

**Orpheus in the Netherworld in
The Plateau of Western North America:
The Voyage of Peni**

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Like all myths, the myth of Orpheus can be seen as a combination of several basic themes: the close relationship with the natural world (particularly birds, whose song Orpheus the lyre-player perhaps imitates), his death, in some early versions, at the hands of women (perhaps linked to his reputed introduction of homosexual practices, or, more romantically, his shunning of all women other than Eurydice; his body was dismembered, flung into the sea and his head was said to have come to rest at Lesbos), and especially the descent to the underworld to rescue Eurydice¹ (the failure of which by virtue of Orpheus' looking backwards into the Land of Shades and away from his destination, the world of men, links the idea of the rebirth of the soul -- immortality -- with an escape from the domain of culture into nature, the 'natural' music of the Thracian [barbaric and hence uncultured] bird-tamer Orpheus²). Although the particular combination that we know as the drama of Orpheus in the underworld perhaps arose from various non-Hellenic strands of beliefs (and was popularized only in later Greek literature), several other partial combinations of similar mythic elements can be found in other societies.

In this paper, I will explore several correspondences between the Greek Orpheus and the North American Indian version of the descent to the underworld, especially among those people who lived in the mountains and plateaus of western North America, whose myths and associated rituals about trips to a netherworld played a particularly important role in their religious and political lives. In particular, I will argue that ease of access to the

¹G.S. Kirk, *The Nature of Greek Myths*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974, p.172; John Warden, "Introduction", p.vii, in John Warden (ed.), *Orpheus: The Metamorphoses of a Myth*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982. Hultkrantz argues that the main motif of North American Indian Orpheus tales that distinguishes them from the much more common 'revival of the dead' stories is the voyage to the netherworld. See Ake Hultkrantz, *The North American Indian Orpheus Tradition: A Contribution to Comparative Religion*, Stockholm: The Ethnographical Museum of Sweden, Monograph Series, Publication No. 2, 1957, p.23. Orpheus's relationship to birds places him in the Indo-European tradition of the shaman as Master of Animals, an ancient tradition that probably migrated to the New World as the Master of the Hunt. See Weston LaBarre, *The Ghost Dance*, New York: Doubleday, 1970, p.302. The tradition of the head as source of prophecies (after it came to rest on Lesbos) is an old Indo-European tradition; see R.B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp.100-102.

²Several writers have pointed out that Orpheus' foreign (non-Greek) origin is reflected in the characteristics attributed to him. He is essentially portrayed as gentle (even effeminate), in contrast to the bloodthirsty and bloodied heroes who occupied the rest of the Greek pantheon. See Marcel Detienne, "Orphée au miel", *Quaderni Urbinati di cultura Classica* 12:7-23, 1971; Emmett Robbins, "Famous Orpheus", in Warden (ed.), *Orpheus*, Ibid., 1982, p. 18; E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951, p.147. LaBarre identifies Orpheus as a shaman (a marginal figure in his own society) who accompanied Jason on his voyages; see LaBarre, *The Ghost Dance*, Ibid., 1970 pp.439-440. Guthrie has also identified Orpheus as a shaman; see W.K. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, London: Methuen, 1952, p.28. Not only the figure of Orpheus but the Orphic cult was essentially foreign to the Greek human-centered ethos; the 'mysteries' of the Orphic cult seem to have been linked to an eastern (possibly Semitic or Persian) conception of punishment for sexual contamination. The ideas that the soul rose to the heavens as a flame and that the universe and life are circular are probably of foreign origin; see Onians, *The Origins*, Ibid., 1989, pp.164,450-451. Orpheus's foreign origin was probably later coupled to these concepts by the followers of the Orphic cult in order to preserve the mysterious character of Orphic belief. Not surprisingly, the protagonist of many North American Orpheus tales is often marginal in terms of his own society: a shaman or a mythological and supernatural figure like the Trickster Coyote.

netherworld is related to the particular type of political and social organization that characterizes the peoples of northwestern North America. In some cases, trips to the netherworld sometimes served as a mean of justifying radical changes in beliefs and organization, tasks that would otherwise be improbable or difficult in the normal course of events. In other, more centrally-organized societies, access to the netherworld was either restricted or occurred in the midst of the community.

Trips to the netherworld were an important component of Plateau³ Indian mythology (See Map 1).⁴ An otherwise-widespread version of the Orphic theme of wife-rescue from the Land of the Dead and a test in

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the underworld forms a particularly important part of Plateau beliefs,⁵ where the voyage to the Land of the Dead was regarded as a myth treating the origin of eternal and irrevocable death⁶ (see Appendix I for an example of a Plateau Orpheus-type myth). Encounters with spirits and ghosts, including voyages to the netherworld, were particularly important in the historic epoch on the Northwest Coast of North America and in the Plateau region;

³The Plateau tribes are Salish speakers (Shuswap, Kalispel, Wenatchi, Columbia, Spokane, Thompson, Lillooet, Okanagon, Sanpoil, Coeur D'Alene, Flathead), Sahaptin speakers (Nez-Percé, Cayuse, Palus, Umatilla, Kittitas, Tenino, Yakima, Klikitat), Athabascan speakers (Carrier, Sekani, Chilcotin), Klamath-Modoc, Kutenai, and Kalapuya. See Verne F. Ray, *Cultural Relations in the Plateau of Northwestern North America*, Los Angeles: Publications of the Frederick Webb Hodge Anniversary Publication Fund, 1939; Verne F. Ray, "Culture Element Distributions XXII: Plateau", *Anthropological Records* 8(2):99-262, 1942; Joseph Jorgensen, *Western Indians*, San Fransisco, W.H. Freeman and Co., 1980.

⁴See Leslie Spier and Edward Sapir, *Wishram Ethnography*, Seattle: University of Washington Publications in Anthropology, vol. 3, 1930, pp.277,278 for visits to the Land of the Dead by Eagle and Coyote [the Transformer]; Franz Boas (ed.), *Folk-Tales of Salishan and Sahaptin Tribes*, Memoirs of the American Folklore Society XI, Lancaster: American Folklore Society, 1917, pp.112, 178-179, on the origin of death as a result of a failed task during a visit to the Land of the Dead. See Hultkrantz, *Indian Orpheus*, Ibid., 1957, pp.162-183 for a general comparison of North American Indian visits to the Land of the Dead with visits to alternative worlds. Hultkrantz argues that the Orpheus theme is found where "primitive's" attitude to life is "bright and harmonious". People who fear death, like Athabaskans, do not long to be near their loved ones after death. See Hultkrantz, *Indian Orpheus*, Ibid., 1957, pp.223-225. He does not, however, deal with people's feelings towards the living and how these feelings are the outcome of complex organizational patterns.

⁵Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indian*, vol. 8; Norwood (Mass.): Plimpton Press, 1907-1930. A.H. Gayton, "The Orpheus Myth in North America", *Journal of American Folklore*, 48(189): 263-293, 1935. Leo Frachtenburg, "Kalapuya Texts", *University of Washington Publications in Anthropology* 11, Seattle, 1935, pp.143-369. Boas, when comparing Thompson and Kootenay religious concepts, writes: "The fundamental concepts...seem to have been the same...the worship of the sun, and appear to have been connected with the idea that the dead would return from the land of the shades." See F. Boas, "Introduction", in James Teit, *Traditions of the Thompson River Indians of British Columbia*, N.Y.: American Folklore Society, 1898, p.3.

⁶John Bierhorst, *The Mythology of North America*; New York: William Morrow, 1985, p.144.

elsewhere, there are traces of an Orpheus theme in the East,⁷ although visits to the land of the dead are uncommon except for the peoples of the central Plains region.⁸

Apart from the vision quest, in which young boys (and sometimes girls) received advice from encounters with visiting spirits, the central and southern (Plateau) area of the Rocky Mountains was the birthplace of the Prophet Dance in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. While spirit visitors encountered during the vision quest usually resided on the earth, the ghosts and spirits encountered in the Prophet Dance (and later in its offshoot, the Ghost Dance of the Plains) usually lived in alternate worlds or in the netherworld. Visits to and from the netherworld were sources of important knowledge in both shamans' vision quests and the Prophet Dance.

Such information was to be relayed to people by the agency of the Prophets; more precisely, by the guardian spirits of the Prophets (shamans), who were the only 'people' with sufficient knowledge to allow them to follow the difficult trail to the land of the Chief (Spirit). This is succinctly expressed in a Thompson tale:

[The Chief] said, "I will send messages to earth by the souls of the people that reach me, but whose time to die has not come [i.e., they are able to return to the Land of the Living]. They will carry messages to you from time to time; and when their souls return to their bodies, they will revive, and tell you their experiences [note in the original text: People who go into trances are chiefly meant. Many biblical elements appear in the story]. Coyote [the Transformer] and myself will not be seen again until the Earth-Woman [the Earth] is very old. Then we shall return to earth, for it will require a new change by that time. Coyote will precede me by some little time; and when you see him, you will know that the time is at hand. When I return, all the spirits of the dead will accompany me, and after there will be no spirit-land. All the people will live together. Then will the Earth-Woman revert to her natural shape, and live as a mother among her children. Then will things be made right, and there will be much happiness."⁹

These cults became an historically crucial rallying point of Indian resistance to the Euro-American westward advance of the last century.¹⁰ Yet the people who gave birth to them,

⁷Stith Thompson, *Tales of the North American Indians*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929, states (p.337) that Orpheus is found "everywhere" in North America, although no evidence is offered in support of the assertion. Gayton's survey (note 5 above) is more precise in delimiting the extent of the Orpheus theme, and the distribution mapped by Gayton (p.266) shows a preponderance of Plateau/Coast locations, a point also supported by Hultkrantz, *Indian Orpheus*, Ibid., 1957, pp.25-55.

