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first person account

A First Nations hand game: Gambling from supernatural power

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In 1969 I was fortunate to experience the verve and the warmth of traditional native gambling as an indirect result of a federal cabinet decision. That summer two representatives from British Columbia's First Nations advocacy groups came to our department at the University of British Columbia to ask for volunteers from among us graduate students. They explained that the federal government had just tabled a White Paper that threatened to deprive them of their aboriginal rights as enshrined in the British North America Act of 1867. They asked us to help them to defend their rights by working with them on research and to prepare briefs and position papers.

Three of us volunteered and that week began working under the direction of our First Nations colleagues. By day we researched archives; on evenings and weekends we caucused to help draft position papers and to plan strategy. As we collaborated with our native colleagues, we became good friends. Eventually, they commented with some sadness that we didn't really know them. As an elderly matriarch put it, "We must seem like really *uptight* bureaucrats from the reserve just fighting those white bureaucrats in Ottawa." She turned to me. "Did you ever have smoked salmon and bannock? And see the hand game? That's how we gamble, you know. Only we call it *slahál* in our language. My family has some songs for that, we're pretty strong." She and the other women laughed.

That was our invitation to the Cultus Lake Indian Festival. During the two-hour drive from Vancouver our native friends mentioned that the lake wasn't their favourite place. The park did have enough space for hundreds of people to cook, visit, race war

canoes, and gamble. But *cultus* means *no-good* in the Chinook language. They knew that this lake was bottomless, that monsters swam between it and other lakes miles away, setting up dangerous currents.

But for me, the park setting was shaded and quiet, considering the hundreds of people there. The calm lake seemed timeless. A peaceful setting, sunshine, a few clouds. Soon we were ambling through scattered crowds, meeting our friends' families. In the quietest, most gracious way we were offered scrumptious baked salmon, potato salad, fresh-made bannock, soft drinks, and dried candlefish. There were few non-aboriginal people and they fit in quietly.

But when the huge war canoes began racing, each canoe with 11 men paddling with gusto, there were problems. White men speeding in powerboats cut in so close to take movies of the paddlers that their rooster-tail wakes filled the canoes. The announcer asked the power boaters to please stay clear of the racing area. They ignored him. Some canoes won their heat because a competitor was swamped, dead in the water. There was much outrage at such blatant fouling of an athletic event.

After the war canoe fiasco, I wondered if native people who didn't know about us and our advocacy work would resent our being there and might object to our watching their gambling? More than ever I was conscious that, "You are walking on Indian land" (as it was phrased in the 1960s). This beautiful park was now theirs to enjoy only for this weekend and only on the sufferance of a provincial agency. Yet everyone was friendly and smiled when they asked me if I was going to see the hand game.

Just before we left our comfortable campfire, an athletic Salish man in his forties explained to us how they play *slahál*. The two opposing teams sat facing each other across a fire. The *holders* had two pairs of short bones, each bone was about the size of an adult's thumb. One bone per pair was marked with designs and one wasn't. Players hid the bones in their closed fists. They sang and drummed for supernatural power to confuse the other side's *guesser* who had to guess which hands held which bones. The prize, or the *pot* was a bundle of cash. Then our friends asked us to go along to the game.

We found a clearing where a fire was burning between the two teams facing each other. Each team had a straight line of players, perhaps two-thirds of them were men, who knelt or sat facing the other team. Onlookers gathered behind them, at least a hundred in all.

A round of play began with a man circulating and gathering bets, while a young woman carefully wrote down in a notebook the amount that each person contributed. When all who wanted to bet had placed their money, a man from each side met his counterpart and they compared amounts. One side was short a few dollars, so he went back to his people to raise enough so that each side placed equal amounts. Then the pot was tied up in a scarf and placed in the middle, off to one side, away from the fire, and from anyone.

The side with the bones began drumming and loudly singing a melody that was pure and haunting, soaring and strong. Each drummer held his own instrument, sometimes heating the skinhead over the fire to tighten it. The song radiated confidence and an upbeat attitude. The music was the first thing to impress me. I had expected to hear high-pitched, keening songs like those of the First Nations of the Plains. But these songs were pitched in a speaking voice range and were as melodious as a choral composition. Even now, 34 years later, the beauty of their songs and drumming so fill my memory that it's difficult to write.

