

AN ANALYSIS OF THE FIRST SALMON CEREMONY¹

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A CEREMONY marking the advent of the first salmon run of the season is general among North Pacific Coast Indians.

Many of the ceremonial features are similar throughout the area, yet the question remains in how far these common elements are dependent on the salmon run and how far they represent a diffused ceremonial complex.

The majority of tribes on the coast make salmon one of their principal foods. This is true of tribes as far inland as the Rockies, that is, wherever they live on streams which have connection with the ocean. Several varieties of salmon (*Oncorhynchus*) are abundant from Monterey, California to Bering Sea. When these fish run up the rivers in enormous numbers to spawn, the great fishing season commences for the Indian. In most localities there are no salmon in the streams during some seasons of the year, or if any are to be found the quality is so poor that the Indians do not use them. Hence the coming of the first salmon is a real event, for it means not only a change from the diet of dried meats and fish, but in many instances saves the people from imminent starvation.

I will give a description of four typical first salmon ceremonies and then deal with the following questions: first, is the distribution of this ceremony co-extensive with the use of salmon? Second, what is the relation of this ceremony to the ceremonial complex of the tribe, especially to other first-fruits ceremonies? Finally, what is the attitude toward the salmon as shown by this ceremony and by myths and taboos?

The northernmost people practising the ceremony are the Tsimshian. When the first salmon of the year is caught, four old shamans are called to the fisherman's platform, bringing a new cedar bark mat, bird's down and red ochre. They spread out the mat and a shaman puts on the fisherman's clothing. He holds a rattle in his right hand and an eagle's tail in the left. The shamans

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put the salmon on the mat and taking it up at the four corners, carry it to the chief's house, the shaman dressed in the fisherman's clothing leading the way and shaking his rattle. All young people who are unclean are ordered to leave. The old people enter the house in front of the procession. After the procession has passed in, all the shamans of the village dressed in ceremonial regalia enter. The salmon is placed on a cedar board and the shamans march around it four times. Then the shaman wearing the fisherman's clothes calls two old shamans to cut the fish. The head is cut off first, then the tail is cut, never broken, with a mussel-shell knife. A stone or metal knife would cause thunderstorm or disaster. While cutting the fish they call it honorary names. They cut along the ventral side and remove the stomach.²

The second area is that of the Kwakiutl-speaking peoples. The Kwakiutl are justly famous for their complete ritualization of life. In regard to the salmon ceremony they have lived up to their tradition, for where most tribes have one ritual they have at least three. The first is really an individual ritual. Every wise salmon fisher has prayers which belong to him personally. These prayers are offered when the first catch of salmon is made with the hook. When some are caught, the fisherman goes to the river house and prays to the fish to be good while he is drying them. He prays:

Swimmer, I thank you because I am still alive at this season when you come back to our good place, for the reason why you come is that we may play together with my fishing tackle, Swimmer. Now, go home and tell your friends that you had good luck on account of your coming here, and that they shall come with their wealth bringer, that I may get some of your wealth, Swimmer; also take away my sickness, friend, supernatural one, Swimmer.³

The other ceremonies are the collective rituals used elsewhere. As soon as the first four silver salmon of the run are caught the wife of the fisherman meets him on the beach. She prays to the silver salmon, picks them up and lays them on the beach before their house. She cuts them with a fish knife so that the head and

² Franz Boas. *Tsimshian Mythology*, 31st Report, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1916, p. 450.

³ Franz Boas. *Ethnology of the Kwakiutl*, 35th Report, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1921, p. 1318-1319.

tail are left on the backbone. She sets up roasting tongs on the beach and fastens the salmon so that the eyes project on the tongs. Later the tongs are carried into the house and placed by the fire. As soon as the eyes blacken, the fisherman calls together his family group to eat them for if roasted eyes are kept in the house overnight, the silver salmon will disappear from the sea. The guests who are called sit behind the fire. The hostess spreads new food mats and places the tongs with the eyes before the guest.. She gives them water to drink before eating. The guest of the highest rank prays to the food before it is eaten. The fisherman's wife picks up all bones and skin, wraps them in a food mat and throws it in the sea. The guests rub their hands, but do not wash them, and wipe them on shredded cedar bark as they usually would do.