⁸Gayton, "The Orpheus Myth", Ibid. 1935, pp. 263-264,277.

⁹Fragment of a Thompson tale collected by James Teit, in Franz Boas (ed.), *Folk-Tales*, Ibid., 1917, p.83, cited in Miller. See also Leslie Spier, *The Sinkaieth or Southern Okanagon of Washington*, American Anthropological Association, General Series in Anthropology 6, Menasha: American Anthropological Association, 1938, pp.174-175, on the relationship between the prophet vision, dancing and the hastening of the new and more rigid moral order. See Christopher Miller, *Prophetic Worlds: Indians and Whites on the Columbia Plateau*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1985, for a detailed analysis of the Plateau Prophet Cult.

¹⁰The most famous example is the Ghost Dance of the various Plains Indian groups described by Mooney. It has generally been considered an example of the effects of cultural disintegration due to contact with White society. Spier, however, argued effectively that this movement, especially popular in the 1890s and an instrumental component of the Sioux rebellion against the yoke imposed by the U.S. Army, could be traced back to at least the 1870s, when a similar movement swept through the people of the Great Plains. Hence, there is more than a hint of cultural continuity involved in the expression of what could otherwise be described as two examples of political, social and cultural dissent. Although Mooney had acknowledged the particular historical connection between the 1870s and 1890s versions of the

the people of the Plateau region, were not threatened by White encroachment to a degree in any way resembling the crisis experienced by the people of the Plains, where conflicts with the United States Army and with settlers were common fare.¹¹ This fact re-opens the question of the cause and structural function of all crisis cults,¹² especially those that incorporate a dependency on the netherworld as a font of instructions: why was it that people who experienced an entire century of devastation at the hands of advancing Whites adopted other peoples' beliefs and, more importantly, why did people who were relatively isolated from the worst aspects of Europeanization develop such beliefs?

It is generally accepted that the Prophet Dance was an elaboration of the vision quest belief, and that Christian elements were added only when these were congruent with Indian practices.¹³ The issue of the aboriginality of these messianic and revitalization movements is not only complex; it is an important step towards understanding the implications of the predisposition of the Carrier, Sekani and other groups of the mountains and Plateau to contact the netherworld.¹⁴ Miller, in particular, argues that the Plateau Prophet cult arose from a concatenation of several centuries of cooler weather (which placed additional pressures on scarcer resources) and waves of social dislocation due to the eastern fur trade (which introduced the horse, guns and disease and pushed eastern peoples onto the Plains, who in turn placed military pressure on the Plateau peoples). In his view, the Prophet Dance is a re-alignment of the ideological world in light of the newly emerged militarism and political alliances that eroded traditional village autonomy.¹⁵ The Orphic image of visits to the netherworld in search of new and vital 'secular' information in much of traditional Plateau myth points the way to another interpretation, however. I will argue here that these cults were not merely a reaction of desperation to White

Ghost Dance, Spier believed that the messianic Plains complex could be traced back to the even earlier Prophet Dance of the Northwest Plateau region of the early 1800s. See J. Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965; L. Spier, *The Prophet Dance of the Northwest and its Derivatives: the Source of the Ghost Dance*, Menasha: George Banta Publishing Co., 1935, p.8. For a general overview of the Ghost Dance, see LaBarre, *The Ghost Dance*, Ibid., 1970, p.221. Revitalization as a response to contact-induced crises is a common viewpoint in popular and standard anthropological texts; see in M. Harris, *People, Culture, Nature*, New York: Random House, 1980, p.422-423. Yet LaBarre's description of a Kickapoo utopian vision demonstrates that resistance to a colonial-contact situation is not always a fundamental part of millenarian movements; see LaBarre, *The Ghost Dance*, Ibid., 1970, pp.214-215. Yet the Ghost Dance tradition is old; see R.F. Heizer, "A California Messianic Movement of 1801 among the Chumash", *American Anthropologist* 43(1):129-129, 1941. It is generally agreed that the 1870 Ghost Dance originated with the Paiute, neighbours of the Plateau peoples; see Joseph Jorgensen, "Ghost Dance, Bear Dance, and Sun Dance", in Warren D'Azevedo (ed.), *Handbook of North American Indians, vol. 11: Great Basin*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1986, pp.660-661. The Northern Paiute were one of the few Great Basin people who sought the return of the dead; see Cora DuBois, *The 1870 Ghost Dance*, Berkeley: University of California Anthropological Records 3(1):1-151, 1939, (cited in Jorgensen, "Ghost Dance", Ibid., 1986, p.660).

¹¹Although these cults did continue when there is no doubt that Plateau groups were in a genuine period of crisis due to active missionary work and Euro-American settlement. See Verne F. Ray, "The Kalaskin Cult: A Prophet Movement of 1870 in Northeastern Washington", *American Anthropologist* 38(1):67-75, 1936.

¹²See, for example, Weston LaBarre, "Materials for a History of the Studies of Crisis Cults: A Bibliographic Essay", *Current Anthropology* 12(1):3-44, 1971.

¹³Spier, *The Prophet Dance*, 1935, Ibid. p.36,37; Miller, *Prophetic Worlds*, Ibid., 1985.

¹⁴The Sekani, like the Carrier, were adherents of the Prophet Dance cult, and a tradition of prophesying was not unknown to them. Spier, *The Prophet Dance*, 1935, Ibid., p.62.; A.G. Morice, *Au Pays de l'Ours Noir: Chez les sauvages de la Colombie Britannique*, Paris: Delhomme et Brigue, 1897, p.116. Others, notably Spier, Barbeau and LaBarre, tend to see proselytizing contact as an explanation for the adoption of Messianic and Ghost Dance cults among the northern Athabaskans. See LaBarre, *The Ghost Dance*, Ibid., 1970, p.221.

¹⁵Miller, *Prophetic Worlds*, Ibid., 1985.

encroachment but are based on a confluence of a particular form of social and political organization and a set of geographic circumstances.

A Prophet Visits "Heaven": the voyage of Peni

At the end of the 18th century, the Carrier, Sekani and some of their neighbours adopted the Prophet Dance. One peculiarity of the Prophet Dance, apart from the obvious prophesying that characterizes it, is that the prophet's instructions are received 'in person' after the prophet has 'died', gone to the netherworld and come back to life to instruct his followers on earth. Peni was one such prophet who predicted the arrival of Whites and preached a doctrine of accommodation to White practices.

Peni was a resident of New Caledonia and apparently a Gitksan Indian, although he may have been a western Carrier.¹⁶ Morice dates his emergence around the time of the christianization of the Carrier, which would be around 1842.¹⁷ Morice implies that the movement was pre-missionary, although it followed the arrival of two mission-educated Oregon Indians to the New Caledonia district.¹⁸ The Carrier, Morice reported, believed that Peni had no prior knowledge of Christianity at the time of the inception of his movement.¹⁹ Spier, on the other hand, cites a personal communication from Barbeau that suggests that Peni flourished during the 1820s.²⁰ Barbeau, however, had given no such impression in his earlier work.²¹ According to him, Peni antedates the arrival of missionaries into the district and even the appearance of the first White man in the northern uplands,²² which would date Peni before 1805.

According to Carrier traditions, Peni had a dramatic vision in which he 'died' and disappeared during the month of February. He later re-appeared in the month of May, claiming to have returned from the dead.²³ Barbeau believed that Peni could not have travelled to an eastern trading post -- which would have been considerably east or south of his home and isolated by difficult mountainous terrain -- in his two or three month absence, although it was likely that he encountered some Cree or Iroquois Indians (hired by the Northwest Company, some of these eastern Indians are reputed to have settled near Jasper, Alberta, at this early date), or some French Canadian *coureurs de bois* in his travels.²⁴ Peni was old before the Whites arrived in New Caledonia (the name assigned to the northern Plateau-Cordillera area by the fur traders). This supports the argument for the aboriginality of the Prophet Dance in this district. Peni died disappointed because his prophecy regarding the generosity of the Whites proved to be false, although Morice states that Peni died as a common shaman.²⁵ So ends the story of Peni.

¹⁶M. Barbeau, *Indian Days in the Canadian Rockies*, Toronto: McMillan Co., 1923, p.207.

¹⁷Morice cited in Spier, *The Prophet Dance*, 1935, Ibid., p.36; A.G. Morice, *The History of the Interior of British Columbia (formerly New Caledonia) from 1660 - 1880*, London: John Lane, 1906, p.229.

¹⁸Morice, *The History*, Ibid., 1906, p.225.

¹⁹Morice, *The History*, Ibid., 1906, p.239ftn.

²⁰Spier, *The Prophet Dance*, 1935, Ibid. p.63.

²¹Barbeau, *Indian Days*, Ibid., 1923.

