

Art and Awe in Secret Societies: A Case Study of the Petroglyph Site at Thorsen Creek, British Columbia

Abstract

The origin of art has been an enduring issue in archaeology since the nineteenth century with many contending theories. While we are not concerned here with the origins of simple image-making (images consisting of patterned scratches or minimal representations), we would like to propose that one important reason for the elaboration and widespread use of more labor intensive and complex images--especially those requiring considerable time, effort, and training--may be the need for impressive images by traditional secret societies. We document such elaborations ethnographically and point out the inherent reasons for investing in them by secret societies. Beginning with complex hunter/gatherers, secret societies had the motivations, the resources, and the psychological insights to develop sophisticated art and architecture, resulting in some of the most impressive displays in prehistory. We use the remarkable petroglyph site of Thorsen Creek in British Columbia as a prime case study.

Keywords: art, awe, prehistory, secret societies, Northwest Coast, petroglyphs

"The prestige of the [Kusiut] organization depends upon the ability of its members to inspire awe" (McIlwraith 1948:11:10).

"Near every village is a place where the chiefs hold such meetings [i.e., 'for the discussion of matters connected with the winter ceremonial. Such a meeting is always called when a new member is to be initiated into the Kusiut society.'] All the inhabitants know the general locality, but there is such dread of the supernatural powers possessed by members of the Kusiut society that none would dare go there. The meeting place of the Qomqo'ts [a village in the lower Bella Coola valley] chiefs is on a ledge of rock jutting out over a waterfall about a quarter of a mile from the village. The stream winds down a narrow cleft of the mountain side, screened by dense vegetation, and suddenly falls into

a cauldron, so hemmed in by cliffs that no sunlight can enter. The ledge is immediately above the brink of the falls, one of the most awe-inspiring places imaginable. The meeting places of other villages lack such natural settings, though all are at the bases of cliffs, or near some easily distinguished feature. Some of them are decorated with rude carvings, pecked into the stone. The meaning of the designs is not known to any of the present inhabitants. Some of them were made, long ago, by chiefs when they were composing tunes; they picked out the rock in time to the music forming in their minds. Others were mere memorials of certain events. If a chief gave an important ceremony, he, or one of his friends, carved a figure, perhaps that of a man, perhaps of some animal connected with the rite, to recall the occasion. No carvings have

been made within the life-time of any Bella Coola.” (McIlwraith 1948:l:177-8).

Introduction and theoretical framework

The origin and role of art has been widely debated over the last century. Explanations range from art for art’s sake (Pelegrin 2021), to new symbolic cognitive abilities of modern humans (Stringer 2002; Stringer and Gamble 1993, Mithen 1996, Wynne and Coolidge 2004), to hunting magic (Breuil 1952), to communicating agency, social values and social positions in society (Raphael 1945, Gell 1998) including status displays and totemic representations (Guy 2017), to shaman’s records of altered states and visions (Lommel 1967; Clottes and Lewis-Williams 1998). We would like to suggest that traditional secret societies may have played an important, perhaps critical, role in the development of elaborate art for display purposes. We base our investigation of this topic on the comparative documentation of the existing ethnographic literature on secret societies as well as on our own documentation of a well-known secret society meeting location near Bella Coola, British Columbia.

Public and more exclusive displays are ethnographically important for secret societies in order to convey to their members, and to others, the reality of their claims to supernatural contacts (or metaphysical concepts) and to display their abilities to produce attractive, even stunning, awe-inducing displays that would impress and attract people in supernaturally and politically competitive environments. Our focus is not on the beginning of image making, but on the elaboration of images into what have been recognized as more sophisticated art traditions.

In the context of secret societies and their institutional goals of both controlling and changing broader society, it is fruitful to consider the work of one scholar in particular, the anthropologist Alfred Gell, who wrote about art and agency in society. This obviously does not mean that we support all aspects of his theoretical framework

(see, for example; Lewis-Williams 2002; Osborne & Tanner 2007, Ling & Cornell 2010; Gardner 2021, and Shelach-Lavi 2023 for critical viewpoints). Gell argued against the conventional art historical perspectives that focused on symbolic meaning and aesthetic perceptions. In its place Gell wished to stress agency, causation, result, and transformation. Traditional art is, according to Gell, a ‘system of action intended to change the world’, and should not be looked at merely in terms of coded symbolic propositions (Gell 1998:6). He further argued that humans use artefacts and images as a kind of extended agency--in his terms ‘secondary agents’--and through these are able to realize their goals (Ling & Cornell 2010). Gell gives several examples of how features which have been interpreted by means of aesthetic perceptions as merely ‘religious’ or ‘aesthetic’ symbols actually operated as active social symbols (Ling & Cornell 2010). For example, this can be seen in the carvings on the canoe prows of the Trobriand Islands, which had a function far beyond their aesthetic appeal or symbolic meaning. The carvings on these war canoes worked actively as ‘secondary agents’ in the psychological warfare of the competitive kula exchange relationships.

“Overcome with awe at the magical powers inferred to be at the disposal of the canoe-owner by virtue of the captivating power of the prow-decoration, the viewers of such imagery were expected to lose hold of normal wits, and trade their kula-shells at less than their true value (Osborne & Tanner 2007: 3).” Note the emphasis on the intention of creating ‘awe,’ which McIlwraith also emphasized for the Bella Coola secret societies.

Likewise, according to Gell (1998: 6), the depictions of anthropomorphic beings on the shields used by hoplite warriors, traditionally seen as passive symbolic or aesthetic representation, rather worked as “active secondary agents in frightening the opponent in battle.” The alteration, transformation, and transition of social situations are what Gell emphasizes in traditional art, and this fits well with the general aims of secret society goals of controlling social

power using a number of effective strategies including displays of: supernatural battles, putative supernatural powers, inducing altered states in individuals with claims of possessions by spirits, profane powers, human sacrifices, rituals, and, of central importance here, art.

Ling and Cornell (2010), as well as Chacon et al. (2020) have used Gell's concept of "secondary agents" in the analysis of Bronze Age Scandinavian Rock art and argued that the rock art could have served to accentuate and manifest the agency of special sodalities in Bronze Age Scandinavia that were involved in maritime long-distance trade, travel, and warfare. Chacon et al. (2020) further propose that rock art depictions of warriors represent individuals engaging in activities and rituals conducted by secret societies. These warrior images are often accompanied by depictions of warriors in large ships, wearing ritual gear especially with bird-like attributes, masks, and other exotic items characteristic of secret societies (Chacon et al 2020).

How secret societies employ art

In this article, we examine the use of art in ethnographic secret societies and suggest several similar prehistoric cases that lend themselves to an interpretation in this vein. In particular, we provide details about the Thorsen Creek rock art site in British Columbia (Canada). This is possibly the best

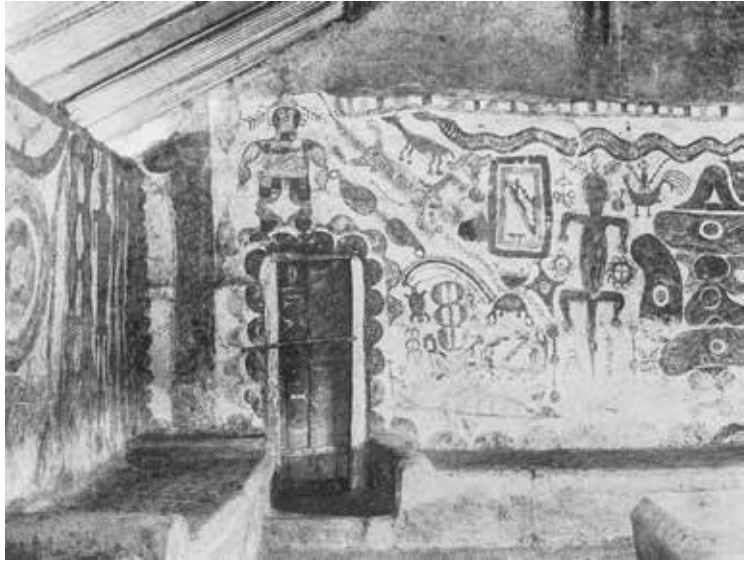
ethnographically documented rock art site associated with traditional hunter/gatherer secret societies.

