

Indigenous Slavery on the Northwest Pacific Coast

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Introduction:

My interest in this subject derives from accounts of travellers and merchants of periods spent in the late eighteenth century in Nootka Sound, their observations of the indigenous Mowachaht peoples of Nootka Sound and their participation in the maritime fur trade. What I present here is a summary of notes on various themes in a limited range of secondary sources. I wish to develop points on the integration of the fur trade with the slave trade. The most detailed account of the role of slaves in the Mowachaht community was provided by a white slave, John Jewitt in his memoir of his period of captivity and slavery in 1803-5. The subject has not been addressed in any depth in recent historiography, but detailed study of slavery along the whole of the Northwest Pacific coast was carried out by Donald Mitchell in the early 1980s, and later in a significant sociological historical study by Leland Donald in the mid 1990s. More recent work by Yvonne Hajda in 2005 focuses on the Columbia River area further south. This work is drawn on in Joshua Reid's recent *The Sea is my Country : the Maritime World of the Makahs*.(2015).

Reid sums up, for the group he studies, the Makah of Cape Flattery, that slaves made up 20-40% of a village's population at many places along the North West Pacific. Slave status was hereditary; slaves were valuable property and status items, and high-status Makahs kept many slaves. They were key traders in the regional slave trade.

By the early nineteenth century the Makahs 'provided many slaves, finest sea otter skins, quantities of oil, whale sinew, salal cakes, ornamented canoes, 'hai-kwuh' or dentalia shells used as currency, red ocher, elk skins and mica to neighboring peoples'.(Reid, p. 36)

Origins and Definitions of Slavery on the North West Pacific

Leland Donald's study draws on archaeology, linguistics, European reports including Hudson's Bay Company records, and oral histories.

First he sets out the antiquity of slavery. Archaeological records of peoples of the coast date back 15,000 years. They have been grouped by anthropologists as 'complex hunter-gatherers' who relied on slave labour in the process of food production. Archaeological evidence for the period 500 BC to 500 AD demonstrates classic forms of North West cultures: stratification, warfare and the plausible presence of slavery. This presence is indicated by burial location and condition, and physical evidence of skeletons (injuries and individuals showing absence of cultural markings – labrets and head flattening).

Linguistic evidence indicates the strong likelihood of a much earlier practice. The term slave and its meaning appeared in the more than thirty different languages on the coast; among the twenty different Salish languages the key language family divide occurred in the period between 1200 and 400 BC.

European accounts in the eighteenth century indicated that slavery was well-integrated in the various North West cultures all the way up the coast. A summary of a Nootka text referred to events prior to 1785: 'The people of Ucluelet Arm decide they need a river, so as to be able to trap salmon in season. A party is sent out to visit and eat with the neighboring tribes to determine who has the best salmon. They decide on Namint. After two raids, the Namint people give the Ucluelet a woman as a ransom to purchase peace, but both sides continue to plan raids. The Ucluelet strike first, killing all the chiefs and taking slaves. Namint territory and ceremonial rights are apportioned to those who killed the original holders.'

Characteristics of Slavery

Donald sets out the features of this slavery in kin-based societies without state structures:

Slave status was permanent and hereditary; the origin and maintenance of slave status is violent domination; slaves are alienated from their birth communities, and they are dishonoured persons. 'To be alienated from a kin group is the most severe of fates in a kin-based society.' (p. 71)

Slaves were seized by force in war or predatory warfare with the aim of slave-taking. They were also acquired in transactions, both carried out most often against communities in relatively close proximity, but with slaves then traded over long distances from one community to the next, and even in a long-distance direct trade.

There is also evidence of long-distance military expeditions, especially from Tlingit and Haida territory as far as the Salish groups in the Gulf of Georgia and Puget Sound, a distance of 1,000 km. Direct trade could also take place over great distances. Nuuchahnulth peoples from the Nootka Sound area traded slaves to the Makah, the Quileute and the Quinault, who in turn traded them on to the Chinook in the Columbia River area. The Chinook in the Lower Columbia River area recounted to the captain of a British trading vessel in 1795 their slave taking raid to an area that was 150-230 miles upriver followed by ten days paddling on a lake. They killed all the men in the large village on the other side of the lake and took the women and children as slaves back to the Chinook.