²²Barbeau, *Indian Days*, Ibid., 1923, p.33.

²³Barbeau, *Indian Days*, Ibid., 1923, pp.54,55; A.G. Morice, *The History*, Ibid., 1906, p.240.

²⁴Barbeau, *Indian Days*, Ibid., 1923, p.19-25. *Coureurs de bois* is a term that refers to both independent fur traders and sometimes to French Canadian employees of the major trading companies.

²⁵Barbeau, *Indian Days*, Ibid., 1923, p.33.

There are many similarities between Peni's vision and Christian doctrine and rituals. Peni no longer spoke his native tongue when he returned from the land of the dead but instead spoke the language of the Sky People. These were ruled by two head chiefs, the Father and the Son.²⁶ The son was named Zazeekry, which is suspiciously similar in sound to the French pronunciation of *Jesus Christ*. Peni's followers had to be baptized, abandon the potlatch and observe 'Deemawse', which is again reminiscent of the French *Dimanche*. Barbeau himself pointed out this latter similarity to the French but not the former resemblance.²⁷

It is clear that this movement is neither entirely aboriginal nor is it entirely based on contact with Europeans. Elements of Christianity are present despite later Carrier avowals to the contrary. On the other hand, it is clear that it is not direct contact which precipitated a crisis from which emerged the Prophet movement. In fact, the delay between the prophesied contact with the Whites and actual contact led the movement to become temporarily moribund at one point.²⁸ The question remains: what caused this belief before any significant threat to their local traditions was perceived by the Carrier, the Gitksan and the Sekani? It is likely that we shall never know. What is striking, however, is the fact that little or no threat of contact was necessary for its adoption by members of all three groups, and that Peni continually stressed adherence to a form of discourse that emphasized the arrival of unknown entities into the midst of his people. Clearly, there is something internal to the social, political and religious organization of Plateau and Mountain people that disposed them to this type of discourse.

Religious Beliefs

All northwest North American Indian groups had, of course, a belief in an afterlife, but few believed in heaven or hell as such; there are no damned, and heaven is sometimes beyond the horizon, slightly above the ground (in which case it is often thought of as being in the West, near the land of the setting sun). Rarely is the Land of the Dead below ground, although this might be the location of alternative worlds populated by spirits (but not ghosts).²⁹ In this sense, their vision of an afterworld is closer to the classical Greek view than the Christian idea of heaven and hell.

Besides these beliefs, many of North American aboriginal peoples also believed in the existence of alternate or at least very different worlds below the surface of the earth or the seas, rivers and lakes, as well as the near-universal Plateau belief in the land of the Sky,

²⁶Barbeau, *Indian Days*, Ibid., 1923, p.26.

²⁷Barbeau, *Indian Days*, Ibid., 1923, p.29.

²⁸Barbeau, *Indian Days*, Ibid., 1923, p.34.

²⁹The westerly location of the Land of the Dead is typical of Orphic tales; see Gayton, "The Orpheus Myth", Ibid. 1935, p.264; Hultkrantz, *Indian Orpheus*, Ibid., 1957, p.91. The neighbouring Quileute, who have no reported Orpheus myth, locate the Land of the Dead deep underground (yet it is still a mirror-image of life in the Land of the Living). See Leo J. Frachtenberg, "Eschatology of the Quileute Indians", *American Anthropologist* 22(4):330-340, 1920, pp.337-338. Hultkrantz suggests that societies with a gloomy picture of the afterlife locate the Land of the Dead underground, while those with a more optimistic eschatological belief are more prone to possess Orpheus-like beliefs. See Hultkrantz, *Indian Orpheus*, Ibid., 1957, p.92. It is significant the Land of the Dead is never 'above', since ideological considerations generally urge people to think in terms of 'far' and 'near', not 'high' and 'low'; this generally preserves the emergent and sometimes nebulous political hierarchy in territorial band and tribal societies, which is indeed couched in terms of 'high' and 'low' status. See G. Lanoue, *Images in Stone: A Theory on Interpreting Rock Art*, Rome: The Art Centre, 1989, chap. 5.

which could be visited (at least in their myths) by means of climbing a chain of arrows.³⁰ These worlds are also occasionally visited by humans, who either receive instructions on how to live their own personal lives from the supernatural inhabitants of these worlds or are irremediably changed by their adventures and contacts.³¹ Sometimes these alternate worlds contain the souls of the dead, especially of people who have become lost or vanished while on earth. Rare are the cases in which the original inhabitants of these worlds (neither diaphanous souls of the dead nor corporeal in the usual sense, since they have supernatural powers and attributes) prove benign or helpful to visitors from the real world.³² 'Help' to visitors is often inadvertent, the result of contact with supernatural beings, or sometimes aid is given by a traitor to his society; the vicissitudes of living in a supernatural society are such that it is sometimes the human visitors who are asked to help the supernaturals. In these cases, humans sometimes benefit from the transaction when the supernatural being grants the visitor special powers or magical objects as aids in accomplishing tasks.³³

In short, there is a long and widespread tradition of contact with alternative worlds in these Indian societies, and although today there is a general belief that these spirit or alternate worlds are all one -- usually called "heaven" -- there is little doubt that this belief is the result of later elements that have been added as a result of over one hundred years of missionary activity. In their original conception, these netherworlds were dangerous zones of tribulations where human visitors went only as a result of accident or some extraordinary circumstances that had caused their expulsion from their own society. While not exactly Hell or Hades, visits to these worlds would inevitably change a man's destiny.

The Social Organization of Coast, Mountain and Plateau Peoples

Not all of these peoples held the same beliefs, despite the widespread diffusion of the theme of the possibility of travelling to the underworld. To understand their role and even diffusion it is necessary to examine the social organization and geographic position of the peoples who possessed these beliefs and, more important, those who did not.

For example, the Kwakiutl and Tsimshian of the Northwest Coast are representative of people who believed in trips to alternate worlds; these voyages, however, were not a central part of their myth or religion.³⁴ They had complex political organization and

³⁰For a general overview of the mythical symbolism of the western region of North America, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *L'Homme Nu*, Paris: Plon, 1971; S. Thompson, *Tales*, Ibid., p.333. For descriptions of similar Athabascan Indian beliefs, see Robin Ridington, "Knowledge, Power, and the Individual in Subarctic Hunting Societies", *American Anthropologist* 90(1):98-110, 1988; Henry S. Sharp, "Giant Fish, Giant Otters, and Dinosaurs: "Apparently Irrational Beliefs" in a Chipewyan Community", *American Ethnologist* 14(2):226-235, 1987.

³¹For an Athabascan example, see Robin Ridington, "From Hunt Chief to Prophet: Beaver Indian Dreamers and Christianity", *Arctic Anthropology* 24(1):8-18, 1987.

³²See, for example, Frachtenberg, "Eschatology", Ibid., 1920, in which the road that leads to the land of the dead is described as perilous to the spirit-helpers of shamans and souls of sick people.

³³See a Thompson Indian tale, in which a boy travelled to the Land of the Sun in the East (the opposite direction from the location of the Land of the Dead in much of Plateau mythology), and where he received, through misadventures, a new appearance and new clothes. See F. Boas (ed.), *Folk-Tales*, Ibid., 1917, p.43. A visit to the Sky country by Coyote and his son proves dangerous at first but eventually results in friendship; see Boas (ed.), *Folk-Tales*, Ibid., 1917, pp.135-137. A Sanpoil tale describes a visit to the Land of the Sky where hunger ensues; see Verne F. Ray, "Sanpoil Folk Tales", *Journal of American Folklore* 46(180):129-197, 1933, p.157.

³⁴The Orpheus tale was found on the Northwest Coast (for example, the Tlingit, Kwakiutl and Coast Salish groups), although Hultkrantz rightly argues that many of the Northwest Coast tales that deal with visits to the Land of the Dead

elaborate ceremonies that came from a tradition of living in permanent villages by the sea at the mouth of rivers. This location allowed them to harvest the rich seasonal runs of salmon and candlefish that come up rivers to spawn before they die, as well take advantage of the abundant shellfish. The coast dwellers spent their lives dividing their time between two geographic poles, one in their summer mountain villages and the other in their winter seaside homes. The Tsimshian and Kwakiutl, like all Northwest Coast people, used their inland summer villages as bases from which to hunt, trade with their neighbours, gather berries (an important component of their diet) and hunt for hides (which were often lacking in the coastal zones). These outlying areas were not only important for the resources they provided but also for the isolation they offered for defence. While these groups were semi-sedentary in the sense that they exploited a stable resource base, they were just as concerned with the territory beyond their immediate frontiers as nomadic groups were concerned with the ever-present possibility of change and the unknown that was the natural result of their dispersed and strategically weak position. Relations between neighbouring villages are usually volatile, even between villages in the same tribal segment. These societies are traditionally dominated by a heightened awareness of the dichotomous tendencies towards aggregation and dispersal which characterize their lives and their social organization.

The Kwakiutl and Tsimshian are divided into tribes and villages according to 'ethnic' and geographic variables. On the other hand, they also have clans and phratries which unite them in a complex interlocking network that joins and divides them into an ever-changing set of alliances. There is more than one type of tie between villages, and villages themselves are an amalgamation of different cognatic descent groups, called 'houses', which are also composed of clan sub-units, the lineages, usually two (which are sometimes called the 'sides' of the house). Hence, each residential unit is simultaneously a member of a geographic association with political overtones -- the village -- and a politico-religious association that has no fixed geographic expression, the lineage/clan/phratry network.