A survey of ethnographic secret societies by Hayden (2018) has documented the use of elaborate, often sophisticated, specialist art associated with the meeting places of secret societies. Many of the basic symbols and motifs, sometimes abstracted, were typically spread publically throughout communities in many contexts in order to inculcate secret society concepts and ideology in community members, thereby increasing support for, or acquiescence to, secret societies and their activities. Their spiritually potent motifs could be used to decorate houses, utensils, special locations, mortuary facilities, and children's training locations. While not all secret societies developed elaborate art (especially the poorer and less successful startup secret societies), elaborate art seems to have typified the most successful and most powerful secret societies. A brief sampling of elaborated art include: the meeting structures of secret societies in Africa which were often lavishly decorated (Fig. 1 --Talbot 1912:249, 264); builders of the Tambaran structures of the Arapesh and other groups in the Papuan Gulf region who competed with each other to make the structures as tall and elaborate as possible with abundant art inside and outside serving as "secondary agents" (Fig. 2--Tuzin 1980); the exteriors and interiors of secret society meeting houses in Vanuatu



Fig. 1a. Drawing of an Igbo secret society ritual house near Abijang, Nigeria (Talbot 1912:216). Note the basal platform and elaborately decorated walls.

Fig. 1b. The interior of an Egbo secret society house at Akangba, Nigeria (Talbot 1912:249). Note the plastered benches and power animals or figures painted on the walls.



which were often elaborately carved (Fig. 3) and were sometimes accompanied by

megalithic constructions (Speiser 1996); the caves used by secret societies in Malekula

Fig. 2. Below: An illustration of the size and general architecture of the Tambaran secret society spirit house of the New Guinea Arapesh, almost cathedral-like in scale and construction. Right: Detail of the elaborately decorated front of one of the Tambaran spirit houses (Tuzin 1980:184,187).

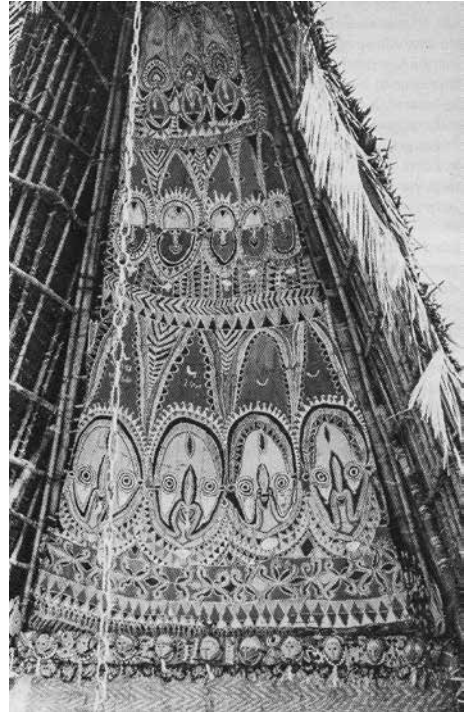
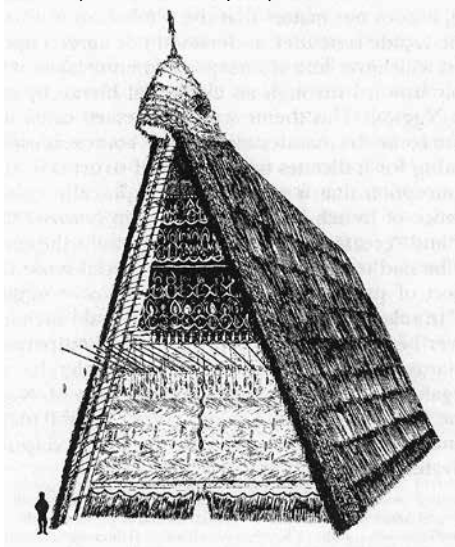




Fig. 3. Above: A men's clubhouse/secret society house on Ambrym Island with its associated dancing ground showing the impressive decorated wood "gongs" or drums used in rituals (Speiser 1923:Plate 97.3). Making and carving such drums would have been a major undertaking, especially with the artistic elaboration. Below: The exterior of a men's clubhouse/secret society house on Venua Leva Island. Note the elaborated architecture and decor: the stone wall or platform, the plaited wall, and the carved posts representing stylized pig jaws (Speiser 1923:Plate 104.5).



(Vanuatu) which were decorated with petroglyphs (Wilson et al. 2000; Chris Ballard in Hayden 2018:230); the secret society kivas in the American Southwest which were sometimes elaborately decorated (Fig. 4 Stevenson 1894); a cave which was used for secret society rituals on Gilford Island, British Columbia and decorated with pictographs of animals (Fig. 5 Judith Williams in Hayden 2018:66); the well-known, highly sophisticated Northwest Coast masks which were exclusively carved for secret society rituals, as well as the animal motifs on poles and portable items that represented inherited privileges and prerogatives central to secret society memberships; and the secluded open air meeting places of secret societies near Bella Coola which were elaborately decorated with petroglyphs (Fig. 6--McIlwraith 1948:1; Gould 1997).

It is especially noteworthy that Speiser observed that art was very elaborated in the parts of Vanuatu where there were secret societies, primarily the *suque*, with their basic motifs pervasively appearing in a wide variety of utilitarian contexts. In contrast, on islands where secret societies were absent, art was almost non-existent. As Speiser (1996:373) described it:

"The *suque* has had a very pronounced effect on all native artistic expression...the



Fig. 4. The ceremonial chamber and altar of the Zuni Thle'wekwe (Wood) secret society. Note the power animals painted on the plastered walls and the numerous carvings and textiles displaying ritual motifs (Stevenson 2004:Pl. CVIII).

symbols of the *suque* are used on almost every utensil which is decorated in any way. They are depictions of those things figuring most prominently in the *suque*, namely the ghosts of ancestors as human faces or human figures, the pig mandible or tusk alone, and also the bird and shark. These are all motifs which have become symbols the native often works with although ignorant of their meanings; they are applied to all utensils in endless new variations and, of course, serve not merely as decoration but



primarily as amulets. They represent the mana which should pass into the utensil and indirectly into its owner...

"Even though the *suque* alone is not strictly responsible for the origination of decorative and pictorial art, it has undoubtedly given a great impetus to the development of the arts--witness the fact that the arts are practised most assiduously in those places where the *suque* is most fully developed. *There is almost no art in the southern islands, where the suque is unknown...* and it is quite certain that if the *suque* had penetrated as far as those islands, it would certainly have elicited some artistic expression." (emphasis added)

Tuzin (1980:25, 203) made similar observations about the pervasiveness of secret society attribution of ritual symbolism to a wide range of material objects. He notes: "the Tambaran [secret society] seemingly delights in seeking out mundane objects and activities and insinuating itself into them, steadily enriching itself by converting the base metal of everyday life into the gold of cultural value." And, like Speiser, he attributes the diffusion of art styles over large areas to the participation of ritual "guests" from other villages in secret society rituals of host villages (Tuzin 1980:198).

These observations together with the above occurrences encourage us to propose that a causal link between secret societies and art production seems likely as at least one route in the development of art. Indeed, the idea that it was evolutionary developments of cognition that spurred humans to produce symbolic art c. 35,000 years ago is difficult to reconcile with the facts that not all anatomically modern populations produced art (e.g., the Hadza [Woodburn 1966], the historic Tasmanians, and many archaeological cultures over the last 35,000 years that left little or no art--

Fig. 5. One of the painted animals on the walls of the Cave of Animals in the Broughton Archipelago, reminiscent of some Upper Paleolithic painted animals in caves. According to informants who were initiated into the Hamatsa society in this cave, the cave was also a repository of masks for the society. (Photo and information courtesy of Judith Williams).