At the ceremony for the first dog salmon the wife of the fisherman again officiates. She prays to the salmon:

O Supernatural Ones, O Swimmers, I thank you that you are willing to come to us. Don't let your coming be bad, for you come to be food for us. Therefore I beg you to protect me and the one who takes mercy on me, that we may not die without cause, Swimmers.

The woman replies "Yes" to herself. She goes up the bank and there cuts the fish. The intestines of a speared salmon are broken off at the anal fin, while those of a salmon caught on the hook are cut. If these rules are not followed the fisherman's line will break. The entrails are gathered in a basket and poured into the sea at the mouth of a river for it is believed that various kinds of salmon at once come to life when the intestines are put into the water.⁴

Among the Lower Lillooet the ceremony is preceded by watching and praying at the fishing-places, a feature that also occurs in northern California. When the salmon have passed up the river the chief under whose supervision the ceremony is performed sends a boy to pray at each fishing-place for a heavy run. Just before the catch the tops of the weir poles are decorated with owl, hawk, red-wing, flicker or eagle feathers. At fishing places without weirs, poles are decorated with feathers and set up. Then the chief orders a man to go out in a canoe and make the first catch. Before taking

⁴ Boas, *Ibid.*, p. 609-611.

the salmon from the water it is rolled up in a mat, for if it saw the ground, no more fish would come. They wait until it is dead on the shore; then rolled it in leaves and branches of a bush with red berries. They carry it to the place where a new kettle stands ready to receive it. New stones for boiling are used and are first dipped into a new basket of water to clean them. The salmon is boiled whole, then lifted out with sticks and laid on a new mat in order to pull off the fins and take out the backbone. It is boiled again until it is reduced to a mush. Then it is divided with a new spoon and put into two new dishes. Now the people are all assembled to eat the fish. Unmarried adult women, menstruating women, orphans, widows or widowers are not allowed to eat the first salmon. All others must eat some of it, the men from one dish, the women from the other.

If the first salmon were cut with a knife, there would be no run. The humpback is regarded as the chief of the salmon and is believed to lead all other salmon away from the sea, so if he is prayed to, the salmon will come quickly. He is frequently treated with as much reverence as the first salmon caught earlier in the season.⁵

Hill-Tout records another Lillooet salmon ceremony, specifically for the sockeye which according to him was regarded as the chief of the salmon. It is conducted in much the same way but adds an elaborate introduction of the salmon to the elders of the village by laying the right fin of the salmon on a series of rods, each named for one of the elders. In this way the salmon is welcomed into the tribe. After a feast of salmon cooked to a mush there is a ceremonial dance. After the feast, the bones are thrown into the water so they can revive.⁶

These ceremonies differ radically from those to the south, for in the Puget Sound region and beyond the ceremonial eating of the salmon is practically the whole ceremony. The Snohomish at the mouth of the Snohomish River on Puget Sound allowed

⁵ James Teit. *The Lillooet*, *Memoirs*, American Museum of Natural History, vol. iv, part 5, 1906, p. 280-281.

⁶ Charles Hill-Tout. *Report on the Ethnology of the StlatlumH of British Columbia*, *Journal*, Royal Anthropological Institute, vol. 35, 1905, p. 140.

nobody to step over the first salmon. The man who caught the first fish invited all his friends to a feast at which everyone except the host ate some of the fish.⁷ From this point southward the ceremony always centers around the eating of the salmon. The ritual is generally very simple. Sometimes the mode of cutting the fish and the persons who are to partake of it are specified. The southernmost ceremony occurs among the Northern Maidu.⁸

The first question is whether all Pacific Coast people who use salmon, perform this ceremony for the first catch of the year. The northernmost people who have the ceremony are the Tsimshian, whose neighbors the Bella Coola share their type of ritual, whereas the salmon runs as far north as the Yukon where the dog salmon goes up the river in July.⁹ There are no accounts of Tlingit or Haida ceremonies although both these people use the fish, hence it may be assumed that they lack the ceremony. The Tahltan have five varieties of salmon which begin running in June but here again no ceremony is noted.¹⁰ Further inland, the Carrier and Chilcotin are quite dependent on salmon for food but no ritual has been described.¹¹ Among the interior peoples we find the Thompson, Shuswap¹² and Upper Lillooet,¹³ who use salmon extensively, have no ceremony. The Shuswap and Thompson say that the salmon is a "hard fish" and does not have to be treated carefully. They claim that it has no real "mystery." The Cowichans of the Delta,¹⁴ the StsÉelis¹⁵ and other tribes along the

⁷ Hermann Haerberlin and Erna Gunther. *Ethnographische Notizen über die Indianerstämme des Puget-Sundes*, *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 1924, p. 17.