In brief, these people are very much like the hunting bands of the interior, except that their pattern of resource use brings them together in larger numbers and for longer periods of time. This intensifies the problem of claiming exclusive ownership over areas which are in the buffer zone and which are left unoccupied for as long as people remain in their coastal villages. The practice of naming the ownership groups gives rise to strong notions of sovereignty among these peoples. When threatened by invasion the coastal village people defend themselves -- just as people in hunting bands would-- but, unlike hunting bands, they base their defensive response in part on the notion of sovereignty. Chiefs unite people for purposes of defense along the lines suggested by the manner in which

are not Orphic tales since the dead protagonist is not carried away to the Land of the Dead but to an alternative world, the Land of the Killer Whales, at the bottom of the ocean. Hence, Orpheus tales are relatively few in the complex mythology of the Northwest Coast. See Hultkrantz, *Indian Orpheus*, Ibid., 1957, pp.43-48. For an extensive bibliography of the Tsimshian, see G. Lanoue and M. Korovkin, "On the Substantiality of Form: Interpreting Symbolic Expression in the Paradigm of Social Organization", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30(3), 1988; Jay Miller and Carol Eastman (eds.), *The Tsimshian and Their Neighbours of the North Pacific Coast*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984. For an analysis of Tsimshian mythology and its relation to social organization, see G. Lanoue, "Beyond Values and Ideology: Tales from Six North American Indian Peoples", *Quaderni di Igitur* 4:1-137, Roma: Nuova Arnica Editore, 1990, pp.49-62. On Kwakiutl religious beliefs see Franz Boas, *The Religion of the Kwakiutl Indians*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1930 (vol. 2, Kwakiutl texts only); I. Goldman, *The Mouths of Heaven: An introduction to Kwakiutl religious thought*, New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975; S. Reid, "The Kwakiutl Man-eater", *Anthropologica*, 21:247-275, 1979; Stanley Walens, *Feasting With Cannibals: An essay on Kwakiutl Cosmology*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.

sovereignty is invested in the group; that is, houses and clans in the village fight together, or at the very least are ceremonial and political allies. Friends and enemies alike are invited to participate in elaborate ritual feasts of consumption and distribution, the potlatch, where alliances are formed and formalized.

The potlatch has many economic aspects, but it remains compelling that regardless of the economic situation of the people, potlatches are the key to the formation of alliances.³⁵ When people are rich with foodstuffs and trade goods, a demonstration of their enormous wealth in a potlatch cowers their neighbours into a seeking a peaceful alliance, usually formalized by marriages between the chiefly classes of the respective groups. Lacking great wealth, a group is soon judged weak by its neighbours and is therefore in a bad position to defend its claimed territory, especially the outlying inland areas that are unoccupied for long periods of time. Not surprisingly, all coastal groups work very hard to avoid this situation; their leaders mobilize people to accumulate surpluses of goods that are to be given away or destroyed (as a sign of power) in the potlatch. In the past, these goods included slaves, either captured in war or bought from the Plateau tribes to the South -- precisely from those people whose traditions gave birth to the Prophet Dance. Thus, the cycle of accumulation and distribution was fuelled into a continuous and ever-increasing spiral of competition and, occasionally, war.

This use of an idiom of unity -- several 'houses' joined together by clan or phratric links are the political units that act together in the potlatch -- is what sets these people apart from hunting bands such as the Sekani, Beaver and Plateau peoples in general, and justifies defining these people as tribal despite their hunting and gathering mode of life. Although this general and brief description does not do justice to the many excellent ethnographies which have emerged from this area, it does point to what many ethnographers have noted as the salient feature of Northwest Coast peoples, especially the general tendency towards 'social schizophrenia' which characterized so many aspects of their lives in the fur trade era, the simultaneous tendency to create links with people of different villages on the one hand and to re-affirm village economic autonomy and political independence on the other.

Given the political circumstances which these people faced it is not surprising to find that a predominant concern with dualism -- with the 'here' and 'there' -- emerges in public discourse. If I were Tsimshian, for example, I would always be wondering whether or not my staying 'here' -- either on the coast or in the interior -- is causing my extended

³⁵For descriptions of this aspect of Northwest Coast potlatching, see John Adams, *The Gitksan Potlatch: Population Flux, Resource and Reciprocity*, Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973; Homer Barnett, "The Nature of the Potlatch", *American Anthropologist*, 40(3):349-358, 1938; Franz Boas, *Ethnography of the Kwakiutl*, H. Codere (ed.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966; Helen Codere, *Fighting With Property: A Study of Kwakiutl Potlatching and Warfare, 1792 - 1930*, Seattle: American Ethnological Society Monograph 18, 1966; P. Drucker and R. Heizer, *To Make My Name Good: A Re-examination of the Southern Kwakiutl Potlatch*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967; Brian Ferguson, "Warfare and Redistributive Exchange on the Northwest Coast", in E. Tooker (ed.), *The Development of Political Organization in Native North America: 1979 Proceedings of the A.E.S.*, Washington D.C.: American Ethnological Society, 1983; Mark Fleisher, "The Potlatch: A Symbolic and Psychoanalytic View", *Current Anthropology* 22(1):69-71, 1981; Stuart Piddocke, "The Potlatch System of the Southern Kwakiutl: A New Perspective", *Southwest Journal of Anthropology* 21:244-264, 1965; A. Rosman and P. Rubel, *Feasting With Mine Enemy: Rank and Exchange Among Northwest Coast Societies*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1971; P. Rubel and A. Rosman, "The Evolution of Exchange Structures and Ranking: Some Northwest Coast and Athapaskan Examples", *Journal of Anthropological Research* 39(1):1-25, 1983; M. Seguin, "Lest There Be No Salmon: Symbols in traditional Tsimshian Potlatch", in M. Seguin (ed.), *The Tsimshian*, Vancouver: U.B.C. Press, 1984, pp.110-133; James Spradley, *Guests Never Leave Hungry: The Autobiography of James Sewid, a Kwakiutl Indian*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969; Walens, *Feasting*, Ibid., 1981.

household group to weaken its claim to 'over there'. There is no solution to this state of affairs; it is part and parcel of the system. It goes, literally, with the territory. Yet this dualism takes a particular form: the fear of and the fascination with the unknown pushes these people (like all people) to create alternate worlds populated by strange and inimical beings who, paradoxically, are fonts of knowledge and helpful powers. But the coastal people do not tend to visit the netherworld as much as call the inhabitants of alternate worlds into their midst. The Kwakiutl, for example, have an elaborate mid-winter renewal ceremony in which cannibalistic creatures, the Hamatsa, visit the village and 'eat' a 'victim'. This ceremony was impressively staged, with secret underground tunnels from which the Hamatsa made their appearance, and the 'victim' was a young initiate in one of the brotherhoods who feigned death from contact with the Hamatsa. In the dim winter light that suffused the large smoke-filled ceremonial houses, the sudden appearance from a central fire of a hideously masked cannibal monster who leapt about in a frenzy of blood lust and ate his victim (reputedly a skinned and dressed bear, although the Hamatsa dancers were known to actually tear chunks of flesh from the arms and shoulders of people in the audience) must have appeared an all too convincing demonstration of the presence of spirit visitors from the other world. Even the totem poles, typical of all Northwest Coast peoples, place images of supernatural beings in front of and within the houses (which usually faced the sea) as a form of 'signature': these were usually placed facing seawards, the direction from which potlatch guests arrived.

The Sekani are an Athabaskan-speaking people who live in the great valley formed by the two eastern-most chains of the Rocky Mountains in British Columbia, Canada. They probably numbered about 500 people at the time of contact with Europeans (around 1805), and are still few in number. The Carrier (also speakers of an Athabaskan language) were and are much numerous, since they lived in more or less permanent villages; their position on the Pacific side of the Arctic-Pacific Divide allowed them to exploit the rich annual salmon runs that, indeed, allowed all the western-most people of Canada to flourish and develop village organization, a rich tradition of art, elaborate ceremonial cycles and political-religious organization based on intricately-linked clan, village and phratic categories. By contrast, the Sekani are dispersed nomadic hunters with a relatively simple social organization (though with a complex political culture) whose important categories are based on shared work and residence histories, both present and past.

People like the Sekani and Beaver in the north and the Plateau people south of them visited the netherworld, which, however, was usually accessible only at the periphery of their respective homelands. Although the Tsimshian and other Northwest Coast peoples sometimes visited alternative worlds (the most famous example is Asdiwal, studied by Lévi-Strauss³⁶), the bulk of their stories, especially the Raven cycle and Transformer stories, rarely mention the land of the dead; rather, Transformer (usually Coyote), Mink and Salmon-Boy perform their deeds in the various terrestrial homelands of the people and so account for the present distribution of people, places and natural characteristics of animals.³⁷ Hence, the 'official' ideology of Northwest Coast peoples, elaborated in their

³⁶Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Story of Asdiwal", in *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*, Tavistock Publications: London, pp.1-47, 1967. See Lanoue, *Tales*, Ibid, 1990, for a re-analysis of the Asdiwal myth.