Fig. 6. Panel 31-O at Thorsen Creek showing the density and elaborateness of images on main display panels adjacent to a small pond of water. Note the possible solar image in the upper right. (Photo by J.Ling).

much less, sophisticated art. Moreover, biological changes in cognition fail to explain why the Upper Paleolithic outpouring of sophisticated art virtually disappeared from “vast parts” of Europe at the end of the Ice Age when the grass savannas with their dense populations of herbivores were replaced by forests (Aujoulat and Ferulio 2011:101). Other factors affecting the production of art must have been important from culture to culture. Secret societies provide one plausible, differentially occurring factor that might explain a significant amount of this variability between cultures. Looking at the ethnographic record from this perspective may provide important clues and insights into the development or elaboration of art in a number of prehistoric cases, such as the Upper Paleolithic painted caves in Europe (Hayden 2020) and the Bronze Age petroglyphs in Scandinavia (Ling 2014). In order to discuss this possibility in greater detail, it will first be necessary to outline key features of secret societies

since archaeologists generally have not dealt with these organizations in their modeling of the prehistoric past.

What Are Secret Societies?

Secret societies can be defined as: an association with internal ranks in which membership, especially in upper ranks is exclusive, voluntary, and associated with access to secret knowledge, usually about supernatural powers, and usually involving large wealth transfers for initiation and advancement (Hayden 2018:8). To summarize the conclusions from Hayden’s comparative analysis of secret societies, these organizations constituted a major focus of anthropological study from the time of Franz Boas until the mid-twentieth century when scholarly interest in them began to wane. One of their critical features was their widespread, but not universal, occurrence in pre-Industrial societies including: the complex hunter/gatherer societies of California and the

Northwest Coast as well as the agricultural societies of Melanesia and Africa. Secret societies do not occur among generalized foragers, but only appear to develop with more complex hunter/gatherer cultures and continue to occur in various ways in tandem with increasing cultural complexity.

Many people assume that the epithet of "secret society" implies that the existence and membership of these societies was secret. However, this is far from the case for pre-Industrial societies. Membership was widely known and the societies typically put on public displays to attract members and to demonstrate the validity of their claims to supernatural powers. These public--and private--ritual displays of their supernatural powers involved stage magic, mimed contests of power, and real induced altered states. The secret was the purported knowledge of how to contact supernatural forces and exercise power.

A key distinguishing trait of secret societies is the formation of an exclusive "ingroup." (Chacon et al 2020). An ingroup refers to "[a]ny group to which an individual belongs; these can be based on chosen or unchosen characteristics..." 2019:271 (Heinzen and Goodfriend). According to social psychology studies, ingroup members tend to discriminate in favor of their own ingroup and are prone to believe in the presence of similarities among fellow ingroup members (Hagtvedt and Johnson 2018). These sociopsychological dynamics operating within ingroups--such as battle units (Raffield et al. 2016:37) and secret societies-- greatly enhance the ability to coordinate group efforts in an effective manner, creating significant advantages for such groups in any competitive context, and certainly there was often considerable competition for dominance and members between and within secret societies.

Typically, wealth is critical for initiation or advancement and thus secret societies only existed in highly productive environments where significant surpluses and wealth inequalities also existed in communities (e.g., Bean and Vane 1978:663; Kroeber 1932:402,412,418). In view of this feature, Hayden (2018) has argued that

secret societies were created by ambitious individuals in order to concentrate wealth and power in their own hands and extend control beyond kinship groups and communities. As a result, successful secret society members were primarily drawn from the most wealthy and politically important people in various kinship groups within communities or regions. The organizations frequently included chiefs who effectively made all important political decisions within the context of secret societies. High ranks in secret societies conferred considerable material and political benefits including the abundant proceeds from new initiations. Thus, competition for new members and especially for high positions was often intense and ruthless. Rather than increasing social solidarity in communities (as most archaeologists assume is the function of rituals and religion), secret societies created greater divisions between the initiated and uninitiated, the wealthy and the poor, the powerful and the weak.

It is our contention that the creation of impressive art, and its use as secondary agents (Ling & Cornell 2010, Gell 1998) in many sacred and profane contexts, was an integral part of these secret society strategies to enhance their social power and agency in the broader society, i.e., by using art to change, transform, and alter particular social situations. Impressive art displays and the proliferation of its motifs served:

- 1) to impress people with the societies' pervasive profane power and resources that enabled them to create such impressive art, the goal of which was to attract members and deter contrary claims or critical comments;

- 2) to put their ideological stamp and social agency on a wide range of objects in the community so that secret society importance, ideology¹, and dominance pervaded all aspects of life; this art helped to transform and integrate supernatural and sacred concepts into both rituals and daily life that were central to the ideologies promulgated by secret societies;

- 3) to create a new sense of shared social identity (involving members from multiple kin groups, villages, and often ethnic

groups) in part by means of the proliferation of secret society motifs and symbols in everyday contexts, the goal of creating this social identity being to increase cooperation in expanded social groups and thus to reduce resistance to secret society demands for support, labor, and resources (Schortman et al 2001); and

4) using awe-inspiring art to help induce altered states of consciousness in members and spectators alike, i.e., to create a numinous atmosphere of awe that provided credibility to claims of supernatural powers via the emotions that people experienced when observing the art.

As noted by others, awe helps to create contexts outside normal states of consciousness and facilitates experiences of liminal states, thus making it feel as though viewers are in contact with the supernatural and rendering claims of abilities to contact the supernatural more credible. As Margaret Stott (1975:35) phrased it for the Bella Coola secret society: "The importance of the *Kusiut* society depended on the continued belief of the uninitiated in the supernatural powers of the members. This in turn depended on the ability of the *Kuku-siut* to inspire awe." This echoes the earlier observation by McLlwraith (1948:II:10) to the effect that: "The prestige of the [*Kusiut*] organization depends upon the ability of its members to inspire awe."

According to Keltner (2016), "Awe is the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your understanding of the world." Why would secret society leaders seek to foment feelings of awe among members and non-members? The answer is because "awe binds people to social collectives and enables them to act in more collaborative ways..." (Keltner 2016). Thus, we argue that the uninitiated, as well as the initiated, when in the emotionally charged emotional state of awe, were highly amenable to the demands and ideological precepts of secret society leaders. This reasoning is based on psychological research findings showing that experiencing awe "leads people to cooperate, share resources, and sacrifice for others,..." (Keltner 2016--see also Bai et al. 2017; Prade and Sa-

rogrou 2016). Referring to the effect of Arah-pesh initiates "seeing for the first time the master works of an artistic tradition," Tuzin (1980:238-9) remarked that these "symbols of supreme importance excite feelings of transcendence that signify and subjectively verify the presence of something preternaturally higher."

We suggest that this same logic involving the effects of awe, when combined with substantial self-interested political and material benefits, underlay the construction of most of the world's impressive religious centers, including gothic cathedrals, massive pyramids, or complex megaliths. Importantly, it also explains why inordinate amounts of resources were expended to create them. These same dynamics plausibly explain the choices of natural 'power locations' for rituals by secret societies in hunting/gathering cultures with fewer resources available for building elaborate structures. That is, secret societies among hunter/gatherers often used natural places for rituals such as caves, waterfalls, mountain tops, and viewpoints that inspire feelings of awe or similar emotional states. Importantly, in all situations, secret societies typically controlled, to varying degrees, far greater amounts of wealth and resources than any individual or kin group could have amassed. They therefore had not only the motivation but also the material means with which to underwrite the creation of elaborate sophisticated art forms via payments to artists for the creation of masks, sculptures, elaborate paintings, and impressive structures.

At Thorsen Creek, the deep pecking of many of the petroglyphs (typically about one cm into the rock face) required a substantial amount of time and effort, much more so than painting on rocks. Some of the more elaborate motifs such as the solarized face in Panel 30 (discussed below) must have taken many hours, if not days, of constant pecking--perhaps comparable to the investments in sculpting rock faces in the Upper Paleolithic like the full-sized animals in high relief at Cap Blanc. Creating such panels thus constituted major investments that would not be expected to have

been expended without strong motivation or considerable compensation.

