



**Introduction to John R. Swanton's  
'Tlingit Sacred Peace Dance' in *Tlingit Myths and Texts*,  
Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 39, 1909.**

**MARIE-FRANÇOISE GUÉDON, PhD**

**Introduction**

This introduction aims to provide a cultural context for Swanton's text as it relates one of the myths told by the Tlingit people about the origins of the Tlingit Peace ceremony, also known as *Kuwakan* or Deer Dance. Among other things, the dance is a remarkable socio-political tool allowing the Tlingit communities to make peace following a war, a murder or other crime, or any accident affecting their populations from the errors or abuses of human power. This Introduction is divided into three parts: a presentation of land otters and their cultural significance, the matrilineality of the Tlingit people, and the *Kuwakan*, also known as the Deer Dance or the Sacred Peace Dance.

**Land Otters**

The myths presented briefly here are part of a larger corpus of oral literature pertaining to the land otter and transmitted among the Tlingit people of southeastern Alaska. Abundant in southern Alaska, land otters have shown themselves to be extremely intelligent and, like the bears, are similar to humans in terms of family life, dwelling, communication, and play.

However, land otters have a very bad reputation among the Tlingit people, as they were formerly considered to be the animal form of human beings who had drowned in the rivers or in the sea.



Whether rescued or kidnapped by a land otter, victims were transformed into land otters, even while they kept the ability to present themselves in a human form (including as attractive young men or women). After transformation, the new land otters roamed the forests in hopes of luring further victims into the water or into madness. Even today, land otters evoke a deep fear and revulsion, especially among older people, and children are warned to trust neither land otters nor strangers. Occasionally, though, land otters may remember their human family and bring them good fortune.

Most importantly, land otters are also a direct pathway to shamanistic powers and are involved in many shamanic rituals as supernatural helpers and teachers. Shamanic masks depicting land otters are striking as they assemble human and animal features merging over a human skull. Such animal spirit beings, with at least a partial human identity (like that of the land otters) may also be inherited from deceased shamans, or may themselves be the spirits of these dead shamans, now reinstated in their inheritors.

Please note that the Tlingit language and dialects do not mark gender directly, whether in the equivalents of pronouns, nouns, or verbs (as in French). French translations automatically assign a gender, usually masculine, to anything considered a person not explicitly presented as female. Please note also that according to Tlingit traditions, animals and other living beings are considered to be persons.

That a land otter-person would be involved in the mythical origins of the Peace Dance, as described by Swanton (see Swanton's article) indicates that this Dance was much more than a simple socio-political or official diplomatic event. It means that the Deer Dance was sanctioned by one of the great mythological and supernatural beings of the Tlingit world, beyond the human realms and still active today.

## **A Matrilineal Society**

The Tlingit people are a matrilineal society, with localised clans organised in two exogamous opposite moieties. Tlingit society is further divided between aristocrats (holders of noble names owned by the clan and bestowed publicly on persons with the proper kin connections) and commoners, as well as, formerly, a number of slaves (captives, or descendants of captives). Though one identifies as a member of one's mother's clan and moiety, kin on the father's side are essential to one's family life and one's public actions. Furthermore, in such an exogamous moiety system, one's clan and the clan of one's spouse are in a reciprocal relationship. However, as opposites, they are also in a position of potential conflict: "We marry those against whom we fight."

In this hierarchical society, adolescent boys and girls did not enjoy much freedom, particularly if they belonged to an aristocratic family. Here, they were under the direct supervision of their mother and their mother's brother. High-ranking girls were guarded most closely and upon reaching their puberty, were ritually secluded for several months (up to two years) in a small space and in semi-darkness.

While in seclusion, they were strictly prevented from interacting with human and nonhuman beings (even from looking at the sky), with the exception of their mother and older female relatives. One must note that a shortened version of that long retreat was observed by every adult women during her menses until menopause, keeping her away from her family and social duties. As was the case for the adolescent girl, this was done both to protect the community from contact with her power as a potential life-giver in touch with the non-human realms, and to protect her from undue influences.