³⁷See Bierhorst, *The Mythology*, Ibid., pp.28-49, 1985; Franz Boas, *Kwakiutl Tales*, New York: Columbia University Contributions to Anthropology 2, 1910; F. Boas, *Kwakiutl Culture as Reflected in Mythology*, New York: American Folklore Society, 1935; John Swanton, *Contributions to the Ethnology of the Haida*, Jesup Expedition vol. 5, pt. 1; Leiden: E.J. Brill (Washington: Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History vol. 8, pt. 1), 1905; John Swanton, *Tlingit Myths and Texts*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Bulletin 39, American Bureau of Ethnology,

'state religion' bolstered by the mid-winter and potlatch ceremonies, held that the inhabitants of the netherworld appeared in their midst in the heart of their communities. This is the critical component that is missing from the religious beliefs of the hunters of the interior. Not surprisingly, their small population, constant movement and only sporadic aggregation (in the summer for a few weeks around a lake or river where fish could be found in relative abundance) made travel a constant theme of their religious ideology and mythology. The Sekani are peculiar in this regard and, just like the Kwakiutl, provide an extreme example of the results of a constant pre-occupation with movement. Their difficult geographic position was both a blessing and a bane, since it prevented wholesale absorption by the westward-moving Europeans.³⁸ On the other hand, their isolation and the harsh conditions in which they lived made them somewhat unique in comparison to other Athabaskan speakers. They were latecomers to the Trench valley (as it is called), hounded from the western part of the Great Plains by the fur trade wars of the latter half of the 18th century. Hence, they had to defend their new territory from the people surrounding the Trench, who claimed (and sporadically visited) the region.

One way of ensuring their claims to vast amounts of land (as a counter to certain changes in the carrying capacity of the land) was to intermittently occupy all parts of their homeland. A peculiarity of this area is the periodicity of the animal population, especially moose, the prized catch. Moose numbers appear to reach a peak every 30 years and then decline, sometimes to the point of local extinction. Hence, the Trench was alternatively valued and disdained by the Sekani and their neighbours: valued when moose were to be found in large numbers, ignored when moose and other animals were few. These conditions urged the Sekani to attempt sporadic incursions into more tempting parts of the region when food was scarce and to defend their land when outsiders decided that the food resources of the Trench made invasions worthwhile. Because of continually fluctuating environmental and political conditions, the Sekani stressed the political autonomy of the two or three (depending on the period) regional bands, a group of people who claimed a homeland in common by virtue of recognizing their vested interest in not attacking each other. Their political organization, in other words, was concentrated on unifying the various family or task groups. Unlike Northwest Coast peoples, there were no long term nor long distance associations that cut across regional-band boundaries. Leadership was by moral exhortation and example. There was no institutionalized system of coercive power; people moved and changed their allegiance at will. Not surprisingly, the Sekani had a highly developed sense of land ownership compared to other nomadic Athabaskan groups in the region, and were quicker than most to fight in order to maintain their claim.³⁹ Fighting, however, was not organized into large-scale offensive or defensive

1909. But see R. Maud, "The Henry Tate-Franz Boas Collaboration on Tsimshian Mythology", *American Ethnologist* 16(1):158-162, 1989, in which Maud claims that many of the Tsimshian tales that have been considered the classic heritage of the anthropology of myth are in fact Tsimshian transcriptions of Kwakiutl texts that were re-translated back into English!

³⁸All information on the Sekani is based on nearly two years of research and residence in 1978 - 1979. G. Lanoue, "Brothers: The Social and Political History of the Sekani of Northern British Columbia", Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto, 1984; "The New Iconography: Elvis, kings, commoners and the perception of change in modern Sekani society", *Igitur* 1(1):71-98, 1989; "La Désunion fait la force: Survie et tensions chez les Sekani de la Colombie Britannique", *Anthropologie et Sociétés* 14(2):117-141, 1990; "Breakdown and Ethnographic Consciousness: The Sekani Case", *The European Journal of Native American Studies* 4(2):45-52, 1990; and *Brothers: The Politics of Violence among the Sekani of northern British Columbia*; Oxford: Berg Publishers Ltd., 1991.

³⁹On Sekani aggressiveness, see J. VanStone, *Athapaskan Adaptations: Hunters and Fishermen of the Subarctic Forests*, Chicago: Aldine, 1974.

actions; it was limited the local or task group, a seasonal association of two or three 'families' (though Sekani 'families' did not resemble European family types).

The Sekani are but an extreme case of pre-occupation with 'over there'. All of these groups have one trait in common: they are concerned with isolation and its consequences; namely, a weakening of their claims of ownership to all parts of their homeland. Consequently, they are disposed to create an elaborate vision of the unknown, of the supernatural world beyond their frontiers.⁴⁰ Yet despite their fears, in extraordinary circumstances these worlds are accessible to human beings by means of temporary visits. Sedentary groups, more highly organized and less mobile than the interior groups, prefer to call visitors from these worlds into their midst, while nomadic people, with more knowledge of 'over there' owing to their constant movement but with even less control over the material circumstances of their lives because of their acephalous political structure, assert a symbolic form of control by preferring to 'visit' (through dreams and by means of travelling souls) these strange lands rather than be visited by strange beings. In this way the tide of potentially dangerous alien and unknown people that threatens to engulf them, in real life as well as in myth, is symbolically kept at bay. Despite their fears, or perhaps because of them, voyages to this terra incognita are a central feature of the mythology of these nomads, since knowledge tames the unknown and creates the illusion that the uncontrollable is in fact part of the normal and knowable realm. The sedentary Tsimshian and Kwakiutl, on the other hand, use their strong centralized political organization as a means of controlling the unknown; foreign visitors -- in life and in myth -- are called into their midst where they confront the entire group, whose collective strength tames the wild and unpredictable spirits.

Although it cannot be asserted that there is a single source for the nearly universal belief in visits to the netherworld (and for the ritual complex that is associated with it), there does appear to be a single source for the Prophet Dance: the Plateau region. And it is precisely here that vision quests, the belief in beneficial spirits and ghosts, widely diffused modes of contact with the spirit world (especially by shamans), and the heaviest North American concentration of Orpheus myths are to be found (See Map 2). Although we cannot know if the area served as a template for the entire western half of North America, Plateau beliefs in spirits and contact with the underworld are exemplary. There are several interesting characteristics that are unique to the Plateau region that shed light on the general phenomenon.

MAPPA 2 QUI

⁴⁰A traveller wrote: "[The Provincial Government Surveyor] got only as far as the "Fishing Lakes" [source of the Finlay, and at the extreme north-northwest of the northern Sekani homeland], where he found many moose. He attributes the number of animals in that locality to the fact that [the Sekani] have a superstitious dread of the country; those who accompanied him could hardly be prevailed upon to enter its precincts. At Fort Grahame one of the Indians drew in the sand for [the Surveyor's] edification a sketch of a footprint he declared he had seen, and it was fully three feet long. Later one of the Indians deserted rather than face the reputed monsters." Paul Haworth, *On the Headwaters of the Peace River: A Narrative of a Thousand Mile Canoe Trip to a Little Known Range of the Canadian Rockies*, New York: Scribners, 1917, p.240.

Although tribes on the fringes of the Plateau region were influenced by their neighbours (from the Northwest Coast on the West and northwest, the Plains to the East and the California culture area to the South and Southeast), conditions varied. The easternmost tribes had tribal organization, a result of Plains influence; the southwest Plateau, like the Klamath, were influenced by the people of California; they had ranked social classes that were, however, much more flexible and less permanent than those of their Northwest Coast cousins. Compared to Northwest Coast groups, in fact, Plateau people did not have a class *system* but merely an acknowledgement of individual differences that were used as a basis by which a moral basis for leadership was expressed. Plateau tribes of the core were generally peaceful, with relatively unimportant rank differences, weak chiefs,⁴¹ and a benign attitude towards slaves (notwithstanding the Klamath practice of capturing Basin people and selling them to the Northwest Coast peoples⁴²). One feature all such groups had in common was village autonomy; that is, the village was the major (and often, the only) social category that conferred identity.⁴³ The key to the Prophet Dance and to the anterior beliefs in voyages to the netherworld lies, I think, in the autonomy of Plateau villages.

The village was the most important political unit; the complex inter-village political ties of the Northwest Coast are lacking.⁴⁴ Plateau local groups were extremely flexible in membership.⁴⁵ Each village was headed by a chief who, unlike his Northwest Coast counterpart, had no ties or real influence over chiefs of other villages. The entire Plateau zone was marked by very flexible arrangements, such that people moved from village to

⁴¹No matter what the influence (Athabaskan, Northwest Coast, California or Plains) on the people of the Plateau, the resemblances far outweighed the differences between them. The Thompson Indians, for example, though influenced by the Northwest Coast (Coast Salish), had villages that were not ownership groups as such, no totems or clans, and an unimportant potlatch system. See F. Boas, "Introduction", in Teit, *Traditions*, Ibid., 1898, p.3.

⁴²Verne F. Ray et al., "Tribal Distribution in Eastern Oregon and Adjacent Regions", *American Anthropologist* 40:384-415, 1938. The authors argue that the introduction of firearms from the Northwest Coast, as well as the introduction of the horse in the Plateau region around the turn of the last century, tipped the previously-equal balance of power between Plateau Sahaptin speaking tribes and Great Basin Shoshonean speakers in favour of the former. See also Spier and Sapir, *Wishram Ethnography*, Ibid., 1930, pp.151-300.