The team leader sat in the middle of the line holding the two pairs of bones that his side would hide. He sometimes rolled them in his hands, rolled them on the blanket or on a wooden plank or passed them to people on his side to roll around and handle. Finally, he handed them to two men who were on either side of him and they did the same for a while, then finally hid their hands behind a drum or a Cowichan sweater as they switched them to a final position, one bone in each fist. Then they still moved their hands and arms around. A holder sometimes stretched his hands toward the opposing side, sometimes crossing them in front of his chest. The leader was calm and serious. I found myself hypnotized by song, drumming, and rhythmic movements, and remembered our friend saying that songs have power.

The side that would guess the positions of the bones was silent, unmoving, and totally absorbed in looking for clues to which hands held the unmarked bones. The slightest movement of eye, hand, or body could be read to tell which hand held the important bone. Possibilities included false signals. As the bone-holding side sang and drummed, a few onlookers held up coins, smiled, and sought eye contact with anyone on the other side willing to make a side bet.

Suddenly, the singers and drummers ceased. Abrupt silence. Previously, everyone's attention had been on the side that was singing, drumming, and moving the hidden bones around. Now, in a heartbeat all eyes were on the guesser. He hesitated dramatically before revealing his choice, indicating by a hand gesture where he thought the two unmarked bones were. Whoops

of victory by the successful side and the bones were handed over with dignity, even by a side that had lost often.

Next, someone from the winning side stabbed a one foot-long, painted marker stick into the earth, leaning toward the other side. And the next round began with the former guessers now singing, drumming, and hiding the pairs of bones.

I was appalled to see one of my non-aboriginal colleagues pull out a tape recorder and turn it on. For the Salish, as for other First Nations peoples of the Northwest Coast, not only songs, but the rights to lands, resources, myths, dances, masks, and countless other treasures are gifts of supernatural origin for specific individuals or families. Only the owners can offer them to someone. I was trying to decide how to stop her when two older Salish women moved in so close to her that they blocked off the recorder's built-in microphone. She moved away to get clear, and they boxed her in again. Yet all was genial, the cultural guardians even smiled at her once. She finally put the recorder back in her handbag.

Eventually, after numerous rounds, one side won the game, and with cheer, but not gloating, divided the pot. Each person won twice his or her original bet, double or nothing. People chatted, some joked as they paid up or collected their side bets. Elders talked in Salish.

The games went on until early morning. I was disappointed when they ended; for I felt that I had seen something timeless and important, although there was much that I had not understood..

Later, from friends and by reading, I learned about details of the game that had baffled me in the dark and the confusion. Question: What did the guessing really involve? (In the dark, with the campfire flaring, I could barely see the bones, but sometimes one man showed one or both bones and sometimes two men showed all four bones.) Answer: Two men each handled one pair of bones and each man's pair had a marked "male" bone and an unmarked "female" bone; for the female bones were the ones identified by the guesser. One clear gesture by the guesser indicated which hands he felt held the unmarked bones. Sometimes showing only one bone out of the four showed the guesser's error. To avoid showing all of the bones often made strategic sense; for if one holder allowed even a slight giveaway – the barest indication by eye, hand or body – the guesser might then realize it on finally seeing where all of the bones really were. I also wondered if the game had always been like this. I read that it was structured like many other Salish gambling games.

Academics who research gambling debate whether a given game is based on skill, on luck, or a combination of the two. From a western science perspective, my vote is to see this as nearly totally a game of skill with little luck involved. I also respect and accept the Salish perspective that this is a game from supernatural powers; the power of the leader, of the collective strength of each side, and the power of their songs.

Our First Nations friends saw how much I enjoyed watching *slahál* and so either took me to games or told me where to find them. I always felt welcome, but I didn't gamble. For me, it was enough to witness the drama and to hear such powerful singing and drumming.

One final, very personal memory from that game. The next morning, after no sleep and the excitement of such hauntingly beautiful songs and drumming, I struggled to stay awake as we drove home. While dozing, I imagined a young aboriginal man of 200 years ago:

I paddle my small dugout canoe home tonight, starlit, no moon, close to shore and quite near our slahál game. To my right, far up the bank, a fire outlines my family and our very welcome visitors, singing, drumming, gambling: hope and disappointment. To my left, in unfathomable depths, monsters scheme and coil in cold waters.

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Competing interests: PL is editor of the *Journal of Gambling Issues*.

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