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Shuswap Songs & Dances

SHUSWAP CULTURAL SERIES • BOOK 7
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SHUSWAP
SONGS AND
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SHUSWAP CULTURAL SERIES - Book Seven

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Shuswap Songs and Dances

Drums were used at dances and as an accompaniment to singing. They were circular and exactly like those of the Thompson tribe. They were very seldom painted or decorated in any way. Fawn's hoofs were sometimes attached all around the rim.

Certain kinds of ceremonial dress and ornaments were used when giving dances and potlatches. Each group had a distinct song and dance. Most dances were performed in the winter-time only, but some could take place at any season. The only masks remembered are one representing a beaver and another representing a corpse. Rattles made of wood and bark enclosing pebbles were commonly used in dances.

Marmot Dances

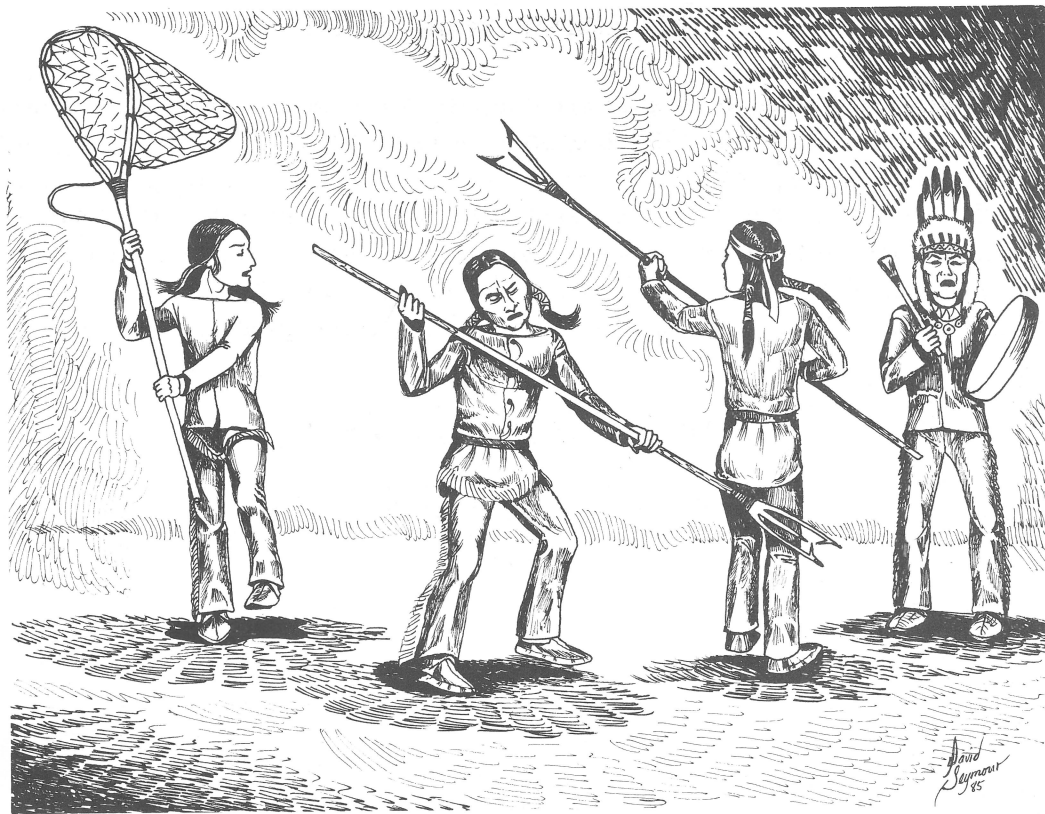
The chief actor appeared carrying a pack and the sticks used for marmot-traps as if he were going on a trip to the mountains to trap marmots. Another man imitating the action of the marmots by motions and by whistling, and the dance finished with his capture by the trapper. The song to this dance was very peculiar.

Hunger or Famine Dance

The chief actor appeared almost naked and painted like a skelton to represent the famine. White strips running down the legs, arms and backbone, across the shoulders and along the ribs, representing bones. Circles were painted around the eyes and dots or marks in the brow, cheeks and chin. He had white paint or down on his head and a long white streak across his mouth. Sometimes he wore a mask with hollow cheeks, protruding eyes and projecting jaws and teeth. Hunger was one of the figures of Shuswap mythology.