⁸ Roland B. Dixon. *The Northern Maidu*, *Bulletin, American Museum of Natural History*, vol. 17, 1905, p. 198.

⁹ E. W. Nelson. *Eskimo about Bering Straits*, 18th Report, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1899, p. 183.

¹⁰ George T. Emmons. *The Tahltan Indians*, University of Pennsylvania Anthropological Publications, vol. iv, part 1, 1911, p. 85.

¹¹ A. G. Morice. *Western Dènès*, *Proceedings, Canadian Institute*, 3rd Series, vol. vii, 1899, p. 128-129.

¹² James Teit. *The Shuswap*, *Memoirs, American Museum of Natural History*, vol. iv, part 7, 1909, p. 602.

¹³ James Teit. *The Lillooet*, p. 280.

¹⁴ Franz Boas. *Indians of the Lower Fraser River*, *British Association for the Advancement of Science, Report*, 1894, p. 461.

¹⁵ Charles Hill-Tout. *Ethnological Report on the StsÉelis and Sk'aulits Tribes*

Fraser River, share the elaborate first salmon ceremony of the Lower Lillooet. On Vancouver Island the Kwakiutl on the east coast and the Nootka on the west coast have much the same ceremony, but I could find no information concerning the Salish tribes of the island.

About Puget Sound the ceremony seems to be practised generally. For the Klallam I have conflicting data. An informant who was raised in the village where Dungeness, Washington, now stands, gives an account of a ceremony similar to that found elsewhere on the Sound, while another informant whose native village was about ten miles east of Dungeness tells me that salmon ran all year in the Dungeness River so that there was no ceremony to mark its coming in the spring.¹⁶

It is possible here that one village had the ceremony and the other did not. The Nisqually¹⁷ and Puyallup,¹⁸ who are closely related linguistically and culturally to the Snohomish, have similar simple ceremonies. All the Chinook tribes on the Columbia River from its mouth to the Dalles perform a salmon ceremony very similar to the Snohomish.¹⁹ The Wishram, who live at the Dalles, suspend all fishing after the first spring salmon is caught until after the ceremony has been performed. The fisherman carries the fish to a shaman who cuts the fish lengthwise, taking out the head and backbone in one piece. The fish is baked in a depression in the ground, which is lined with choke-cherry leaves and covered with mats. Everyone is invited and gets some of the fish. They pray at the feast. The bones are not returned to the river.²⁰

of the Halkomelem Division of the Salish of British Columbia, *Journal, Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 34, 1904, p. 330.

¹⁶ Field notes gathered under the auspices of the Department of Anthropology, University of Washington.

¹⁷ George Gibbs. *Tribes of Western Washington and Northwestern Oregon*, Contributions to North American Ethnology, vol. 1, 1877, p. 196.

¹⁸ Arthur C. Ballard. Personal Communication.

¹⁹ James G. Swan. *The Northwest Coast*, 1857, p. 107-108; George Gibbs, *loc. cit.*, p. 196; Gabriel Franchère, *Narrative of a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America*, New York, 1854, pp. 260-261.

²⁰ Leslie Spier. *Wishram Notes*, ms.

