Johnson and Bernick, 1986:5). That is a very long time. In all that time we have developed and maintained important cultural mechanisms such as the Winter Dance Complex, and later on, the Shaker Church. It is in these mechanisms that we find the values and traditions spoken about by Chief Thomas as a “Sacred Trust”. He described the Sacred Trust as a relationship of trust and responsibility to work and help one other. It is held between children,

parents and families, between communities and their leaders, and between the land and the people. That responsibility was also reinforced by the Anthropologist Wayne Suttles who, while writing about our traditions said “..his survival as a whole person must surely contribute to this cultural reproductivity,” and were applied to “influence the continuing evolution of Indian culture” (W. Suttles 1963:229-230).

The old people, with one look, could tell if a person was taught our ways or participated within our own cultural activities. Participation within our very old cultural systems by the whole family, leads to stronger families, and to knowing that we hold relationships and alliances between our territories. Think about how whole extended families, during a naming ceremony for example, all get up when a speaker is hired or when the speaker begins to announce the names of those people called upon to witness the work. Suttles wrote that these interactions are “the most significant aspect of contemporary Coast Salish life” (Suttles 1963:18). When we help each other and stand together in this way, our responsibilities are shared and we know we belong to a larger community. It is this aspect that Chief Thomas refers to when he says, “..it’s what’s going to give us a long life, when you follow those teachings,”

In 1848 the population of Xwulmuxw (Indians), on Vancouver Island was 11,463 people, and this was after already surviving a disastrous smallpox epidemic in the 1780’s that killed at least 50% of the people. Today, it is hard to imagine a time when only our own people moved across the land hunting, fishing, visiting relatives, visiting to potlatch or play bone games. At the same time, significant family groups in our immediate region were identified as Teechamitsa, Kosapsum (Xwsepsum), Swenghwung, Chilkowetch, Hwyuwmilth, Cheko’nein, Kakyaakan, Tsuli’lhchu.

The attached photo shows our world as it existed in 1872. The world of the Esquimalt Nation still had wilderness areas surrounding immediate village sites. Access to wilderness sites was important to our ancestors as it meant access to hunting and fishing sites. When the 1850 Treaty was signed, our ancestors had wanted to keep, according to Chief Thomas, significant access to hunting and fishing sites. Increased development around our homelands has seriously restricted and prevented our ability ‘to hunt and fish as formerly’. Families who hunt and fish for winter dance and family meetings can no longer access sites within a short distance of our homes. Surely the loss of traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering sites, and the loss of lands due to encroachment of houses and roads means an infringement of the 1850 Treaty signed with the Xwsepsum by James Douglas.

The ancestor of Chief Andy Thomas, Sisunuq was one of the Chiefs from the Xwsepsum family and his people had at least 3-4 village sites in the immediate region of what is now known as Victoria (A. Thomas, 2009:6). These were the families that signed the 1850 Treaty with James Douglas. One of the advantages of the Esquimalt Nation, compared to other Treaty Tribes, comes from Chief Thomas’ ability to identify a direct line to Chieftainship to his 3rd Great Grandfather Sisunuq.

The ancestors' world was complex and based on renewing their relationship with the Creator and protecting their families and relatives. For example, ritual preparation to assume the role of a Chief required extensive seclusion. In 1847, a Chief known as Chea-clach in preparation to assuming a chieftainship from his father went to the mountains for 30 days and nights to dream and fast (Kane, 1968:150-53). After this he returned and his family hosted others to announce his new status. Then, like today, relatives would have provided seafood, deer, plants etc. to feed their guests. Theirs world, like ours, was one in which the youth inherited teachings and rules for good living from parents, grandparents etc.. Today, we also still have ceremonies which require cleansing, seclusion, and public validation of a new status.

Others who underwent training were medicine people. According to Kane they went into seclusion for three days and on the fourth day were taken and washed in cold water and bathed. Today, our families are familiar with ritual seclusion and then ritual morning bathing to wake up a person. In another instance the host of a gathering distributed all his property including "blankets, shells, [and] ornaments" and another gave "twelve bales of blankets, 20 -30 guns, numerous pots, kettles, pans, knives, great quantities of beads, trinkets and Chinese boxes." Generosity of this nature was expected of Chiefs and fulfilled the Sacred Trust requirement to help and look after their extended family and community. And, of course, the distribution of wealth items validated status (Kane, 1968:150-153). All of these are good examples of traditions which have been held for hundreds and hundreds of years. In the context of the 1850 Treaty with our ancestors, this kind of evidence proves our reliance on wilderness areas around our village sites to supply us with meat, fish, and plants to feed our guests, which was and is a big part of who we are.

Our people in the Central Coast Salish region continue to invite relatives and friends to gatherings, to initiate dancers, to use rites associated with the Shulmuhwtsus Rattles, Sxwaixwe Masks, etc., conduct memorials, and yes, to use and validate ancestral names. When speaking about our ritual and ceremonial world, Chief Andy Thomas learned the following from his grandfather and from that time related the following, "...we're all connected to all these, and that's why we have our ceremonies in place. So we can protect ourselves from hurting our own bodies, hurting our children, our family around us. That's why I call it that Sacred Trust that we have with our territory."(2009:5)

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