The Beaver Dance

The performers wore masks of bark and headbands of beaver skin, having a beaver tail in front and a number of tail feathers all around. The mask was painted with vertical red stripes.



Salmon Dance

Some men who were said to belong to the Salmon used to act in a dance the catching of salmon with dip-nets, spears, etc., meanwhile singing the Salmon Song.

Moose, Caribou, Elk and Deer Dances

The persons acting dressed in the skins of these animals with the scalp part hanging over their head and face. Some had antlers attached to the head and neck. Others assisted in the acting. The dancers went through all the actions of the animal impersonated, imitated its feeding, and fighting, hunting and snaring, chasing over lakes in canoes and final capture or death.

Ceremonial Dances

The songs sung at the ceremonial dances are supposed to have been obtained from the spirit-land. It is also said that the chief of the dead advised the Indians to perform these ceremonies. They were also said to make it easier for the dying to reach the spirit-land and to make life there more pleasant for them and to strengthen the bonds between the living and the dead. It was also believed that no more messages from the spirit-land would come if the ceremonies were not performed.

Mystery Songs

Once at least, during the winter, the people gathered in the largest underground house, and each in turn sung his mystery-songs either the most powerful song obtained from his guardians, or the one best adapted for the purpose of the ceremony. Each man, in his song, told whatever was wonderful or important that had happened to his spirit since last they sang the mystery-songs. A very few of the men danced when they sang. This ceremony trained all the youths in the singing of their mystery-songs, to give them self-confidence, to find out how they were progressing, what their guardians were, and who among them was likely to become great.

Service Berry Dance

Women danced with baskets and branches of service berry branches, imitating the gathering of berries.



Prairie Chicken and Ruffed Grouse Dance

These were performed by both men and women, the dancers imitating the cries and all the action of these birds. Each dance had a song of its own. They adopted the Prairie Chicken Dance and Song and their women sometimes danced it at potlatches for amusements, the dancers being paid.

Potlatches

The Shuswap gave many potlatches. Guests upon arrival made an offering or present of many articles which were accepted by their hosts. A special short song was sung when gifts were given and received. It was accompanied by loud beating of drums and shaking of rattles. Another special song was sung when the people were about to be feasted. It was commenced as the servers were seen carrying in the food.

The party receiving gifts had to return them in equal or slightly increased in value at a future date.

The Thunder, Wind, Rain, Arrow and Frog Dances

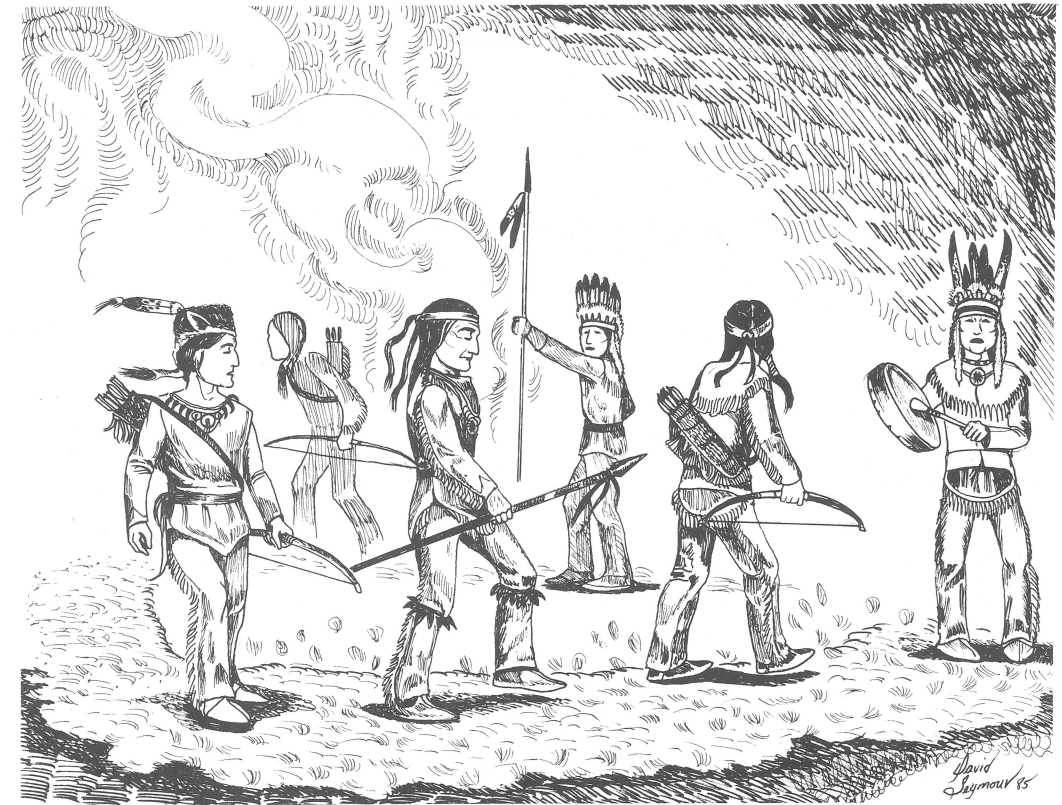
The performers wore headbands of beaver skin, without the tail. No masks were used but faces were painted in different ways. In one or two of these dances, arrows with very large stone heads were used, and the bows were covered with dentalium shells. Feathers and scalps of red-headed woodpeckers were attached to the body and hair. In a few dances, necklaces and belts of cedar or other bark dyed red were used by the dancers, while others wore necklaces of dentalia. Short bark whistles were sometimes used and strings of fawn's hoofs were often worn around the ankles, knees, wrists, elbow and neck.