The Tillamook and Alsea honor the salmon by boiling the first catch with a simple ceremony.²¹ The Kalapuya²² however have no ceremony because the salmon cannot ascend the falls of the Willamette at the northern border of their territory. In northern California, the Tolowa, Karok, and Yurok²³ have a salmon dance which is said to be much like their deer dance. The Hupa²⁴ and Shasta have a ceremony which recalls that of the Lower Lillooet in that a person is sent out to watch for the first salmon. The Shasta allow this fish to pass, for this one was believed to lead the others upstream.²⁵ Salmon was used by the Achomawi and Atsugewi in quantity but there is no record of a ceremony.²⁶ The Northern Maidu of the foothills prohibit salmon fishing until a ceremony has been performed.²⁷ In his survey of California Kroeber makes the statement that wherever salmon abound in California there is a salmon ceremony.²⁸ Salmon are found as far south as Salinan territory, but at the southern boundary of this area they occur only in small numbers for there are few rivers to the coast.²⁹

The two eastern outposts of the salmon ceremony are the Paviotso of Pyramid Lake who order a dance five days after the

²¹ Franz Boas. Notes on the Tillamook, University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology, vol. 20, 1923, pp. 9-10.

²² Handbook of American Indians, Bulletin 30, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1907, p. 645.

²³ Stephen Powers. Indians of California, Contributions to North American Ethnology, vol. III, 1877, pp. 56, 67.

²⁴ P. E. Goddard. Life and Culture of the Hupa, Univ. Calif. Publ. Amer. Arch. and Eth., vol. I, 1903, pp. 78-79.

²⁵ Roland B. Dixon. The Shasta, Bulletin, American Museum of Natural History, 1907, pp. 430-431.

²⁶ *Id.*, Notes on the Achomawi and Atsugewi, American Anthropologist, n.s., vol. 10, 1908, pp. 212-213.

²⁷ Roland B. Dixon. The Northern Maidu, p. 198.

²⁸ A. L. Kroeber. Handbook of the Indians of California, p. 467, Bulletin 78, Bureau of American Ethnology, Washington, 1925.

²⁹ J. Alden Mason. Ethnology of the Salmon Indians, Univ. of Calif. Publ. in Amer. Arch. and Eth., vol. 10, 1912, p. 124. At present the southernmost salmon are in the Carmel River near Monterey. Dean Cobb of the College of Fisheries said that they may have occurred as far south as the Salinan River in aboriginal times, for the distribution of salmon is very variable.

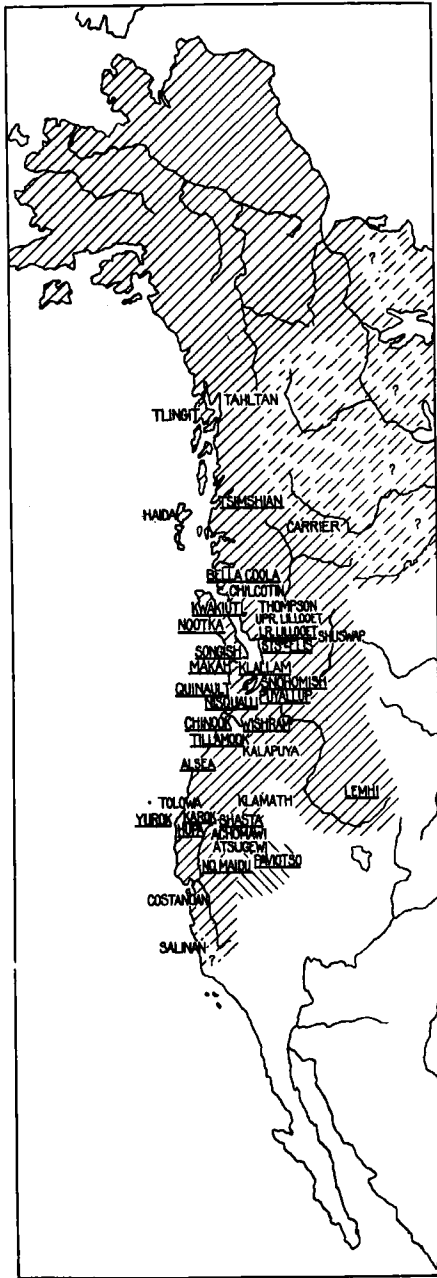


FIG. 1.—Map showing the Distribution of the tribes with the first ceremony (underlined) and the Distribution of the salmon (cross-hatched).

fish come into the lake,³⁰ and the Lemhi Shoshoni who divide the first catch and feast on it, their faces being painted ceremonially for the occasion.³¹ The Kutenai and their neighbors certainly use salmon extensively for food yet they do not express their reverence for it by way of a ceremony.