⁴³Ray, *Cultural Relations*, Ibid., 1939, p.5; Angelo Anastasio, "The Southern Plateau: An Ecological Analysis of Intergroup Relations", *Northwest Anthropological Research Notes* 6:109-229, 1972, pp. 189-190; Verne F. Ray, *The Sanpoil and the Nespelem: Salishan Peoples of Northeastern Washington*; Seattle: University of Washington Publications in Anthropology, vol. 5, 1932, pp. 109-111; Deward E. Walker, *Conflict and Schism in Nez-Perce Acculturation: A Study of Religion and Politics*, Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1968, pp.9-13,16,17. Much the same has been noted for the Coast Salish, adjacent to the western edge of the Plateau area, where the same flexibility in the composition of villages has been attributed to the diversity in resources, in turn associated with a wide range of environmental types in a relatively small area. See Astrida Blukisonat, "The Interaction of Kin, Clans, Property Ownership and Residence with Respect to Resource Locations Among the Coast Salish of Puget Sound", *Northwest Anthropological Research Notes* 18(1):86-96, 1984. Another writer has noted that up to 50% of village residents are born outside their village of residence. See Edwin Allen Jr., "Intergroup Ties and Exogamy among Northern Coast Salish", *Northwest Anthropological Research Notes* 10(2):161-172, 1976. The crucial difference between the Coast and the Plateau, then, is the presence of wide-ranging phratric-clan ties among Coastal peoples and their absence in the interior.

⁴⁴Miller, *Prophetic Worlds*, Ibid., 1985, p.35; Ray, *Cultural Relations*, Ibid., 1939.

⁴⁵Jorgensen, *Western Indians*, Ibid., 1980, p.163.

village and from winter villages to summer encampments composed of four or five families; these would sometimes be from different winter (main) villages. Such short term associations were negotiated on an individual basis rather than through linkages established by political chiefs; there were no 'kinship' groups as such in the Plateau.⁴⁶ Plateau peoples generally depended on salmon, roots and berries, like their Northwest Coast neighbours (with the exception of the heavy reliance on roots in the Plateau) but did not locate their villages near fishing stations.⁴⁷ In brief, the entire Plateau was characterized by short-term task-oriented associations which cut across ethnic, linguistic and village affiliations. These temporary networks were defined by the network of relationships created by the migration of people from village to village.⁴⁸ For example, Klamath villages were autonomous, but with changing populations. The Klamath are gatherers, like the Northwest Coast people, but they have a very weakly organized political system. Their chiefs, in fact, have less power than their shamans⁴⁹ and have no special privileges as regards the ownership or exploitation of hunting territories, berry patches and fishing spots. Chieftainship is exclusively based on wealth; hence, the office is temporary, not hereditary. Typically, the Plateau groups fix precise boundaries around particular resource areas, especially fishing stations, but these are "largely formal" and not "economically functional"; that is, resources were generally plentiful, and no matter what form the organization of the local group took, neighbours, friends and kin had the right to use resources 'owned' by others.⁵⁰

Throughout the Plateau hunting is of tertiary or at best secondary importance despite the abundance of game.⁵¹ Village locations are a compromise between proximity to a good

⁴⁶Jorgensen, *Western Indians*, Ibid., 1980, p.177.

⁴⁷This pattern is apparently very old. See C. Melvin Aikens, "The Far West", in Jesse D. Jennings (ed.), *Ancient North Americans*, New York: W.H. Freeman, 1983, pp.184-193.

⁴⁸Ray, *Cultural Relations*, Ibid., 1939, p. 14; Miller, *Prophetic Worlds*, Ibid., 1985, pp. 11-13; Angelo Anastasio, "Ethnohistory of the Spokane Indians", Petitioners Exhibit 180, Indian Claims Commission Docket 47, printed New York: Garland Press, 1974, p.170, cited in Miller, *Prophetic Worlds*, Ibid., 1985, p. 11. Jorgensen, *Western Indians*, Ibid., 1980, p.180.

⁴⁹Leslie Spier, *Klamath Ethnography*, Berkeley: University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology vol. 30, 1930, p.35.

⁵⁰Ray, *Cultural Relations*, Ibid., 1939 p. 15-16; Jorgensen, *Western Indians*, Ibid., 1980, p.180. Suttles, in evaluating the controversy over Ray's assertion (in Ray, *The Sanpoil and the Nespelem*, Ibid., 1932) that the Sanpoil held and preached pacifism (despite some ethnographic evidence to the contrary; see S. Kent, "Pacifism -- a Myth of the Plateau", *Northwest Anthropological Research Notes* 14(2):125-134, 1980), notes that the organization of work and distribution at the fishing stations (at least in those areas that had access to salmon runs) was governed by a kind of communalism, in which every person had free access to any station and received an *equal* portion of the catch regardless of the amount of work he had contributed. The task group leaders (not suprisingly, called Salmon Chiefs) were not political chiefs (they appear to have been in charge of collecting and distributing the catch) and were independent of village chiefs. In brief, political and social egalitarianism was developed and expressed on the Plateau as perhaps nowhere else in North America. The fact that they may have occasionally raided Plains groups may not be as significant as the fact that their Chiefs continually and increasingly urged pacifism as the richness of the catch increased; see W. Suttles, "Plateau Pacifism Reconsidered -- Ethnography, Ethnology and Ethnohistory", in W. Suttles, *Coast Salish Essays*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987, pp.282-286. Pacifism, therefore, was a political and not moral characteristic.

⁵¹See Miller, *Prophetic Worlds*, Ibid., 1985, pp. 11-13; Ray, Ibid., 1932., p.27; Herbert J. Spinden, *The Nez-Percé Indians*, Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association vol. 2 pt. 3, Menasha: American Anthropological

fishing location and to a source of plentiful fuel, an important consideration given the cold winters of the Plateau.⁵² In sum, the Plateau social universe was evidently conceived as a series of nodal points -- the villages -- which existed despite variations in their populations. Hence, the Plateau people of the centre have every reason to feel a stronger concern than most western Indian groups with the 'over there', since they live in fixed villages yet cannot move *en masse* like their Northwest Coast neighbours, nor have they developed wide-ranging formal politico-religious associations like the peoples of the Northwest Coast. Their resources are more seasonally predictable and, in the epoch prior to the advent of the Prophet Dance, appear to have been as abundant as those on the Northwest Coast. Their general disdain of hunting despite generally plentiful game points to the political and structural motives that govern their lives: the specificity of game locations would necessitate a claim to specific hunting areas that would involve them with a type of organization not consistent with the specificity of the other resources they habitually exploit.⁵³ This is a general feature of political and resource-ownership systems everywhere, where widely available or generally dispersed resources are correlated with loose organization; specificity of resources, either seasonal or geographic, is associated with 'tighter' systems of political control.⁵⁴ We cannot know the history of Plateau social evolution in any great detail, but it seems a reasonable guess that the nearby presence of their powerful Northwest Coast neighbours induced the Plateau groups (especially those nearest the Northwest Coast and California peoples, like the Klamath) to balance a nomadic lifestyle against a rudimentary form of central organization based on the village as the central locus of political identity. The Plateau peoples, in other words, would probably have preferred -- or would have been induced to by their pattern resource exploitation -- to live like their pacific and nearly anarchistic northern California cousins, but the presence of their powerful Northwest Coast neighbours probably induced a need for a type of political organization that encompassed at least the village, yet they limited the scope of chiefly political power. They evidently preferred to be providers of slaves rather than slaves themselves.

Association, 1908, pp. 203-204; Jorgensen, *Western Indians*, Ibid., 1980, Map CU 63/V-199, p.392. The point is made even more strongly in another map which correlates data from the majority of western peoples: over 11 species of land mammals were available to people almost everywhere on the Plateau, while only 6 - 10 were available to the peoples of California and the Northwest Coast. Yet in both latter zones hunting was of secondary importance rather than a tertiary activity as it was in the Plateau zone. See Jorgensen, *Western Indians*, Ibid., 1980, Map E-14/V-112, p.327.

⁵²Ray, *Cultural Relations*, Ibid., 1939, p.16.

⁵³Jorgensen's data lead him to conclude that the relative stability of Plateau communities was due to an overwhelming dependence on fish and root predictability rather than on unpredictable game animals. See Jorgensen, *Western Indians*, Ibid., 1980, p.180.

⁵⁴See Allan Richardson, "The Control of Productive Resources on the Northwest Coast of North America", in N.M. Williams and E.S. Hunn (eds.) *Resource-Managers: North American and Australian Hunter-Gatherers*, Boulder: Westview Press for the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1982. The author compares various systems of political control with type and distribution of major resources for the West Coast and concludes that people invest in defending resources only under very particular conditions: when resources are very localized and yet ubiquitous, as in most parts of the Plateau, the cost of 'defending' such dispersed resources is too high. At least one anthropologist has argued that studies of particular Plateau cultures miss the larger set of areal (rather than local) strategies in which people participated. See Anastasio, "The Southern Plateau", Ibid., 1972.