Handsome recompense for artists (such as on the Northwest Coast per Mauzé 2021, also Tuzin 1980:174,194-202) would logically lead to competition between prospective artists and the development of skills through practice, training, and apprenticeships as exemplified by the thousands of engraved “plaquettes” in the French Upper Paleolithic, together with paint formulas, scaffolding erected in caves, and full scale carved reliefs of animals in rock faces (Guy 2017). Tuzin (1980:174), in particular, describes the overseeing by master artists of the ritual art produced by untrained painters and sculptors, as well as the authority and prerogatives that the status of master artist conferred. Such training, in turn, could have led to the development and stylistic standardization of sophisticated art forms like those of the Northwest Coast, Scandinavian Bronze Age rock art, New Guinea spirit houses, and Upper Paleolithic caves. It is above all, the development of training and apprenticeships that we refer to as “specialization,” rather than any part or full-time reliance on art for livelihoods.

Aggrandizers

Underlying the structural dynamics of secret societies is the premise that it was the most ambitious individuals in communities who were motivated to develop secret society organizations in order to acquire benefits for themselves. Such individuals actively seek ways to promote their own self-interests and benefits, often to the detriment of others. We call these individuals, “aggrandizers,” and we posit that they appear in all large populations--albeit at low frequencies--as part of normal human variability (Hayden 2020b). Aggrandizers do not represent the general human condition, but rather constitute an extreme end of a behavioral spectrum that extends from selfless altruism to the extreme pursuit of self-interests, extending even into sociopathic expressions. Under conditions of limited and fluctuating resources, such individuals are kept on a tight leash with obligate

sharing of food resources and minimal private ownership or control (Wiessner 1996, Boehm 2001). However, when Mesolithic technologies--and, in some contexts, Upper Paleolithic innovations--in especially favorable locations began to make the production of surpluses possible, it can be inferred that restraints were eased, claims to private property were recognized, and claims of debt relationships tolerated. Thus, surplus foods could be used in various ways for the benefit of those who wanted to produce them. We have concluded that ambitious individuals then began to devise strategies to use surpluses to motivate people to produce more and to enter into debts for putative benefits (Hayden 2018).

A key point is that, initially, aggrandizers were only able to develop these strategies in the context of complex hunter/gather societies capable of producing surpluses such as typified the American Northwest and favored localities in the Upper Paleolithic and Mesolithic. We think that secret societies constituted one of the main strategies developed to attain self-interested ends as part of a suite of surplus-based strategies including: feasts, bride prices, prestige goods, elaborate funerals, and the creation of elite/proto-elite alliances and/or regional networks (see also Chacon et al. 2020; Ling et al. 2018, 2020, 2022). We think that major social changes or innovations, especially those that became widespread and long-lived, must have been promoted by some members of communities and must be viewed as benefitting those who promoted them.

A key question, then, that we have asked in seeking to understand these developments was: Who benefitted from these social changes (e.g., the costly feasting, bride prices, costly funerals, and costly memberships in secret societies?). The emergence of these features does not happen by itself, and they clearly benefitted the wealthy more than the poor. We suggest that aggrandizers actively promoted social and ideological changes to have their strategies accepted--or tolerated--in their communities. They proffered benefits to lure some people into binding obligations

(much as wily marketers and conmen do in Industrial cultures); they used kinship leverage, oratory, the utterance of supernatural threats; and in the case of secret societies they judiciously used clandestine force or supernaturally sanctioned force. Thus, both the carrot (the “lures”) and the “stick” (the “threats”) were used to obtain acquiescence in the establishment of secret societies and other strategies. While some people were enthusiastic supporters and others could be swayed into acceptance, the diehard skeptics together with the poor and disenfranchised were vulnerable targets for secret society threats and violence.

Once a critical mass of participants was obtained for tolerating the new values needed for these strategies to exist, the way was open to using more and more forcible means to obtain acquiescence from the general population for secret society demands, including demands for material or labor support for: rituals, paraphernalia, creating impressive art and architecture, feasts, labor, and more. Demands were often couched in terms of rituals or paraphernalia needed for the protection or well-being of the community, which only the secret society could provide according to their ideology and the putative supernatural powers that they possessed. A prime example was the Northwest Coast ritual demonstration of the destructive and violent behavior of unleashed cannibal spirits which demonstrated to all the dangers for the community. Only the secret societies knew how to control dangerous spirits and anyone who contravened or openly challenged secret society dictates could unleash destructive spirits that could endanger the entire community. This was a justification not only for demanding resources and labor for secret societies, but also for beating or killing challengers (e.g., Butt-Thompson 1929; Harley 1941; McIlwraith 1948; Hayden 2018). Killing was also a demonstration of secret society power. As Drucker (1941:226) observed, “When they heard a [secret society] dance was to be given, the low-rank people all began to weep, for they knew someone would be murdered.” This is hardly a way to create community solidarity using ritual.

This agency-based, aggrandizer view of social change is very different from the communitarian, egalitarian view of culture change where new social features are only adopted when they are for the good of all community members, and adopted only by consensus (see Stanish 2017). Consensus may have been obtained in superficial terms of reluctant acquiescence, but is unlikely to have changed opinions or eliminated the seething factional competition that we have witnessed in virtually all small traditional communities that we are familiar with.

Case Study

Among complex hunter/gatherers, the specific details of meeting locations for secret societies is one of the most under-reported, rare kinds of information in the ethnographic literature. Yet, this is one of the most critical kinds of information needed for identifying such locations archaeologically. Aside from the generic mention of “sweat houses” in California and the mention of a Chumash cave used by secret societies by Hudson and Underhay (1978), there are only two specific localities in the hunter/gatherer ethnographic literature that we know of that are identified as meeting places of secret societies: 1/ the use of a cave on Gilford Island (British Columbia), and 2/ several sites in the Bella Coola region of British Columbia, the most important of which was Thorsen Creek. We were unable to obtain permission to visit the cave on Gilford Island, but we were able to identify, visit, and document the secret society meeting site and rock art at Thorsen Creek in considerable detail (aided by descriptions in McIlwraith 1948). It is worth emphasizing that, aside from one ethnographically documented cave in Southern California used for a Solstice ritual, the ethnographic identification of the Thorsen Creek site as the specific remote meeting place for a local secret society is relatively unique in the hunter/gatherer ethnographic literature and is also unique in terms of the strong local oral traditions about the site that still exist. The site is also unique in the Bella Coola region in terms of the number, density, and elabo-

ration of rock art images, although some comparable concentrations of petroglyphs occur in other regions along the Northwest Coast (e.g., Hill and Hill 1974:123-9, Adams 2003). Despite the importance of Thorsen Creek, no detailed archaeological documentation of the site has ever been published. We thus traveled to this exceptional site as an opportunity to document and obtain as much information about the site as possible (in preparation), and we now use this information to illustrate some of the main points that have been made about secret societies and their use of art.

Thorsen Creek

The Thorsen Creek site (Borden Number FcSq 1) is located in the territory of the *Nuxalk* (formerly Bella Coola) First Nation on the British Columbian Coast in Canada. Thorsen Creek flows into the Bella Coola River about four km upriver from the coastal town of Bella Coola (Fig. 7). The petroglyph site is about 2.5 km from the mouth of the creek, in a location where the creek is deeply incised into the mountains before flowing onto the river floodplain. The petroglyphs are about one km from an old village site (*Tclxtczwt pa ts*) that was probably located on the Bella Coola River in the past but inhabitants may have moved to the historic village site of *Snxlhh* (FcSq

4, about two km from the petroglyphs) as the river changed course over time (Gould 1997:11). While this may not be considered as an extremely remote location, it is nevertheless well removed from the normal ambit of village activities and can be considered relatively remote. Moreover, this distance for secret society meeting places (within one to two kilometers or sometimes only a few hundred meters from a village) seems to be common on the Northwest Coast, and perhaps elsewhere (e.g., Boas 1897:527,582-3). The Thorsen Creek petroglyph site is a locally well-known supernatural repository and rock art site belonging to the ancestral village of *Snxlhh*. Its function as a secret society meeting place is well documented in the local traditions which place this, and other supernatural repositories among the *Nuxalk* villages far into antiquity suggesting that the art forms that proliferated during the ethnographic period arose out of ancient roots of ceremony and oral history.