The area in which salmon is caught extends beyond the area of the ceremony especially to the north and east. The presence of salmon in a particular place is somewhat variable from year to year, for each group of salmon goes back to the place where it was spawned. If a river is avoided one year there may not be any fish in it for several years, depending on the age of maturity of the fish.³² Even within the salmon area the ceremony is not performed by every tribe that uses the fish. The Klamath Indians, who use salmon sparingly, have no ceremony and none of the taboos that are current elsewhere.³³ The Costanoans who were on the southern margin of the salmon area could catch the fish during the winter months when the water was high.³⁴ Their culture so far as we know was very simple so that it may be logical not to expect a ceremony among them. The accompanying map gives the general distribution of salmon on the Pacific coast and indicates the distribution of the ceremony.

The procedure of the salmon ceremony has beyond doubt grown out of the regular procedure for handling a salmon catch; the interesting feature is the amount of ceremonial action with which it is garnished and the extent to which this ritual is taken from other ceremonies of the tribe. When the Tsimshian carry the salmon into the chief's house on a mat covered with cedar leaves they are treating the fish as they would treat an honored guest, who is carried to the house on a cedar plank.³⁵ The Tsim-

³⁰ Robert H. Lowie. Notes on Shoshonean Ethnography, *Anthropological Papers, American Museum of Natural History*, vol. xx, p. 306. These people probably have a trout or red fish which is colloquially known as salmon. There is no true salmon in the Great Basin Area.

³¹ Robert H. Lowie. *The Northern Shoshone*, same series, vol. II, 1909, p. 218.

³² John Cobb. *Pacific Salmon Fisheries*, Bureau of Fisheries Document, no. 902, 1921.

³³ Leslie Spier. Personal Communication.

³⁴ Kroeber. *Handbook*.

³⁵ Boas. *Tsimshian Mythology*, p. 438.

shian also greet the first olachen with a ceremony that consists of roasting and eating the first catch.

The Lillooet have a bear ceremony which they share with many tribes to the north and east of them. The attitude toward the bear seems to be very much that which the coast people have toward the salmon. The Lillooet pray to the bear, just as the Kwakiutl pray to the salmon. Here arises the question whether the salmon has been substituted on the coast for the bear which is the object of reverence across northern North America and in many parts of eastern Asia.

Teit records that when the potato was first obtained, it was addressed as "chief" and the Lillooet danced to it four times before it was eaten.³⁶ When the berry crop is almost ripe the chief addresses the mountain tops and the people pick just enough for a day's supply; to keep them overnight would be unlucky. A similar taboo is found among many coast tribes with regard to the first salmon. The StsÉelis on the Fraser River observe a similar ceremony for the first berries as they do for the first salmon. In northern California the salmon ceremony belongs to a whole group of dances which are given to produce more bountiful wild crops, abundance of salmon, prevention of flood, famine and earthquake.³⁷ The definitely local characteristic here is the recitation of esoteric formulas.

The pattern for the salmon ceremony seems to be based on a reverential attitude toward the fish and a desire to treat it in such a manner that it will come in great numbers. The actual procedure is taken from the normal handling of the catch with such additional ceremonial features as have been pointed out above. The other first-fruits ceremonies in this area share with the salmon ritual a ceremonial eating of the product in many cases followed by a dance. The possibilities for developing something strikingly different are after all limited. It is clear, however, in spite of the meager information available, that some features of the general ceremonial life in each tribe have been infused in the procedure. Californian

³⁶ Teit. *The Lillooet*, p. 279.

³⁷ Kroeber. *Handbook*, p. 53.

tribes have a social dance where the Kwakiutl have a speech and a feast with guests sitting according to rank.

Finally, the attitude toward the salmon as expressed in mythology and taboo is the same feeling that underlies the ceremonial. The salmon myth on the Pacific coast has a much wider distribution than the ceremony, or rather it occurs among tribes for whom no data concerning a ceremony is available. The typical incidents of the salmon myth are: a boy comes to the salmon country and is told to kill some of the children for food. He is cautioned to save all the bones and throw them into the water so that the children may revive. Very frequently the boy returns home and brings plenty of fish to his village.