At the end of her menarche seclusion, the girl was considered an adult women and quickly married to a husband chosen by her mother and her mother's brother, according to her rank as a noble person. The ideal noble marriage was with a man belonging to her father's clan who would have lived already in her mother's dwelling (avunculocal residence). This early submissive behaviour did not prevent women from becoming extremely active in the economic and political spheres of their communities.

### **The *Kuwakan* or Deer Dance**

The following summary of the Tlingit *Kuwakan*, also known as the Deer Dance or Peace Ceremony, is based on Frederica de Laguna's ethnographic work among the Tlingit people of Alaska. Specifically, her research among the people of Yakutat which was first published in 1972 as *Under Mount Saint Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit*.<sup>1</sup> Several paragraphs are summarized below with the kind permission of the editor. See also John R. Swanton, 1908, *Social Conditions, Belief and Linguistic Relationship of the Tlingit Indians*, 28th Annual report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, and George T. Emmons, *The Tlingit*.

Among the Tlingit, while there could be violence and aggression or crimes between members of the same clan, such incidents did not constitute war as such and were settled by payment in money, goods, or other properties, including ceremonial privileges. Another category of conflict concerned international events, such as attacks by neighbouring tribes, or actions taken against invading European foreigners; in these cases, there was little hope of settlement or a formal peace treaty. War, whether large-scale battles, feuds, or simple retaliation against an accidental death, included *only* conflicts which pitted one clan against another, or more seriously, one moiety against another. In practice, one could talk of a war only if a peace agreement was possible at the end.

According to the information provided by De Laguna, and following an explicit equity principle aiming to 'even the score' after damage was done or someone was killed, the settlement agreements terminating a war were negotiated by third-party individuals called *nakani*, that is, 'in-laws' (men married to women belonging to the clans they were to represent). *Nakani* were, if possible, aristocrats and socially important persons; they could claim a neutral position because, as in-laws, they did not belong to the clans involved in the conflict. The *nakani* discussed the compensation of property or life demanded by the injured party and secured the resulting agreement; this agreement sometimes

---

1 A newer 3-volume edition is available: Frederica de Laguna, *Under Mount Saint Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit* (Ottawa: Frederica de Laguna Northern Books, 2009).

asked for the life of a member or members of the guilty party, in counterpart for the loss of the initial victim(s). in this most exacting situation, compensation would require people of equal rank and number in a context where, if necessary, the life of one aristocrat could be worth the lives of up to four commoners. The leaders of the clan at fault selected who was to be killed in return for the death(s) on the other side; this was not necessarily the person responsible for the loss, as, for instance, a younger brother would customarily replace an older brother.

The *nakani* then arranged a Peace Ceremony or *Kuwakan*; this included a temporary and formal exchange of hostages during a complex process lasting for eight to ten 10 days and longer if the conflict pitted two distant communities. The hostages, four to each side, were carefully paired as to sex and social status but not according to age and they were selected, if possible, among close relatives of the victim and of the supposed aggressor. "If a woman were taken on one side, her 'opposite' (*geyi*) should also be a woman."<sup>2</sup>

Surnamed *kuwakan* (peace-makers, peace officers, or 'deer'), the selected individuals came out of their homes unarmed and in full regalia. They were seized by the opposing party, who pretended to kill them in a mock battle; each side then brought its 'captives' into their own respective homes and gave them new names. The 'deer' had to keep motionless while carried around and were required to remain in a totally passive, peaceful state for several days, being bound by many taboos and prescribed behavioural rules. They were also, however, required to participate in the nightly Peace Dance, an elaborate lengthy dance exchange every evening, featuring first aggressive dancing on the part of their captors and then their subjugation by the *kuwakan*, with rich entertainment for everyone. As well as participating in the dance, each *kuwakan* was given a ceremonial song to present.