The petroglyphs are located up the steep tumultuous canyon of Thorsen Creek and the site forms a ledge over a waterfall and rock basin. The petroglyphs are above a steep cliff face that drops down from the north edge of the site to the creek about 25 m below (Fig. 8). On the south, the site is bounded by steep mountain slopes that rise up from the site so that the available space of the narrow terrace varies from only three m (where most of the panels are located) to about 7.5 m, although much of that space is taken up by boulders resulting in predominantly small spaces where people could have gathered to view the petroglyphs (Fig. 9). The panels occur on boulders and bedrock over a 50 m length of the narrow terrace. As the principal ethnographer (McIlwraith 1948) of the Bella Coola area remarked, such meeting places for secret societies inspired awe due to the dramatic cliff setting and the sound of rushing water from below, effects that may have been enhanced by the production of ozone from the creek. One of the sources of ochre used by artists to paint pictographs is reported to be at the head of Thorsen Creek (McIlwraith 1948:II:542). Gould (1997)

Fig. 7. Map of the Bella Coola region showing the location of Thorsen Creek, Tatstquarm, Bella Coola, and other key locations. (Map by Doris Lundy, 1973).





Fig. 8. The Thorsen Creek petroglyph locality from the entrance in the west showing the steep cliff dropping down to Thorsen Creek and the narrowness of the shelf where the petroglyphs are located. (Photo by B. Hayden)

documented the site in detail in her B.A. Honours Thesis.

Uses of the Petroglyph Site

Thomas McIlwraith (1948) wrote the most comprehensive ethnography on the Bella Coola (*Nuxalk*). He does not have a lot to say specifically about Thorsen Creek, but his treatment of the secret societies at Bella Coola is one of the most detailed that exists for secret societies in North America. And what he does say or imply about Thorsen Creek is important and revealing.

At Bella Coola, there were three secret societies still in existence, or recently so, when McIlwraith conducted his field work

from 1922-1924. The Sisaok society was only for chiefs and was the most powerful society. The Kusiut society could be joined by anyone with enough wealth to pay for initiation, and appears to have been the most active society. The A'alk society was apparently open to anyone, but had ceased to function previous to McIlwraith's work, and so little more is known about it other than it was the

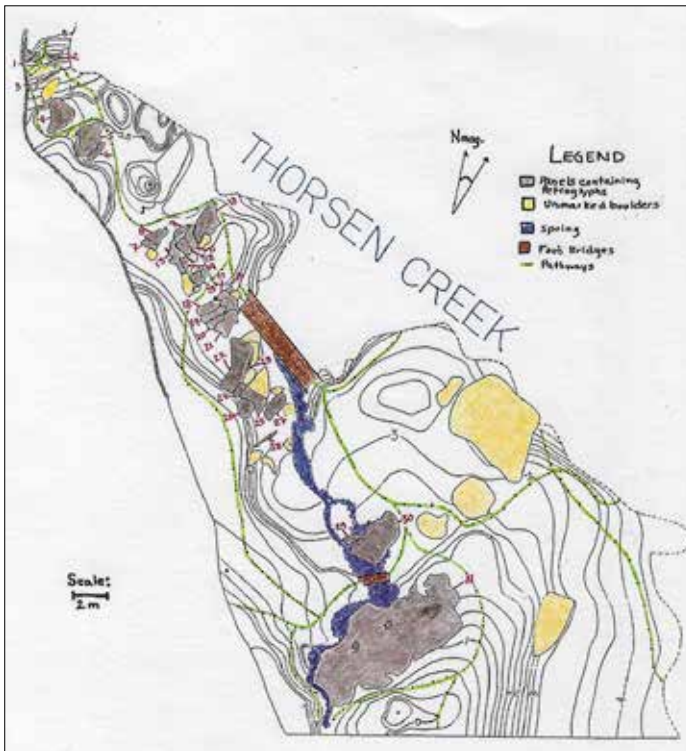


Fig. 9. A map of the area where petroglyphs are located with individually numbered panels. Dotted lines (green) indicate trails. (Map by B. Gould: 1997:Fig. 3).

least important secret society in Bella Coola (McIlwraith 1948:285).

In the oral accounts of meeting places for secret societies, it was Raven who "constructed secluded caves and ledges to serve as meeting-places for chiefs" (McIlwraith 1948:l:91). The opening quotation of this article from McIlwraith summarizes his information about these meeting places, and his description accurately fits Thorsen Creek, although he does not mention it by name, and he might instead have described the very similar Tatstquam Creek site which is also known as a meeting place for secret society officials (see below). The village of *Qomqo'ts* was "the most populous village of the valley" (McIlwraith 1948:l:7), and, we suspect, may have used the Tatstquam Creek site rather than the Thorsen Creek site especially since elsewhere, McIlwraith (*ibid.*) describes *Qomqo'ts* as being the continuation of *Stskiitl*, which he describes as located on the south shore of the Bella Coola river about a quarter mile [0.4 km] from the ocean "and the two in combination formed a row of houses stretching for three-quarters of a mile [1.2 km]." In contrast, Thorsen Creek is described as about four miles [6.4 km] up the Bella Coola River or from the village of Bella Coola (McIlwraith 2003:71). In any case, the Thorsen Creek and Tatstquam sites are so similar in their secluded settings and rock art that there is little question that they represent the same kind of site function, in addition to which Thorsen Creek is universally referred to by the *Nuxalk* themselves, today, as having been a major meeting location for secret societies. Local oral history is strong in this respect. The number and density of petroglyphs at Thorsen Creek is also far greater than any other comparable site in the region, including the now-destroyed Tatstquam petroglyphs.

Thorsen Creek and Tatstquam Creek were not only spectacular, awe-inspiring, secret society meeting places, but they were both located close to the most densely populated parts of the entire *Nuxalk*/Bella Coola territory, and hence, they were associated with the most lucrative areas capable of producing the surpluses upon

which secret societies were predicated. According to McIlwraith (1948) one of the major sources of surplus for the Bella Coola region was the salmon-bearing creeks. In this context it is interesting to note that the two best known secret society sites in Bella Coola were both at significant creeks: Thorsen Creek and Tatstquam Creek with Thorsen Creek being a very productive salmon bearing resource according to the local accounts provided to us.

With abundant resources, a dense local population, awe-inspiring locations, and elaborate art, Thorsen Creek may well have been used for many multi-village, or regional, gatherings and rituals by high ranking secret society members from affiliated village societies. In fact, McIlwraith (1948:l:18,208,211,224; 1948:ll:174,201) states that invitations to secret society events were sent to neighboring villages and to others as far as the Nass River and Alert Bay. Similar practices were recorded for both the Nuuchahnulth and the Kwakwaka'wakw on Vancouver Island (Spradley 1969:83-4,87; Ford 1968:24; Sproat 1987:182). This same pattern is well documented in California, as well, with some locations emerging as regional centers (Kroeber 1925:54-5,260,374-5,388; 1932:259,345; Loeb 1932:128; 1933:146-8,170,178,194; Gamble 2008:196,264). Since, as previously mentioned, the importance of the secret society depended upon its ability to inspire awe and produce wealth, Thorsen Creek would have been a prime candidate for a leading regional secret society gathering location. The remarkable concentration and high quality of petroglyphs at the site, further indicates that this location must have had some kind of special regional importance since comparable concentrations of art are unknown elsewhere in the Bella Coola region.