The Haida and Tlingit have such a myth but there is no record of a ceremony. Among the Haida is the belief that if a girl sees a salmon jumping in the creek, within a year of her puberty rites, all salmon would leave the creek. For five years after her puberty rites she is not allowed to eat salmon.^{37a} The Chilcotin have the myth. The Quinault, who also tell such a story, express their attitude toward the salmon by the taboo that the first catch is never sold for fear that the hearts may be destroyed or fed to the dogs.³⁸

Very frequently myths dictate ceremonial behavior. In this instance the feeling expressed in the myth and the ceremony may be regarded as alike, but the only concrete feature carried from the story to the ritual is the instruction that the salmon bones be thrown back in the water, this being based on the theory that salmon revive when their bones are returned to the river. This belief is not limited to salmon. The Shuswap who have no such regard for the salmon throw beaver bones back into the streams that they may come to life again.³⁹

Special relations to food animals are universal and the salmon comes in for a liberal share. Throughout the salmon area there is

^{37a} John Swanton. Contribution to the Ethnology of the Haida, *Memoirs, American Museum of Natural History*, vol. VIII, pp. 48-49.

³⁸ Cobb. *Pacific Salmon Fisheries*, p. 23.

³⁹ British Association for the Advancement of Science, *Sixth Report on the tribes of Northwestern Canada*, 1890, p. 644

some association between salmon and twins. The Tsimshian believe that twins have the power to call olachen and salmon.⁴⁰ The Kwakiutl believe that twins of the same sex were salmon before birth.⁴¹ The Nootka believe the father of twins to be an instrument of the salmon world and during the fishing season he devotes his entire time to singing and performing secret rituals to propitiate the salmon so that there may be a maximum catch. The appearance of twins forecasts an unusually large run. A twin child will burst into tears if a salmon is mistreated.⁴²

When Makah twins are born during the fishing season at Tatoosh Island the parents are sent back to Neah Bay and prohibited from eating any kind of fish.⁴³ Similarly, the Klallam do not allow the parents of twins to come near salt or fresh water for one year after the birth of the children. The Klallam from all the villages along the Straits of Juan de Fuca used to go to Hood Canal in the fall of the year to catch and dry salmon. On one occasion a woman from Clallam Bay gave birth to twins there. She and her husband had to carry the children overland instead of returning home by canoe on account of this taboo. The Klallam of Dungeness relate that one of the early white families on the river had twins and they besought the father of the children not to fish because he would spoil the run of humpbacks which was then in the Dungeness River. He disregarded their petition and as a consequence there were no humpbacks in the river for twenty years.⁴⁴

Here again the pattern is a relation between twins and salmon, but the relation differs from tribe to tribe.

⁴⁰ Boas. First General Report on the Tribes of Northwestern Canada, Brit. Assoc. Adv. Science, 1889, p. 847.

⁴¹ Brit. Assoc. Adv. Science, Sixth Report, p. 614.

⁴² Edward Sapir. "Nootka" in Hasting's Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics.

⁴³ James G. Swan. The Indians of Cape Flattery, Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge, vol. 16, 1870, p. 82.

⁴⁴ These two incidents are taken from my recent field notes. In discussing the second incident with Dean Cobb of the College of Fisheries, University of Washington, I learned that it may be true that for many years there was no humpback run in the Dungeness River because through some accident they may not have been able to spawn there one season. After such an occurrence the fish may avoid the stream for a long time.

There is on the North Pacific coast a reverent regard for salmon which is one of the principal food animals. This regard shows itself in the rituals which are performed for the salmon, the taboos surrounding it, and in its place in mythology. The first salmon ceremony follows a pattern used in other first fruits ceremonies of the area, and draws on other ceremonial complexes of the tribe. The particular relation to the salmon is further akin to the attitude toward the bear in adjacent areas of North America and Asia. Within our area the fundamental and widespread feature of the first salmon ceremony is in the attitude toward the salmon, although its expression varies somewhat from tribe to tribe. This is of such a character as to suggest the diffusion of at least this basic idea. The diffusion of minor details among neighboring groups suggests possible historic connection in the borrowing of these ceremonial features.

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