



LIḡWÍŁDAḡW RESEARCH CENTRE

We are continuing regular newsletter updates to share exciting history from the Archives with the communities. Some of you know these stories but others do not, so it is a pleasure to introduce the eighth edition of: **Tales from the Vault.**

The Young Shaman

This story was written down by German anthropologist Franz Boaz and George Hunt of Tsaxis (Fort Rupert), and published in 1905 in the Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History, “Kwakiutl Texts.”

Qatenats, a youth from the Liḡwíłdaḡw village of Čaqʷəlutən (“Tsa-kwa-loo-tuhn”), trained to become a shaman by bathing in a cold, fresh-water stream that ran beside his village. He was jealous of Qatemo, a powerful older established shaman, because he was paid in canoes, princesses and slaves. He wanted to become a shaman himself and prove his superior power in a struggle to succeed his rival.

He asked his younger brother to come with him, and together they went upstream to a place where a rock lay in the middle of the river. There the youth noticed a piece of bark lying on the rock and, feeling that it might be a sign to him, he sent his younger brother downstream to bathe in a separate place so that he might be alone. Every morning and evening for four days they returned to the river to purify themselves.

On the evening of the fourth day, the youth was startled by a strange noise on his return upstream to the rock. Something was moving in the salal bushes. He became afraid, and taking hold of the bark, he hurled it with great force into the bushes. The noise ceased. Though he did not know it then, the hidden being was Sisiutl, a terrible and dangerous sea serpent who could give shamanic power for curing the sick or paralyze the bodies of those not ready to receive such power.



Figure 1 Sisiutl mask carved by Oscar Matlpi



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Early the next morning the youth asked his brother to paddle him out to Mitlenatch Island; there he told his brother to return home with the canoe. He assured him that he would return. Then he descended by means of a kelp stem to the house of Komogwa (Wealthy), controller of the sea animals in the underwater world.



Figure 2 Komogwa mask by Bill Henderson

There were many shamans in the house of Wealthy, all of whom had tried but failed to relieve the pain in the side of Sisiutl, who lay there in human form. These shamans then asked the youth to attempt a cure. On feeling for the pain in the body of the “man” the youth felt the piece of bark which he had thrown while bathing, and sucked it out from the flesh. Immediately Sisiutl was relieved of his pain, and he praised the youth. He offered to help him become a great shaman. At once a power came into the house, and the young man fell into a trance. A lake appeared inside the house with reeds growing in it. A bird soared over the lake. But when the youth regained his senses, the vision was gone.

Meanwhile his brother, fearing that the young shaman was drowned, searched the beaches on the south end of the island near his village of Čaq'włutən. When he finally came upon what appeared to be his brother's lifeless body, he found the young shaman still in trance, but alive. Together they returned to their father's house in the village.

Then all the people were called to witness the vision and curing powers of the young shaman. When he came among them in the house, a lake appeared with reeds growing in it, and a bird came soaring over the lake. Then power came into him, and he cured the sick. The rival shaman attempted to trick him and expose him as a fraud, whereupon the young shaman turned the situation to his advantage and destroyed his rival.