Many of the slaves were women and children; female labour was needed in processing and preserving salmon; they did all the menial labour – water and wood gathering, and food foraging and planting, and cooking; they were prostituted to European sailors by their titleholders; male slaves did canoe and housebuilding and fighting with their masters in war; both genders paddled canoes, some of these sea-faring and carrying 40 persons.

Above all, these slaves were part of a system of wealth. A slave became part of a vast pool of valuables that moved from group to group through trade, gift or theft. That wealth was turned into status. (Mitchell, p. 46). Slaves were accumulated and given away at ceremonies and potlatch. They were a high-status commodity. 'High status Makahs kept many slaves' (Reid, p. 10). Via both their labour and their role as capital and status goods, they contributed to their masters' ability to function as elites. In the villages studied in the Columbia River area by Hajda, 47% were slaves in the village by Fort George under Concomly's control; the next greatest in concentration was Kiesno's village with 31% slaves. Both were leading chiefs, and owning slaves bolstered the owner's status. (Hajda, p. 580).

James Douglas's census of indigenous communities interacting with the Hudson's Bay Company in 1853 was compiled from reports of company agents in the 1830s and 1840s. These reports estimated Mohawchaht and Nuu-chah-nulth slavery as comprising c. 25-30% of villages; this was on a par with proportions in the northern part of the region (Donald, p. 19). Among the Mowachaht at Nootka Sound, the chief, Maquinna had c. 50 slaves; other title holders no more than 12. Among the Makah further south in Cape Flattery, one man owned at least 12 slaves; among the Quinault, one titleholder had c. 30, but most held 2 or 3. Further north, among the Haida, two chiefs owned at least between 10 and 12. The typical Coast Salish household was 10-20 persons in mid-nineteenth century; two or three slaves among these made for a significant addition to its productive capacity. (p. 15 of 15)

Slave Transactions

Slaves and the Fur Trade

The long existence of the slave trade does not mean that it did not change over time, and after encounter, the trade became closely entangled with the fur trade. Prices of slaves that appear in European records in the early nineteenth century were most often quoted in numbers of furs or blankets.

The sea otter furs so avidly demanded by Euro-American traders at Nootka Sound to feed a trade to China brought nearly three hundred ships to the coast in the last twenty years of the eighteenth century. The sea otters around Nootka Sound, the main stopping off point into the mid 1790s, were rapidly depleted. The Mowachaht peoples were well-placed geographically to trade with Europeans, but soon lacked the quantities of their vital trade good. They turned to an intermediate trade for the furs with groups further along the coast; a vital trade good in exchange for additional furs was slaves. The local trade networks for slaves intensified in the early nineteenth century. As Donald argues, 'only high level of external demand for furs could have supported local trade networks on anything like the nineteenth-century scale'. (Donald, p. 228).

Certainly the maritime fur trade intensified the slave trade; by the time of the land-based fur trade era, the slave trade was significant and reliant on native middlemen. The founding of trading forts was one major factor. These brought many diverse groups of indigenous peoples to central meeting points. Hajda argues, 'the area in which trading posts were built, from the mouth of the Columbia well into Alaska, coincides with the area in which the strictest form of dependent labour – slavery – prevailed.' (Hajda, p. 583). Trading posts at Astoria in 1811 and Fort Vancouver in 1825 provided another major factor increasing the north-south direction of the slave trade. Hajda asks: 'the Euro-American trade stimulated trade and competition for wealth among Indians; did it also make slavery more restrictive?' (p. 583)

On the north of the coast in Tlingit territory, Hudson's Bay Company records from 1840 provide detailed evidence and European perception of the slave trade in 1840. The records from 1840 complained of the competition of its own agents for furs with indigenous slave traders. In James Douglas's words:

'the species of property most highly prized among the natives of Tako [Takyu Tlingit] is that of slaves, which in fact constitutes their measure of wealth...[S]laves being through this national perversion of

sentiment, the most saleable commodity here, the native pedlars, come from as far south as Kygarnie [Kaigani Haida] with their human assortments and readily obtain from 18 to 20 skins a head for them. The greater number of these slaves are captives made in war, and many predatory excursions are undertaken not to avenge international aggressions, but simply with a sordid view to the profits that may arise from the sale of the captives taken.