Plateau Religious Concepts

Given this form of organization, it is not surprising that shamans were generally more important than political chiefs as such, and that in any event chieftainship, before the advent of the Prophet Dance and the aggression by the Plains peoples associated with it,⁵⁵ was neither hereditary nor institutionalized as it was on the Northwest Coast. Shamans could predict the future and 'see' beyond the immediate frontiers of the village. Only shamans knew the realm of the dead, as only they had sufficient spirit helpers to guide them along the difficult and dangerous road.⁵⁶ The power of a chief, on the other hand, was based on his wealth, a material and hence transient sign of influence rather than power. Power is gained through spirits, but knowledge comes from ghosts and spirit-ghosts. The world is surrounded by spirits, and a vision quest in search of contact with spirits usually took place on the fringes of the group's territory. Ghosts, the inhabitants of the land of the dead, live in a particular location, the Land of the Dead.

Klamath beliefs about the land of the dead, which are typical of Plateau societies with the Orpheus complex,⁵⁷ suggest that the world of the Dead is an inversion of the everyday life of the living.⁵⁸ It is located in the West, the land of the setting sun (while wealth in the form of slaves came from the East). Ghosts are skeletons by day and clothe themselves in flesh at night, when they light fires and sing and dance until dawn. Ghosts live on swan's eggs, which among the Klamath have a special significance, since swan's never nest in Klamath territory⁵⁹ (see Appendix I for more evidence of eggs as the food of Plateau ghosts). Hence, there is a clear series of inversions presented in Klamath cosmology: the netherworld is in the west, while the material basis of life is in the east; the netherworld is the home of knowledgeable ghosts who can provide information about the future, whereas Klamath territory is populated by spirits whose powers make a man temporarily successful in his dealings with others; ghosts eat special food that comes from beyond Klamath territory, whereas the Klamath are continually torn by a desire to consolidate their villages in one location while depending on scattered resources that are always 'over there', beyond the immediate boundary of the village.

Throughout the Plateau, the knowledge that ghosts confer is generally accessible only to shamans, while spirit power is available to everyone who undergoes a vision quest at puberty. The distinction may seem difficult and subtle, but it is a crucial one: ghosts are the souls of dead ancestors, while spirits are non-human entities whose powers are not greater than an ordinary man's but merely different. Hence, men seek an affiliation with spirits in order to supplement their talents. Power that comes from spirits usually is an aid to daily life; men may acquire specific powers such as curing particular illnesses and being successful in hunting particular species. Spirits are not inherently more or less powerful than one another. People vary in their power according to the number, not type, of spirit helpers they accumulate their vision quests. Ghosts, however, deal in more esoteric forms of knowledge. In a word, ghosts are involved in the resolution of problems removed from

⁵⁵See, for example, Verne F. Ray, "The Columbia Indian Confederacy: A League of Central Plateau Tribes", in, S. Diamond (ed.), *Essays in Honor of Paul Radin*, N.Y.: Columbia University Press for Brandeis University, 1960, p.773; Miller, *Prophetic Worlds*, Ibid., 1985.

⁵⁶Hultkrantz, *Indian Orpheus*, Ibid., 1957, p.238.

⁵⁷Gayton, "The Orpheus Myth", Ibid., 1935, pp.263-264.

⁵⁸Hultkrantz argues that there is a, naturally enough, a strong correspondence between Indian conceptions of the forms of the realm of the Dead in the Orpheus legend and the actual culture, proving that the Orpheus legends were well-integrated into the local cultures. See Hultkrantz, *Indian Orpheus*, Ibid., 1957, pp.39-42.

⁵⁹Spier, *Klamath*, Ibid., 1930, p.142.

the immediate sphere of life. It is shamans' spirit helpers that allow him or her to visit the underworld and gain such knowledge.

Contact with ghosts leads to greater knowledge -- either concerned with existential issues like the origin of death or, in the Prophet Dance, the proposed re-organization of the world -- and it is knowledge that it is the key element in the Prophet Dance. In a word, the people of the Plateau live in a world of spirits who can make daily life easier, but it is the ghosts of their ancestors who can aid them in preparing for the future. Contact with ghosts indicates a concern or even a retreat to the past in an attempt to overcome the inherent limitations of their present social organization. The outcome of a visit to the netherworld is a privileged insight that alleviates the chronic lack of knowledge about the world beyond the frontier. Shamans also have special powers, like ordinary men, but their specific contact with the netherworld is usually linked to an enhanced ability to predict and hence control the future.

We know little of the specific myths relating to these beliefs, but there are two significant and opposed examples that are well known. Significantly, one Tsimshian who did visit the netherworld, Asdiwal, came back with special powers that failed to help him predict or control his own future. His life was marred by tremendous misfortune as well as good luck, and in the Tsimshian story of Asdiwal, he finishes his days turned into a rock, unseeing and immobile. The Carrier prophet Peni, on the other hand, was able to go to the Land of the Dead (transformed into 'heaven' in this later version collected in the 1890s) and successfully predict the arrival of Whites into the region and, more importantly, mobilize his people to receive the new visitors.

Conclusion

I have argued that the visits to the netherworld are specifically conceived of as a search for knowledge. Such knowledge was linked to an attempt to see beyond the immediate horizon. Accepted theories of crisis cults lead the researcher into a certain methodological stance; namely, the seeking of crises.⁶⁰ The evidence suggests, however, that 'crisis' may be too strong a term to describe the circumstances surrounding Peni's movement and the Prophet Dance in general. It is possible that the Prophet Dance of the late 1700s and/or

⁶⁰The debate on the aboriginality of the movement has been addressed by several writers. It is an important debate because of the issues it raises; namely, the nature of revitalization, social disintegration, and responses to crises. Aberle argues that the Prophet Dance cult could have been caused by cultural deprivation associated with indirect contact with Whites. Spier, Suttles and Herskovits disagree and maintain that although the Prophet Dance later added elements intended to deal with cultural distress the cult was not itself caused by contact-induced stress. Walker suggests that indirect contact played a role in Plateau culture, as shown in late pre-contact era changes in burial customs. Even if the Prophet Dance is aboriginal as Spier claims, Walker suggests that it is linked to the disruptive effect of Indian-White contact, as does Miller. Disruption is in part caused by the desire to acquire White goods; hence, the Prophet Dance has some cargo cult elements. See D. Aberle, "The Prophet Dance and Reactions to White Contact", *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 15:74-83, 1959; L. Spier, W. Suttles and M. Herskovits, "Comments on Aberle's Thesis of Deprivation", *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 15:84-88, 1959; D.F. Walker, "New Light on the Prophet Dance Controversy", *Ethnohistory* 16:245-255, 1969; Miller, *Prophetic Worlds*, *Ibid.*, 1985. At least one writer has cogently argued that the Plains Ghost Dance is a religious response to severe socio-cultural disintegration. See Russell Thornton, *We Shall Live Again: The 1870 and 1890 Ghost Dance Movements as Demographic Revitalization*, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1986. One writer has disagreed that the Plateau Prophet Dance was Aboriginal, although this conclusion is based on much less intensive investigation than undertaken by Spier and Ray, who dedicated their careers to studying Plateau cultures. See Cora DuBois, *The Feather Cult of the Middle Columbia*, Menasha: George Banta Publishing Co., 1938.

early 1800s was a reaction against the introduction of European technology among the peoples of the Cordillera, yet the evidence is simply too weak to allow even this moderate conclusion. Although the acceptance of a foreign technology implies that a clash exists between contrasting or at least different forms of social organization, it is unlikely that this could have developed so soon after the introduction of European technology by a third party. And in any case, in some ways the Sekani and Carrier were to make a very successful adaptation to the fur trade, even though most of the fur trade era was marked by very difficult economic conditions. There is no evidence to suggest that a similar reaction was typical of this later and even more stressful period. The question remains: why the Prophet Dance? And why the centrality of visits to the Land of the Dead or to alternate worlds?

It seems reasonable to suspect that this earlier Prophet Dance was a continuation of an already long established tradition of cultural expression centred on contact with the netherworld. This is indeed the position taken by Ridington in his examination of the modern Beaver Prophet Cult.⁶¹ Here, the movement is linked to cycles of adjustment to the natural world by means of instructions and advice from the supernatural domain. In other words, the Beaver and other Athabaskan groups who possess a Prophet Dance tradition do not react to difficult dilemmas with irrational and escapist cults. These Athabaskans appear to have one trait in common; they anticipate certain kinds of problems before a final paradox is presented (as I have argued elsewhere; see note 38). It may be that Athabaskan and Plateau cult activity is a means of producing a heightened awareness of potential problems and sustaining that awareness until some sort of resolution is reached. Promulgation and popularization of the problem gives everyone has a chance to encounter a new discourse. As Burrige argues, prophets and other leaders of this sort are those people whose solutions are more appealing by virtue of their congruence with an already developed discourse.⁶² Their views and visions are thus adopted, even if temporarily. Whether or not the discourse moves from the strictly ideological to the political domain probably depends on the particular situation; whether or not there is a classic colonial situation of settlement, forced labour, and so on. Cult movements, in other words, are not so much reactions to a crisis as a form of anticipation which allows an examination of the situation from perspectives which are not normally accepted within the culture. The end of the movement would signify success in a people's search for a solution, not necessarily the failure to find a solution.