The Graveyard Dance

This dance was performed when people erected large carved monuments at graves. In later days it was performed when people carried heavy logs to graveyards for use as the bottom logs or sills of fences. It was performed to give people strength. Drums were brought, people sang and soon they snatched up the log and marched away with it. As excitement increased, they danced with the log, sometimes raising it above them. One to four men would leap on top of the log and dance on it, or run back and forth on it, as it was carried along. The log was carried to the houses first where other people joined in and then it was carried to the graveyard, deposited and the dance stopped. This dance was always performed at night.

The Snow Dance

Much swan's down was scattered about, perhaps in imitation of snow and the dance was performed chiefly by hunters, who dressed as if they were travelling on snowshoes in cold weather. They danced in a circle, carrying their bows and arrows and sang the Snow Song.



The War Dance

Warriors moved in a circle against the sun's course, singing their war song. The warriors tried to make themselves look as fierce as possible and many different hair arrangements and curious head-dresses were used. Every warrior decorated himself with eagle feathers stuck in or fastened to their hair, or attached to the war-caps which many wore. Eagle feathers were also attached to the elbows, wrists, legs, clothes, spears, clubs and even sometimes to the trailers of moccasins.

References:

Dawson, George M., “**Notes on the Shuswap People of British Columbia**”, Trans. Roy. Soc. Canada, Section II, 1891

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SHUSWAP DECLARATION

TO WORK IN UNITY ON SHUSWAP LANGUAGE, HISTORY AND CULTURE

Traditionally, Shuswap territory covered an area of 56,000 square miles and included the Thompson River drainage basin, extended eastward to the Columbia River Valley and reached north into the Fraser District. European settlement and colonialism eroded Indian title to traditional lands and lead to the eventual breakdown of the Shuswap Nation. Where thirty communities existed at the turn of the century, seventeen remain occupying only one-third of the traditional territory.

British imperialism and the colonizing of the Indian nations resulted in the disintegration of the society and a gradual decline of Shuswap culture and language.

For years the Shuswap bands have struggled to recover their heritage and restore it to its true role as the foundation of their nation.

Perseverance and hard work resulted in the signing of the Shuswap Declaration, August 20, 1982. The seventeen Shuswap bands had agreed to work together to preserve, record, perpetuate and enhance the Shuswap language, history and culture. The Shuswap Declaration marked the renewal of a strong and harmonious relationship that existed among the bands prior to European contact.

The Secwepemc Cultural Education Society is one of two sub-groups of the larger Shuswap Cultural Working Committee involved in cultural education programming and carrying out the Shuswap Declaration Agreement.

THE SECWEPENC CULTURAL EDUCATION SOCIETY
would like to thank everyone who assisted
in the research and production of the Shuswap Cultural Series.