Nuxalk secret societies are said to have been given to the first inhabitants of the land. If oral tradition is correct, then it could be speculated that the rock art might be as old as 9000 years. However, it is unlikely that the use of the site by secret societies predates 5000 BP since there are few indications of socioeconomic complexity

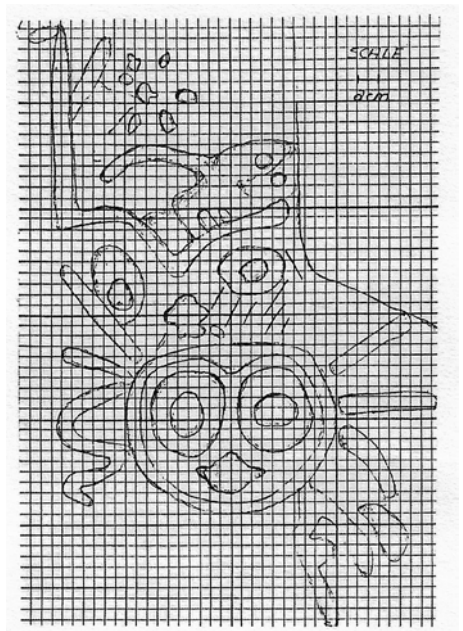
before that date and secret societies do not seem to occur among generalized hunter/gatherers (Hayden 2018). In other regions of the Northwest Coast like the Snuney-muxw (Nanaimo) First Nation region, similar concentrations of rock art do not seem to predate 2500 years BP (Adams 2003:32-40). On the other hand, it is conceivable that a few of the simpler carvings could have been produced by shamans who might have been part of generalized hunter/gatherer communities and therefore some petroglyphs might be earlier. On a less speculative level (Gould 1997:52) provides a relative date for much of the Thorsen Creek rock art of 1750-550 BP based on stylistic comparison to the Late Prehistoric Period. Gould (1997:24) also observed that some of the petroglyphs at Thorsen Creek were historic images carved with metal knives, which together with McIlwraith's statements, seem to indicate ritual use of the site well after the smallpox epidemic of 1862-1863, only a

few generations before McIlwraith worked in the area.

The Images

The dominant motifs of the 144 identifiable images at Thorsen Creek are faces and eyes comprising 127 of the image corpus (Gould 1997:30-31). Such faces may represent ancestors or their spirits who bequeathed their names and powers to their descendants in the secret societies. Both Harlan I. Smith and McIlwraith recorded accounts of important chiefs pounding out petroglyphs while practicing the songs that were presumably associated with their ancestral secret society names (Gould 1997:48). Less common than the faces are depictions of birds, frogs, bear paw prints, a fish, hand prints and stylized zoomorphic beings and several possible anthropomorphized solar heads (Fig. 10)--all of which, in sum, amount to about 10 percent of the total images at the site. Importantly, several facial images resemble mask designs that may represent secret society masks (Fig. 11). It is the simpler faces with only round eyes and mouths

Fig. 10. Below: This figure in Panel 30 may illustrate a solarized head, or, alternatively, may depict an elaborate headdress (Photo by J. Ling). Right: Another possible solarized head is depicted in Panel 31-A (Gould 1997:Fig. 22), and a possible solar image can be seen in Fig. 6 (Photo by J. Ling).



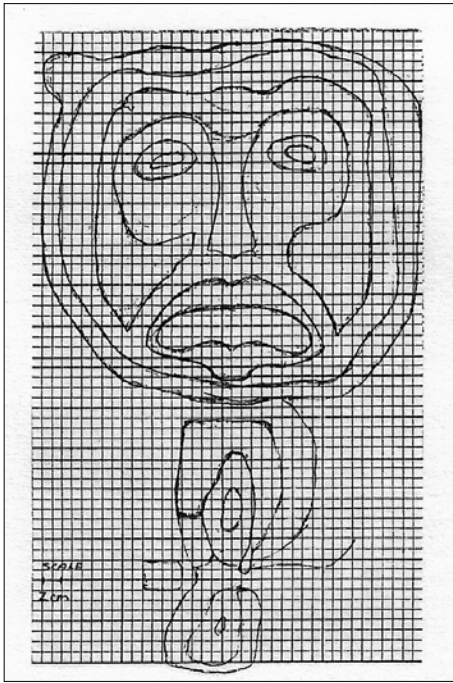


Fig. 11. Panel 31-H illustrating the mask-like style of some of the heads indicating secret society depictions (Gould 1997:Fig. 18).

that probably represent ancestors or helping spirits of secret society members using a generic style (examples in Fig. 6) (ibid. 32,52).

Of particular interest is the orientation of the petroglyphs. They are not generally placed on vertical rock surfaces visible from some distance like displays on billboards. Instead, the images are predominantly located on horizontal or tilted rock surfaces so that viewers need to know where the images are located and to be close to them in order to view them. Interestingly, this is similar to the majority of the Bronze Age rock art images at Tanum, Sweden, which were also carved on horizontal rock outcrops forming the ground surface. This indicates that they were meant to be viewed by a select number of people who knew exactly where the sites were located, and that their socio-symbolic content was linked to the esoterica (whether myth or history)

of the group that was standing at the site (Ling 2004, Chacon et al. 2020). Such orientations are more appropriate for maintaining the secrecy of their locations (similar to the use of caves for making secret hidden images for rituals) rather than displays meant to draw attention from uninitiated or other individuals.

The logic for elaborately decorating locations like Thorsen Creek might be compared to the elaborate decoration of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican which was similarly meant to inspire awe and to create numinous states, but only for the highest ranked members, i.e., the Pope and his retinue, while more public contexts were used to display other art motifs of significance to the Catholic Church. Similarly, the elaborated rock art at Thorsen Creek and at Tanum, together with the esoteric mythology represented by the rock carvings, may have been for viewing only by higher ranking secret society members, or at least those initiated above a certain rank.

Group Sizes

Given the very limited amount of space surrounding the petroglyphs, we suggest that at most, the size of groups standing or sitting in proximity to any one panel would have been 10-20 people. Even today, group sizes of visitors to the site are no larger, and many panels can only be viewed by three or four people at a time, and sometimes only if tightly bunched together. Hayden et al. (1996) found that ethnographically about 2.5 square meters of space were required per individual for most moderate proxemic needs without active movements. Around the densest panels of petroglyphs (Panels 1-28), the largest spaces are only about four square meters in size, with Panels 18-26 only accommodating one or two individuals if people were directly facing an image, or somewhat larger groups if the images were viewed from a linear progression of people. It is only Panels 29-31 that have enough viewing space (about 25 square meters) to accommodate larger groups, perhaps 10-20 people depending on activities and postures. It is interesting that Panels 29-31

are probably the largest and most spectacular petroglyphs at the site, including possible solarized and masked heads, all adjacent to special features consisting of a spring, small stream, and pond. Thus, some panels may have been meant, primarily made, and viewed as individual connections to spirits (as in the accounts of McIlwraith and Smith) while other larger panels may have been meant for viewing by groups and were plausibly meant as the contexts for group rituals. A similar pattern of art meant for viewing by individuals vs. groups has been documented for the Upper Paleolithic painted caves in France (Villeneuve 2008) which we think may also have been created for secret society rituals (Hayden 2020a).

Tatstquam Creek has similar open spaces of about the same size (c.25 square meters) suitable for groups of 10-20 that may have been associated with the petroglyphs there. However, the actual petroglyphs appear to have been located in a more restricted space that seems suitable for only a few people on the basis of Harlan Smith's (1924) description as: "a shelf in the rock wall of the canyon. This is three or four feet wide by something over twenty feet long. On the back of it, and on its floor, are petroglyphs bruised into the rocks by the Bellacoola Indians of long ago...This was a secret meeting place for a certain organization of the Indians." It is difficult to determine in any specific detail what viewing spaces were associated with the petroglyphs since all the images have been destroyed.

If the Thorsen Creek site was used at times for regional gatherings of high ranking secret society members from a number of communities in the general Bella Coola region, it would seem that their number might have been limited to about 20 for the most important rituals. On the other hand, Gould observed that following the trails at the upper end of the petroglyphs, there was a much larger terrace about 20 minutes farther upstream. It is possible that visiting groups from neighboring secret societies included retinues of lower ranking members, family members, servants, children being groomed for memberships, and others who could have been excluded

from the most important rituals, but could have been allowed to camp and take part in minor rituals or socializing at some distance. This pattern of auxiliary people accompanying secret society members was documented for the Midewiwin secret societies of the Ojibway Indians near the North American Great Lakes (Hoffman 1891:187,189,206,231,243), and seems likely to have occurred at least among some other secret societies. However, no archaeological investigations have taken place at the larger upstream terrace of Thorsen Creek.