At the evening Peace Dances, eagle feathers on their head, eagle down on their hair, and lines of red paint on their faces emphasized the role of the *kuwakan* as peace-makers. New clothes, new jewellery, new moccasins and other gifts demonstrated the good will of their captors. The Peace Dance ended on the ninth day, with a return home of the 'deer.' This exchange of the hostages, who crossed the floor to their own side, was accompanied by a series of feasts (exchange of food and goods) and ended with a common ceremonial encounter officially terminating the hostilities.

These Tlingit peace rituals demanded remarkable individual courage and full personal adherence to lineage and clan solidarity, with explicit primacy of the lineage's well-being resting on the individual's choice to subordinate their individual will to the decisions of their family groups and leaders. A noticeable aspect of the *Kuwakan* dance or Peace Dance ceremony (though not emphasized by De Laguna but well documented in her reports) is the fact that while men were the the ones involved in war and in retributions against harm caused to a member of their clan, women directly participated in the *Kuwakan* dance in several distinct ways.

First of all, women entered into the Peace Dance as members of their kin group. As kin (mothers, sisters) of the males of their clan or wives to the clan of their husband, they were called to perform

---

2 Ibid., 205-6.

various duties at various moment during the eight day ritual, including dancing. As siblings or mothers of a *kuwakan* dancer, they provided food, clothing and other necessities for the 'deer' kept as the opposite (*geyi*) of their own family member and would also act as attendant to any women held as *kuwakan*. Sometimes, women could become *nakani* (official conciliators) in default of a man of suitable rank, in which case gender was shown to be less important than their aristocratic status.

More importantly, women could be seized as *kuwakan* / 'deer' themselves and be full participants in the rites that followed, regardless of their age. Even a little girl could be taken. As female, they would be treated according to their gender, with female attendants rather than male servants, and dressed, served and adorned accordingly. But, again, it was their aristocratic status (position in their lineage and clan) and kin ties that mattered then rather than their gender.

My own research has uncovered a potentially misleading link between the *Kuwakan* and the female gender. Specifically, the *kuwakan* dance brings out a very different question about the symbolic gender of the 'deer.' Several male informants mentioned that *kuwakan* had to behave 'like a girl.' In view of that fact, Western readers might assume that the passivity required for the 'deer' contributes to a potential feminisation of their status. But this assumed correlation is wrong: the 'deer' are not seen, defined, or treated as women and women are not defined by the Tlingit as passive beings. Neither socially nor ritually are women seen as weak or powerless. *Kuwakan* do not behave like women, but they are obliged to follow the same ritual prescriptions as girls follow during the retreat imposed on them at menarche.

The nature of the *kuwakan* is circumscribed by a ritual context using three methods: a) supernatural sanctions and rewards to insure their proper behaviour; b) ritual protection against unwelcome influences; and c) a shamanic-like environment because they are in contact with supernatural powers (proximity with death in the case of the 'deer,' proximity with unborn children in the case of the pubescent girls). The demands placed on the 'deer' by their position intersects with their gender, but the ritual gestures were similar for both male and female *kuwakan*.

De Laguna mentions several similarities between the *kuwakan* and the menstruant. Any action was taboo, and one or two men would be appointed to attend to each hostage to care for their needs (if the latter were a women, she would have woman attendants). The attendants sat besides their charge at all times in order to care for them. "He can't do anything for himself — can't even wash his own face. He has to use his left hand, because his right hand cause trouble..." To insure that the right hand was kept idle, the fingers were laced together with cord - as was done to menstruants.<sup>3</sup>

The 'deer' was forbidden to scratch himself with his fingernails, for this would mean 'agitating more war.' [This was also a major interdiction for pubescent girls.] Instead he was given a flat hard rock, or rubbing amulet [...] with which to scratch any place that itches. This hung by a string around his neck. Because he was forbidden to touch his head, his 'servant' combed his hair for him. [This was also the case for pubescent girls.] [...] It

---

3 Ibid., 598.

was taboo for the 'deer' to dress by himself, a task for his or her attendants, and before he did so, moreover 'just like *wetedi* (a menstruant), he rubbed the rock around his mouth, put it under his feet and stepped on it. If this taboo were broken, either the captor's sib [clan] or the 'deer''s sib [clan] would 'die off.' Or, "if he do something, he's going to get crazy when he gets old, that's *ligas* (taboo)."<sup>4</sup>

