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Tlingit Sacred Peace Dance

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Abstract

The man that first learned about dancing was upset in a canoe and became a land-otter-man called Tûts!îdîgû'L, who has very great power. Some time afterwards four boys were drawn out to sea after some black ducks, upset there, and taken into the land-otters' dens. A shaman told the people where they were, and they burned out the dens, killing many otters, but Tûts!îdîgû'L escaped with the boys. Now the land otters made war on human beings, and the bodies of the latter broke out in pimples and sores which were really caused by the spider-crab-shell arrows. At last some people came upon two white land otters, which they carried home and treated as if they were deer (peace ambassadors). Then the land otters came to the town and danced to make peace.

Keywords: Tlingit, dance, peace-making, oral culture, Indigenous tradition

Résumé

Le premier homme à avoir appris à danser s'est renversé dans un canoë et est devenu un homme-loutre terrestre appelé Tûts!îdîgû'L, qui possède un très grand pouvoir. Quelque temps plus tard, quatre garçons ont été attirés vers la mer à la recherche de canards noirs, ils y ont chaviré et ont été emmenés dans



les tanières des loutres terrestres. Un chaman a indiqué aux gens où ils se trouvaient, et ils ont incendié les tanières, tuant de nombreuses loutres, mais Tûts!îdîgû'L s'est échappé avec les garçons. Après cela, les loutres terrestres firent la guerre aux êtres humains, et les corps de ces derniers se couvrirent de boutons et de plaies qui étaient en réalité causés par des flèches faites avec des carapaces d'araignées de mer. Finalement, des gens tombèrent sur deux loutres terrestres blanches, qu'ils rapportèrent chez eux et traitèrent comme s'il s'agissait de cerfs (ambassadeurs de la paix). Puis les loutres terrestres sont venues en ville et ont dansé pour faire la paix.

Mots clés : Tlingit, danse, rétablissement de la paix, culture orale, tradition autochtone

One time four boys went out hunting from Klawak with bow and arrows. They saw some black ducks and shot at them, but the ducks kept swimming out to sea, drawing them on. Far out the canoe upset. They hunted for the boys for days and days, but could not find them. Then some property was given to a shaman named Tuxstâ', who sent his spirit after them to the point on the beach from which they had set out. Then the shaman said, "The spirits of the boys seem to have taken the road to the land-otters' dens." Therefore they kept on until they saw the boys upon a point of land, but, as soon as the latter saw them, they ran into the dens of the land otter. Then the town chief said, "Let the whole town gather pitchwood and burn up the land-otter dens." So all of the people went thither in their canoes, made fires at the mouths of the dens and killed the land otters as soon as they came out. All perished but a few, who said, "It is Tûts!îdîgû'L's fault that they have burned up our houses and our food." Then Tûts!îdîgû'L jumped into the sea from the other side of the point with the boys all around him, so that they could not be found.

After this the shaman said, "The land otters are going to make war upon the people here," and soon after they did so. The people attacked them in return and they warred for some time. Many people fell down suddenly and were taken sick, while others were injured by having limbs of trees fall upon their heads. The shaman said that these mishaps were really effects of the land-otters' arrows, made of the shells of the spider crab. The people were also suffering from boils and pimples all over their bodies, and he said that these were produced by the poisonous shells. So many were dying that all became frightened. Whenever anyone went out hunting or fishing he would be troubled with boils and itching places and have to return. The shaman's spirits, which the land otters could see, were the only things they feared.

Finally the shaman saw that there were two white land otters, and he said, "If you can get hold of those you will be all right." Then a canoe with four men started off, and the shaman sang with them telling them that his spirits were going along also to look after them. He said, "You will be lucky. You will get them. As soon as you get them put feathers

on their heads." So they went away and camped for the night. They were unable to sleep, however, on account of the strange noises about their camp as if people were talking in very low tones. Still they could not see anything. They would say to one another, "Do you hear that?" "Yes," they answered. It was caused by the two high-caste white land otters who were talking to Tuxstâ's spirits.

Next morning the men arose very early, and the eldest said to the one next in years, "Get up. I have had a queer dream. I dreamt that we had a deer and that we were taking our deer to the land-otter den." Then one of them answered, "You have had a lucky dream. Let us start right away." So they took the canoe down and set out. Going along on the opposite side of the point on which they had camped, they saw the two white otters swimming in the water. The shaman's spirits had been holding them. Then the men said to them, "Stay there. We have had you for a long time now." So the otters remained where they were, and they caught them and put feathers upon their heads. They were making deer of them. They took them home to the fort in which they dwelt and carried them in. All the people danced for them. And that night, after they had retired, the people dreamt that the land otters were dancing the peace-making dance. Some of the people said, "They really danced," but others replied, "No, they did not dance. We only dreamt it." Still they dressed up to dance in return. All were fasting, as was customary when peace is about to be made. They also fed the land otters and waited upon them very carefully.

By and by the shaman said that the land otters were coming, so the people made ready for them. They soaked a very bitter root, called s'îkc, in water for a long time. Some said, "They are not coming. The shaman has made that up," but others believed him and got ready. Finally the shaman said, "To-morrow they will be here." The next morning it was very foggy and they could not see far out, but they heard a drum beating. At length the land-otter-people came ashore, and they helped them carry their things up to the houses. One of these land otters had two heads, one under the other. it was Tûts!îdîgû'L. All said, "We depend on Tûts!îdîgû'L." Then numbers of land otters came into the house, but, as soon as Tûts!îdîgû'L appeared at the door, everybody there but the shaman fell down as if dead. The shaman in turn filled his mouth with the poisonous water they had prepared and spit it about upon the otters, rendering unconscious all that it touched. The land otters, however, shouted, "Keep away from Tûts!îdîgû'L. Let him do his work." So Tûts!îdîgû'L danced, saying, "Ha, ha, ha." When they started a song, the land otters mentioned Tûts!îdîgû'L's name in the manner of the Indians. When they were through with their dance, all of the people woke up, and the land otters also came to. But, when the human beings got up on their feet, all had vanished including the two white ones.

Then the village people said to one another, "Did you see the dances?" "Yes," they answered. They knew something had happened and did not want to admit having missed it. "Did you see this Tûts!îdîgû'L?" "Yes." "How was he dressed?" "He had two heads and

wore a dancing apron. He carried two large round rattles. As soon as he moved around sideways we all went to sleep."

About the Author

John Reed Swanton (February 19, 1873 – May 2, 1958) was an American anthropologist, folklorist, and linguist who worked with Native American peoples throughout the United States. Swanton achieved recognition in the fields of ethnology and ethnohistory. He is particularly noted for his work with indigenous peoples of the Southeast and Pacific Northwest.¹

1 'John R. Swanton,' *Wikipedia*: available online at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_R._Swanton, accessed 23 April 2024.