Oral Histories

With these considerations in mind, it is interesting to relate some of the ideas concerning the petroglyphs as recounted by *Nuxalk* members themselves. Christopher Nelson, a *Nuxalk* member who accompanied us to the Thorsen Creek site, in particular, suggested that there was a specific sequence in the viewing of the petroglyphs as individuals were constrained by the width of the terrace to see most of the images in a specific order. The first clear image viewed in the succession is Panel 4 (Fig. 12), perhaps a frog head sculpted around the top of a boulder in the middle of the trail, almost as a supernatural greeting figure together with the adjacent profusion of images in Panel 5 (Fig. 13). These are followed by the densest concentration of petroglyphs through which one must pass (Panels 18-28), almost as though individuals are confronted by the faces of ancestral spirits watching as people pass by individually in silence, one by one, creating a pronounced effect on individual perceptions and emotions. The end of the sequence is around the pond where Panels 29-31 are located and where individuals could have gathered in a group for rituals, discussions, or other important society affairs. A similar structured sequencing of images has been proposed by Lewis-Williams (2002; Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005:218,266) in terms of progressive images ultimately resulting in an awe-inspired vortex experience in the deeper painted Upper Paleolithic caves in



Fig. 12. Panel 4, one of the first prominent images that people encounter when entering the petroglyph zone of Thorsen Creek. It is situated in the middle of the trail as if to greet those entering the site. (Photo by J. Ling).

France. There, too, the constrained movement through cave passages and the specific sequence of images could be used to help induce progressive levels of numinous states of consciousness. From an archaeological perspective, such a sequenced arrangement of art motifs makes good sense in the context of what we know about the dynamics of secret societies and the inducement of altered states.

It is also significant that Christopher Nelson, told us about a detail from the oral traditions of the area which does not appear in any of the written accounts. That is, that guards were traditionally placed at the trail leading to the petroglyphs in order to stop anyone from entering the sacred site. Guards used to prohibit unauthorized access to ritual locations is also reported for the Nu cha nulth (Atleo 2004:105-116) and was probably a common practice of secret

societies elsewhere, as documented for the Poro in Sierra Leone (Hayden 2018:254). Certainly, many efforts were generally made to prevent people from approaching the sacred meeting and ritual locations of secret societies, most often by promulgating the ideology that the places were spiritually dangerous (as indicated in our opening quote by McIlwraith) and by enforcing the dangerousness of transgressing into those spaces with threats of death, and actually killing some individuals (see Hayden 2018). Such threats and physical use of force appear to have been general features on the Northwest Coast. As Doris Lundy (1974: 314) summarizes the situation: "rock art sites, like those concerned with whaling ritual, or secret societies, would be secretive in nature as well as location; their meaning hidden from the uninitiated" (Lundy 1974:314)." And, like McIlwraith, Adams

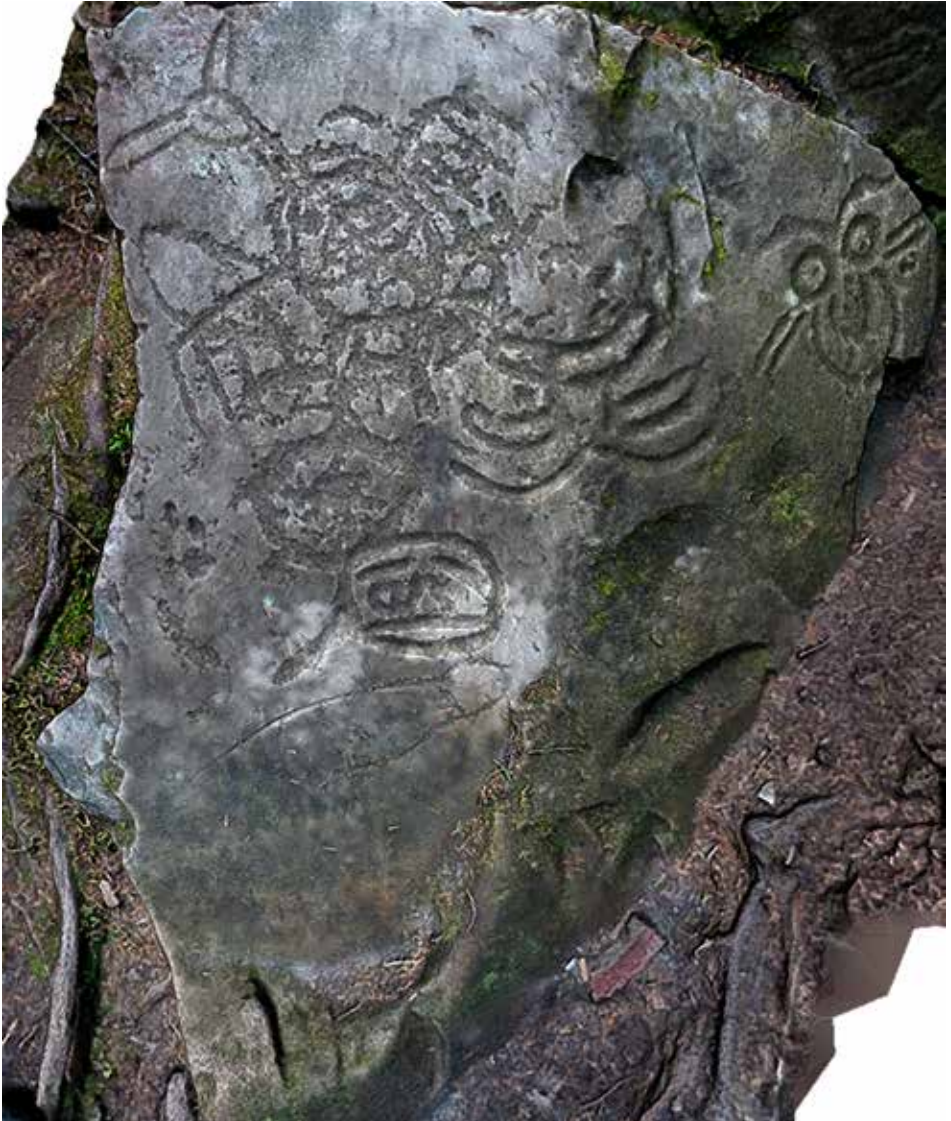


Fig. 13. Panel 5, the second significant panel to be encountered as one enters the Thorsen Creek petroglyph site displaying an initial profusion of images to viewers. (3D photo by Johan Ling and Cecilia Lindhé).

(2003:44), working on Gabriola Island far to the south, found that: "Many Snuneymuxw Elders recall being told not to go near the petroglyph sites as young children--they were places of power, potentially harmful, and they remain as such to this day."

One other account of the making of a petroglyph depicting the face of a powerful spirit was recorded by Boas (1897--Hill and Hill 1974:44,153) on the shore at Fort Rupert where a slave was killed and eaten as part of a *hamatsa* (Cannibal Society) dance.

As reported by Linda Burnard (personal communication), this is a relatively public area and the event was probably witnessed by many uninitiated people, even if at a distance. It was therefore part of the public drama and art produced by the society. The uninitiated public witnesses undoubtedly would recount the dramatic significance of the petroglyph to many others and thus advertise the power of the hamatsa society for many eyes and ears, over many years--including the present day.

The Network

As McIlwraith (1948:1:91) stated, "Near every village is a place where the chiefs hold such meetings." He also made it clear that these sites were part of a network of secret societies and sites in the region (McIlwraith 2003:71). Members of a secret society in one *Nuxalk* village were "accepted as a member in any other one" (McIlwraith 1948:1:18). Serious cases of revealing secret society knowledge at performances in one village could be grounds for punishing raids and attacks by members from other villages (ibid. 192-3). "Marshals" of the *Kusiut* Society cooperated on an inter-village and inter-tribal basis in policing any revelations about the supernatural fictions to the uninitiated, even to the extent of waging war on groups that transgressed those rules (ibid. 18-20). And, leading *Kukusiut* and "fellows" from neighboring villages and towns were also

Fig. 14. A photograph of the petroglyphs at *Tatstquam* Creek before their destruction. (Photo by Harlan Smith c. 1924--B. and R. Hill 1974).



invited to ceremonies in host villages (ibid. 29,174,201).