The *kuwakan* had to follow exacting food prescriptions which prevented contact with anything alive or freshly killed, as well as anything strong or hot. "Peace hostages were also subject to a number of food taboos, similar to those of the adolescent girl. Hot food, hot soup was forbidden, or when they old like us, they sweating so easy."<sup>5</sup> Fresh fish was also avoided because it was slippery (...) and would make money slip away, or could make it impossible for him to catch fish with a spear. Fish skin would make spots to the face in old age. Beach food (shellfish and seaweed) meant poverty. "Indian rice" (root of the Kamchatka Lily) and even that White people's rice was taboo "because they get fat" in the way the rice swells up as it is cooked. Bear meat, fresh or dried was also forbidden, because the bear is cranky. But [old] mountain goat meat put up in seal oil, boiled and dried fish, and fresh or frozen berries were permitted.

I must note here that these prescriptions are identical to those observed by neighbouring Tsimshian, Haida, and Northern Athapaskan women, though the consequences of non-observance vary from one community to the next. Among the Northern Athapaskan, the same ritual gestures also mark periods of personal transformation, such as dream or spirit quest, access to wealth, change of social status and access to an aristocratic rank, and, of course, access to shamanic powers. Among the Tlingit, as noted by de Laguna, the same ritual retreat was followed by menstruating women, adolescent girls reaching puberty, early widowhood, shamans, and, as described here, *kuwakan* – whether male or female.

In all these cases, the contact with the supernatural or non-human world is an opportunity for the acquisition of new powers. While a reluctant *kuwakan* could call misfortune upon himself or herself, as well as his or her relatives, the presence of the 'deer' resulted in good luck for all those interacting with them. This confirms the shamanic-like aspects of the Deer Dance, and the spiritual role of the Deer Dancers. Indeed, De Laguna confirms:

The same taboos applied to the attendants, and probably to all those who slept in the house with the hostages. To be in the house with the peace hostages gave those people a chance to "wish for something in their mind all the time: good luck, money, a good living, and all else desirable."<sup>6</sup>

---

4 Ibid, 599.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

After the final ceremonial feast, the *kuwakan* retained his or her power as a peace-maker for as long as he or she lived and continued to act as a peace maker or even as *nakani* (go between or negotiator) for the two clans involved in the original conflict.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, the presence of women among the Deer dancers and their treatment as men's equals indicate their social importance, while the emphasis in the Peace Dance of female aristocrats as high ranking-persons rather than as female persons *per se* also demonstrates an interesting aspect of Tlingit social values where gender is not the primary indicator of a person's status.

We must discard idea of the *kuwakan* or 'deer' as a symbolic female person because this label does not fit the data. Instead, the *kuwakan* behaves in ways similar to those of girls reaching their puberty, which is also in the manner of persons facing a major personal and spiritual transformation, a situation that brings both exposure to dangerous powers and access to good luck or beneficial spiritual help. The 'deer' are not symbolically female, they are persons in touch with spiritual powers similar to those faced by girls during their puberty: the non-human domain of both birthing and dying. The involvement of land otters in the mythical origins of *kuwakan* confirms the need for extreme ritual caution for all participants to the Peace Ceremony dealing with the aftermath of war and death.

## About the Author

Dr. Marie-Françoise Guédon is a Canadian anthropologist and professor of religious studies at the University of Ottawa in Ottawa, Canada. She has done fieldwork among the Inuit, Gitksan, Ahtna, and Tanana peoples of Canada and Alaska. She is a founding member of the Network on Culture.

## References

De Laguna, Frederica *Under Mount Saint Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit* (Ottawa: Frederica de Laguna Northern Books, 2009).

Swanton, John R., 'Tlingit Sacred Peace Dance,' in *Tlingit Myths and Texts*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 39, 1909.