I have suggested that the point of entry to the netherworld and the frequency of visits depend directly on a group's social and especially its political organization.⁶³ All western North American Indians have a territorial form of social and political organization based on the idea that autonomy and self-sufficiency are possible if large enough tracts of land are claimed. However, the small populations, which make permanent occupation impossible (and undesirable, since it would defeat the aim of self-sufficiency), create a structural problem inherent in this form of organization. Hence, there are various manifestations of

⁶¹R. Ridington, *Swan People: A Study of the Dunne-Za Prophet Dance*, National Museum of Man, Mercury Series No. 38: Ottawa, 1978, p.2-4. Messianic revitalization movements or crisis cults have been reported for the Bear Lakers by Osgood and for the Kutchin by McKennan. C. Osgood, "The Distribution of the Northern Athapaskan Indians", *Yale University Publications in Anthropology* 7:1-23, Yale University Press: New Haven, 1932; R.A. McKennan, *The Chandalar Kutchin*, Arctic Institute of North America, Technical Paper No. 17, 1965.

⁶²K. Burrige, *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities*, Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1969, p.11-14.

⁶³This position is similar to Hocart's arguments, in which he argues that organization for ritual predates political organization, that ritual organization gives birth to government organization when society becomes complex enough to need coordination. See A.M. Hocart, *Kings and Councillors: an essay on the comparative anatomy of human society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

territoriality which depend on the interplay between resources and the political environment and, with them, different conceptions about the location of the netherworld and its importance in daily life.

One end of the scale are the people of the Northwest Coast, whose bipolar form of residence and claims of relatively large tracts of unoccupied land (given their concentrated populations) for reasons of economy and defense create a fertile base for a preoccupation with 'over there' and a belief in the netherworld. These people have developed extremely complex political structures that empower them to exert considerable control over the economic bases of their material lives and, by extension, be less pre-occupied with predicting the future. Future security, in other words, is 'assured' -- at least ideologically -- by forming complex political associations and imbuing these with sacred (and hence inviolable) overtones. Hence, the existence of netherworld as such is acknowledged, but visits in search of knowledge or other less esoteric commodities are of lesser ideological importance than political power. Instead, Northwest Coast peoples assert their power over the unknown by summoning the netherworld into their midst and 'taming' it, especially in the Hamatsa (mid-winter) ceremonies.

On the other end of the scale are the Athabaskans like the Sekani and the Beaver. These people possess a 'classic' form of territorial organization, with large territories and small dispersed nomadic hunting groups. There, the netherworld is at the fringe of their territory and contact with spirits is relatively frequent. These people are specifically concerned with gaining knowledge about the future, a very real problem given their limited contacts with the people beyond the frontiers of their homelands. Such contacts, however, are not an integral part of their culture, in the sense that even if their constant movement over the landscape allows them some knowledge about their neighbour's intentions, there remains a culturally defined gap between knowledge and action: they have some knowledge of territories beyond their frontiers *in fact* but no institutionalized means of validating it or responding to it other than on an individual basis. Hence, there is relatively little overt emphasis on ghosts and visits to the Land of the Dead as such; the medium of contact is largely by means of dreams rather than corporeal visits or visible trances. Furthermore, their neighbours are people who are more or less organized along the same political lines; they are, therefore, not in a position to conquer any more than be conquered and consequently have fewer worries about long-term political survival than peoples of the Plateau.

The strongest development of the netherworld concept is in the Plateau region, which the evidence suggests was the heart of the Prophet Dance movement. Plateau peoples are neighbours of the powerful societies of the Northwest Coast (accomplished raiders and conquerors), the people of the California culture area (renowned for its almost anarchistic socio-political organization), and the powerful quasi-military Plains tribes to the East. Furthermore, the feeble village organization of the Plateau, while enabling them to maintain some form of political coherency and centralized resistance to the Northwest Coast and Plains peoples, has a drawback: the resources they depend on are scattered; not scattered enough to make settled village life impossible, as it is for the Athabaskans, but discrete enough to draw people (and divide the already-tenuously defined community) to particular locations at different times of the year. This creates a sense of the importance of individually-based networks along with political impotence. Moving about less than the Athabaskans but with relatively weak centralized political organization, Plateau peoples in one sense reap the harvest of the worst of both worlds. Hence, it is not surprising that they are very concerned with the frontier and with the future; they have enough of a centralized culture to transcend the individual but not enough of a political organization to confront their neighbours or the unknown on their own terms. Hence, shamans who visit the netherworld in search of knowledge are traditionally more esteemed than war or political

leaders. With the advent of the White man and all the drastic changes this entailed, the tradition of Prophets who visited the land of the dead for specific instructions on how to cope with the crisis came to play a central role in the cultural survival of these peoples. Not love but fear is the motivation for the prominence of an Orpheus mythological cycle among the Plateau peoples of western North America.

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APPENDIX I

A Plateau Orpheus Tale The Origin of Death¹

Coyote's² married daughter³ was accidentally burned to death. Her husband moved away and left Coyote alone.⁴ One night, as Coyote was sleeping,⁵ his daughter came and talked to him. "I have just come to see you," she said. "I'm going on to where the dead people live. You cannot go with us, because you are alive, and we are dead." Coyote said that he would follow her. "You can come along if you throw yourself into the fire,"⁶ the girl told him. Coyote threw himself into the flames; but as soon as he felt the pain, he jumped out again. He was so badly blistered, however, that his daughter allowed him to go along. "You will never see us again," she told him, "but you will hear us later. There is nothing to eat on the trail. You must stick your hand in your mouth. That will satisfy you."

The girl led the way, and Coyote followed her voice. It often led him into rocks and trees. There was the noise of laughter ahead of him, and Coyote followed the sound. Though it was daylight, Coyote could see nothing. They talked only when evening came, and then Coyote would follow the sound.⁷ They travelled for five days.⁸ At the end of that time Coyote could almost see them. In five days more, they would be like people to him.

When they finally arrived at the land of the dead, they feared they would have to bar him from it, because he was alive. They made him sleep at some distance from the others. The land of the dead was very close to the sea.⁹ All about him Coyote saw all kinds of eggs. They gave him a bag full of holes in which to gather eggs. He filled the bag, and saw that all the eggs fell through the holes. Therefore he did not even tie it up. When he came back to his daughter he had nothing at all. The girl then said to him, "Next time fill up the bag; and even if falls together as if there were nothing in it, be sure to tie it up. Then it will be full." - "That is what I thought," replied Coyote. He went back to gather more eggs. He filled the bag and tied it up. He threw it on his back, but it seemed as though there was nothing in it. Soon, however, it grew heavy; and when he reached the house, it was quite full. Henceforth it became his duty to gather eggs.

Though he heard people talk, he could not see them. He would laugh over their jokes and they would talk about him. They said that they would put themselves into a bag, which he was to carry home. When they were ready, they told to start. He travelled over five mountains. The girl said to him, "Father, now we are going home. Four of the mountains will be easy to climb, but the fifth one will be hard. You will hardly be able to climb it but do not under any circumstances open your pack.¹⁰ When you have reached the other side of the last mountain, untie the bundle, and there will be people in it. When later others die, they too will come back in a little while." Coyote promised not to untie the bag. "I may be able to cross the mountains in two days," he said. He threw the pack on his back and started on his journey. This time he had a little food with him. He crossed three mountains, and the load began to get heavy. He heard the people laugh and talk and he was very glad. He crossed the fourth mountain, and now there was only one more to climb. He started to climb it and managed to get within a few feet of the top. He was very tired, still he forced himself to go about four feet more, but that was as far as he could go. Though he had only about six feet to travel,¹¹ he opened his pack. Those in the pack then said to him, "Father, now we must go back and you will have to go home. Henceforth when

people die, they will be dead forever." Then Coyote cried, and said, "I shall not be the only one to mourn a child. All people shall do the same as I.¹² When a person dies, they shall never see him again." Thus he said, and went home. That is the end.

NOTES:

1. A Sahaptin example from F. Boas (ed.), *Folk Tales*, Ibid., 1917, pp.178-179.
2. Coyote is the Trickster/Transformer figure in much of the western half of the North American continent. By design (Transformer) or inadvertently while letting his playful and menacing nature have free rein (Trickster), he is responsible for much of the natural and social features of the Indians' world.
3. The figure of the daughter is much more important in tales of visits to the Land of the Dead than the wife.
4. A reference to initial patrilocality after marriage, in which the groom undertakes to live with and provide services for the bride's family for a period after marriage.
5. Visions usually come in sleep or in states of altered consciousness.
6. Possibly a reference to a missionary version of the Christian hell.
7. A typical Plateau belief regarding ghosts, which cannot be seen but only heard during the day. See Ray, *Cultural Relations*, Ibid., 1939.
8. Five is the typical Plateau 'pattern number', roughly equivalent to the Christian three and the Plains Indians four.
9. That is, to the West.
10. This is the Plateau equivalent of the injunction against looking back into Hades in the Greek Orpheus.
11. That is, he had to travel 10 feet (twice 5). It is significant that the distance is broken down into two 'imperfect' halves (6 and 4 feet).
12. This is Coyote in his double role as Transformer (inventor of death) and Trickster (spiteful and envious of human beings).