Thus, there was a network of meeting places for secret society ritual events, undoubtedly varying in size, importance, degree of elaboration, and regional roles. In the *Bella Coola* region, *Thorsen Creek* appears to have been the most important of those sites, although *Tatstquam Creek* may have been second in importance and several other sites have been documented that were probably included in this network.

Tatsquam Creek: While not quite as well known as *Thorsen Creek*, *Tatsquam Falls* ("The Chiefs Seat") is likewise located up a steep canyon where the tumultuous creek tumbles beneath a ledge. The village associated with the Chiefs Seat is *Qomqo ts*. Unfortunately, the rock art has been destroyed to make way for a dam to supply the community with electricity. Fortunately, Harlan Smith (1924) took a photograph of at least one section of the petroglyphs (Fig. 14) and described the site in these terms: "About two miles [3.2 km] south of the town site (of *Bella Coola*) where the flat bottomlands of the valley reach the base of the very steep mountains, a small stream comes out of the mountains from the south, and here is a waterfall of considerable charm. On the west side of this fall, bathed by its spray at certain times, is a shelf in the rock wall of the canyon. This is three or four feet wide by something over twenty feet long." (From Hill and Hill 1974:173). *Tatsquam Falls* has been described in ethnographic accounts as a place where chiefs would go to peck out figures in time to the music they were composing for the winter dances.

Tapaslt and Tsimotl: *Tapaslt* and *Tsimotl* are both small caves also located near creeks on the south side of the valley and these caves are likely related to supernatural repositories. No rock art has yet been reported in these caves but little research has been undertaken.

Nusatsum River: Harlan Smith (1925b:136) reported several petroglyphs on the north side of the *Bella Coola River*, opposite the mouth of the *Nusatsum River* (about 15 km upriver from *Thorsen Creek*). However, the *Hills* (1974:168) were unable

to relocate these images, which may or may not be associated with a regional secret society network.

Big Rock (Alhliqwalh): Much farther up the Bella Coola River valley, is a giant isolated erratic boulder about the size of a tiny home, that is split near the middle: Big Rock (Fig. 15). According to oral traditions related to us, Big Rock was a meeting place for secret society members. It is described as having pictographs which are faint and obscured by soot from a campfire. It is possibly associated with the easternmost *Nuxalk* ancestral village of *Snutte it* meaning place of no falls, about 20 km past the forks of the Atnarko, Talchako, and Bella Coola Rivers. The village is described by McIlwraith (1948:1:10) as having been deserted when the big rock holding the salmon was washed downstream. McIlwraith also links the village of *Snutte it* with *Snxlhh* (on Thorsen Creek) as both regard the sun as

their crest. Downstream from Big Rock is the ancestral village of *Qwliutl* at the forks of Atnarko, Talchako, and Bella Coola Rivers.

Also reported by Harlan Smith within a discussion of Bella Coola villages was mention of "a cave said to contain pictographs and ancient ceremonial paraphernalia, in the valley of the Sowiltz," but he had no opportunity to explore it during his stay (Kidder 1925:596).

Although there were undoubtedly many other such locations, these are the only six (including Thorsen Creek) that we currently have any information on in the Bella Coola region. We saw no artifactual indications of site use at any of these locations, although future excavations might yield some such materials, especially stone tools used for pecking. On the other hand, sacred sites are often devoid of artifacts.

Fig. 15. The Big Rock site in the mid-Bella Coola Valley, reportedly used as a meeting place for secret societies in this locality. (Photo by B. Hayden).





Fig. 16. Above: Chrome Island, British Columbia. Note the size, the steep sides, and the barrenness of the island in relation to the high density of petroglyphs, some of which are shown below. Note also the preponderance of anthropomorph faces in the rubbings of the panels as well as the four rayed, solar-like images. The island appears unsuited for any habitation, but ideally suited as a remote place for secret meetings, secure against any intrusions.

A similar network of petroglyph sites that were situated in relatively remote areas, predominantly within five kilometers of village sites, is reported by Adams (2003) for the Nanaimo region. The similarities of distance from villages, concentrations of petroglyphs on horizontal rock surfaces, and generic facial motifs, suggest a similar use and origin of the sites to the Thorsen Creek example. Somewhat farther afield, Hill and Hill (1974:128-9) documented very high densities of petroglyphs at Chrome Island, a small, isolated, largely barren, steep sided island about 200 meters off the south end of Denman Island (Fig. 16). The steep edges of the island preclude any easy access by boat. The preponderance of anthropomorphic heads together with a few rayed, solar-like images, as well as the remote location and lack of suitable habitation, make this another good candidate for a place where secret society members or high ranks could have met in secrecy, similar to the Rose Island meeting place of a secret society at Port Simpson (George MacDonald, personal communication).

Conclusions

We have seen how rock art and other types of figurative or non-figurative art were central elements in the promulgation of secret society ideologies and recruitment. In the context of secret societies, art became elaborated, widely diffused, publicly displayed, and underwritten with specialist producers on at least three continents (North America, Africa, and Island Southeast Asia), all evolving independently of each other. This indicates that it was the internal dynamics and logic of secret societies that made elaborate art important, as is also indicated by the way art was used in secret societies and our understanding of how and why secret societies were organized.

The art produced by secret societies was meant to impress, to advertise the wealth and power of secret societies, to create feelings of awe, and to help induce numinous experiences. It therefore typically centered on things and concepts pertaining to the supernatural: ancestors, spirits, power animals, mythical beings, and symbolically laden motifs. Masks, too, were frequently

important art forms used in creating awe and transcendental experiences in their wearers and viewers. Basic motifs proliferated in everyday contexts as a means of reinforcing secret society ideologies and control, especially where multiple villages and ethnicities comprised memberships--that is, as a means of promoting ingroup identity in the larger population so that demands for support and resources would be more easily accepted.

While earlier forms of art may have developed for similar reasons by shamans (i.e., to induce numinous states in patients and viewers which could have activated immune systems and self-healing biomechanisms), it is with secret societies which controlled substantial resources and wealth and which had larger memberships than solitary shamans, that the development of art really seems to have taken off. We propose that this development first emerged in the Upper Paleolithic of Europe and that the painted caves of that period with specialized artists reflects one of the first developments of art related to secret societies (Hayden 2020a). Thorsen Creek, in the *Nuxalk* territory on the Northwest Coast of North America provides the clearest ethnographic documentation of the role of secret societies in creating elaborate art, and we discuss this site in some detail. According to the model that we have formulated, the foundation of elaborate art was essentially for promoting ritual organizations, their ideologies, and associated numinous experiences. We think that these functions continued to be of importance in more complex cultures accounting for the prevalence of spiritual themes in the art of most pre-state societies.

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Brian Hayden (corresponding author)
Archaeology Dept., Simon Fraser University; Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada v5a 1s6. bhayden@sfu.ca

Brenda Gould
Similkameen Consulting, Hedley, British Columbia, Canada

Richard J. Chacon
Department of Sociology, Criminology, and Anthropology, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC 29733, USA, chaconr@winthrop.edu

Johan Ling
Department of Historical Studies, University of Gothenburg, Universitetsplatsen 1, 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden

Yamilette Chacon
Department of Sociology and Anthropology, James Madison University, MSC 7501/ Sheldon Hall Room 213, 71 Alumnae Drive, Harrisonburg, VA 22807, USA
chaconyd@jmu.edu

Cecilia Lindhé
Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion, University of Gothenburg, Universitetsplatsen 1, 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden

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Note

¹Some of the activities carried out by secret societies might be explained by a variant of Roscoe's (2009; Roscoe et al. 2019) Social

Signaling Model. This model posits that the most reliable means for a group to signal honest (accurate) strength is to deploy it against external enemies through actual fighting. However, given the high cost of physical conflicts, Roscoe suggests that alternate techniques were often favored which could convey honest strength information through symbolic fighting involving conspicuous material distributions (feasts), conspicuous performances (dances), and conspicuous constructions (awe-inspiring art and monumental architecture). Such social signals might serve as deterrents to those considering attacking the group. While acknowledging that costly displays can be used for these purposes, Hayden (2014) has argued that causal factors need to be broadened to include costly social signals that also serve to attract and retain allies or supporters of strategies developed by aggrandizers to promote their own self-interests.

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