This detestable traffic, and the evils it gives rise to, are subjects of deep regret to us, and we know of no remedy within our power, as we would use it were it only for the sake of our own interest, which is thereby seriously affected, as the Tako [Taku Tlingit] skins are traded before our very eyes and carried off from our very door, by means of a description of property that we cannot compete in.' . (Donald, p. 226)

The Hudson Bay Company competed with the slave traders for the furs they sought.

What was the source of the native demand for slaves? Donald argues this was explained not by local demand, nor even by competition for furs amongst Europeans and Americans. A further significant factor was a strong native demand for slaves external to the coast. By the nineteenth century, with the extension of the land-based fur trade in the region, the key source of furs for maritime groups were communities further inland; these groups, in turn wanted slaves. There was a great demand by 'Inland Indians' who traded with the Stikine and who were their principal source of furs – Taku probably trades slaves to the Inland Tlingit, so did Chilkat to the Southern Tutchone.' (Donald, p.228)

European impact affected the slave trade in other ways. By the 1830s the impact of disease and population decline in many communities further intensified the demand for slaves. The trading posts and the Hudson's Bay Company generated their own food demands. Reid reports that by the early 1850s Makah slaves were raising more than a hundred tons of potatoes annually from seed from the HBC. The Makah consumed some and traded the rest to company posts and passing vessels. (Reid, p. 113).

Economic Impact

Slave costs

Leland Donald found 146 records giving details of an exchange rate for furs. Most of his data falls between the 1820s and 1840s. He provides sets of examples of exchange for furs, for coppers and for prestige foreign and ceremonial goods. The records for furs indicate an exchange of between 15 and 25 beaverskins for a slave in the 1820s. One copper in 1840 exchanged for on average 8-10 slaves. Wide varieties of other goods were exchanged: for example five slaves for a cape with dentalia, three for an iron hammer, five for a copper labret. The level of these exchanges varied up the coast.

Donald argues that the number of slaves in many North West Coast communities was large enough to have a considerable impact on those communities, and on the economic, social and political circumstances of their owners. He concludes that North West Coast communities in early parts of the nineteenth century did have enough slaves relative to their size to merit them as large-scale slave systems.

We can also look at the scale of the trade in relation to the returns of the Hudson's Bay Company. Trading posts in the northern Northwest Coast, the area north of Vancouver Island traded the equivalent of 7,251 beaver skins in 1840; this was also equivalent to 403 slaves. The HBC census at this time estimated an indigenous population of c. 50,000; by a conservative estimate 5% (2,500) were slaves. If only 10% of these slaves changed hands for furs, value of the furs involved represented well over half the 1840 fur returns of the HBC. (Donald, pp. 226-8).

Changes over Time

We can investigate changing European perceptions of indigenous slavery between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. One avenue to investigate is the approach taken to the taking of indigenous vs. non-native slaves. The Spanish during the 1780s bought a number of children from the Mowachaht in Nootka Sound; these were clearly slave children. They believed the Mowachaht practiced cannibalism, and buying these children saved them from death, and sent them to religious training in Mexico. There are also some cases of Euro-American ships buying indigenous slaves to trade further along the coast, or of giving passage to indigenous slave traders to do so. There are a number of accounts of non-native slaves taken by various indigenous groups along the coast. Special efforts were made to rescue these 'white' captive slaves. John Jewitt's captivity narrative of 1803-5 became one of the classic captivity narratives later sold on the East Coast. There were later accounts from 1830s and 1840s of Hudson's Bay Company attempts to rescue non-native slaves from the Makah; they had to adhere to indigenous protocols and buy these slaves; among these were three Japanese slaves caught in 1833 from a junk that had sailed off course; they were bought from the Makah. (Reid, p. 104).

American attitudes to the indigenous slave trade divided on racial lines. By the 1850s Congress had established Washington as an antislavery territory. Euro-Americans depicted Northwest Coast Indian slavery as a backward institution that should be prohibited. The Treaty of Neah Bay 1855 ordered the Makahs to free all slaves and not acquire any more; this reflected concerns over the expansion of slavery in the US West. But the real fears were over indigenous peoples enslaving non-natives. The treaty commissioners in Neah Bay made few efforts at ending Makah slavery of other indigenous peoples, and during mid nineteenth century Neah Bay continued to be a centre of the indigenous slave trade. (Reid, p. 134). Slavery on the North West Pacific coast continued into the late 1880s. (Donald, p. 10).

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