



A Cape Covered in Wealth: Interpreting Colonial Encounter in Museum Collections

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Museum collections sometimes present researchers with unanticipated objects; however, through careful research, close material examination, and an understanding of cultural-historical context, these material outliers may prove revealing. This paper examines one such anomaly: a Nuu-chah-nulth (NCN) First Nations' dentalium-covered plaited cedar bark cape trimmed with mountain goat wool. Through ethnological contextualization, followed by analysis of the cape's material, manufacture, and provenance, I use the cape to interpret power relations, colonial encounter, and NCN social organization at the turn of the century.

This research uses grounded theory, a methodological approach developed by sociologists, Glaser and Strauss (1967), wherein theory arises from data. I employ abductive reasoning to draw conclusions and develop theory from this peculiar dress item. Analysis is augmented by knowledge from my ethnographic research with NCN (2009-2013) and additional museums-based studies of ceremonial dress. I argue that the cape's acquisition is indicative of struggles between colonial powers and indigenous people; at the same time, the cape is emblematic of a culture that the government of Canada was desperately attempting to quash.

I first encountered the dentalium-covered cape amidst the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian collection of NCN ceremonial regalia. The cape's material, manufacture, and size diverged from the consistent style typified by the fifty other NCN cedar bark shawls I evaluated in several different museums over the preceding year: it was ornamented with an overwhelming quantity of dentalium shells, woven using a plaited technology (rather than wrapped twining), and graced with an attached mountain goat wool trim.

"Nuu-chah-nulth" is an ethnic designation that denotes fourteen independent nations, each made up of smaller tribes. Each tribe is comprised of a number of ranked Houses, and within each House, individuals are positioned based on gender and birth order according to their proximity to the *Tayii Ha'wilth* (Head Chief). The cape is the result of a highly class-conscious society, where upper classes used dress as a form of distinction (cf. Simmel 1957). At the time of the garment's collection in 1902, dentalium shells were highly valued and widely traded, harvested in only a few locations off the West coast of Vancouver Island (McMillan 2000: 156). Early visitors to the coast—ship crewmen, settlers and ethnographers alike—reported that women of status wore dentalium during ceremonial events (cf. Drucker 1951: 139-40; Jewitt 1824: 83; Swan 1868: 13). Mountain goat wool was another sought-after material and this shawl is the only known example of conspicuously attached wool, which was more commonly woven into the hem. These embellishments suggest that an unmarried female of chiefly rank wore the cape.

With a 36 cm center front, the dentalium cape was much smaller than all other capes surveyed (averaging 45 cm along center front), indicating someone of small stature, perhaps a child, was the wearer. The plaited weave differs from the wrapped twining technology used to produce all other surveyed shawls, suggesting that the cape was made quickly. These observations indicate that the cape was used for an *Aayst'ulthaa* (coming of age ceremony) for a girl of chiefly status who reached menarche earlier than anticipated. This explains why unmistakable symbols of wealth adorn a shawl of relatively poor, hasty construction.

It is unusual to find a garment of this type in museum collections for two reasons: first, the cape would have been worth more as parts (dentalium shells and wool) than as whole; secondly, NCN believe that intimate possessions—especially clothing—should be concealed from outsiders and burned upon the death of the wearer. *Aayst'ulthaa* garments were considered so sacred, and dentalium so highly valued, that in the 1880s Smithsonian correspondent, James Swan, had to procure his own shells and hire a woman to make a facsimile *Aayst'ulthaa* headdress for the Smithsonian's collection. Why and how was the cape purchased? An analysis of provenance helps to settle these questions: Dorr F. Tozier visited Vancouver Island in winter 1902 as captain of U.S. Revenue Service Cutter, *Grant*. Tozier was known for his predilection—bordering on obsession—with Native American artifacts. He collected throughout his career by taking advantage of his position in the Cutter Service, which policed the U.S./Canadian border. Tozier engaged in the nefarious activities he was employed to derail by trafficking second-hand goods, alcohol, and tobacco across the border to exchange for “Indian curios.” George Dorsey of Chicago's Field Museum described him as, “thoroughly unscrupulous and in British Columbia regarded as no better than a common thief.”

Tozier's acquisition of the dentalium cape—whether by purchase or theft—highlights asymmetrical trade relationships that prevailed at the turn of the century. By 1900, increased settlement limited Nuuchahnulth participation in the wage-labor economies their labor had enabled. An 1885 amendment to the Canadian Indian Act outlawed Native American ceremonies, including the *Aayst'ulthaa*, making ceremonial shawls evidence of illegal activity. The methods by which Tozier, a uniformed officer, made his collection is but one example of many hundreds in which ceremonial paraphernalia was purchased (likely under duress) or stolen from the homes of NCN chiefly families. Despite the context of collection, the cape is material evidence of colonial resistance through continued ceremonial practice. Acquiring the cape as a “curio” object is contrasted by NCN reverence for the spiritual power of dress, revealing a collision of different worldviews and value systems. Eventually the cape found final resting place in the Smithsonian, via George Gustav Heye, the famed Native American art collector with an eye for aesthetic (rather than ethnological) value. As a result, the Smithsonian's records are sparse, but as demonstrated, a close reading of material, manufacture, time, and place reveals cultural context and histories of colonial encounter.