

RAVEN

the origin tales

**TALES EDITED WITH ORIGINAL PAINTINGS
BY
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Introduction

My early childhood was full of legends, myths, sagas and tales. I remember being enthralled by Norse trolls with one eye, and Celtic dragons breathing fire. It fed my imagination and formed, for better or worse, my outlook on the world and the creatures in it, especially humans. Usually it made it easier to understand the amazing exploits, feats of courage, and acts of incredible stupidity that often occur in our lives.

It was much later, in 1984 living on Hornby Island, British Columbia, that I was introduced to the folk lore of the Pacific North West. Working with carvers and artists Terry Jackson, Glen Rabena, and Cedar Wallace, I discovered what was behind the gigantic totem poles and masks I remember from my days at the University of BC. It is as clear today as it was 15 years ago, standing in front of the large window in my house overlooking Lambert Channel and the hills behind it during a rare thunderstorm, a vision of a Thunderbird pointed out by Terry, orchestrating the skies. It was so amazing and yet so natural, I had no problems accepting the Tales that followed. Over the years, one figure stood out more than the others, Raven.

In 1989 I moved to the Queen Charlotte Islands, now known by its older name of Haida Gwaii. The journey there was by sailboat, a slow trip, but one of the few ways to truly absorb the sights, smells and the sounds of one of the most magnificent coast lines in the world. Crossing Hecate Strait and seeing the Misty Isles appear in the early dawn was like the beginning of time, when Raven created land. I stayed on Haida Gwaii for 6 years, worked with the elders, sailed around the islands, hiked over them, and tried to capture what I saw on canvas.

There was much to experience, some things stood out over others. The encounter with a small pod of killer whales among the Lost Islands, walking the Amazon like Tlell River, climbing Tow Hill over North Beach or any number of small mountains straddling the islands, seeing them coast to coast. Then there are the ancient village sites with their deteriorated but grand totems, Skedans, Tanu, SGang'waai, and Cumshewa to name a few. It was at the latter that I first felt and heard spirits chanting, while anchored close to the isle of the dead.

One sees Ravens everywhere on Haida Gwaii, all through the year. They are large, bold, brash, and playful. It was while watching a large number of them dance on the wind off Skidegate beach, that I wanted to know all about them. Not only Raven the bird, but also Super Natural Raven, and Son of Raven, the blend of the real and the spiritual. The result was the paintings and stories in this book, representing most of the Origin Tales. I did not stay with one tribes' version but rather used a blend of similar or related myths occurring in peoples of the Canadian north and north west coast and the Siberian east coast. The paintings are executed in a somewhat surreal style combining realism with the more stylized approach of North West Coast native art. Although the designs are original, the method tries to follow traditional concepts where possible.

Karel Doruyter



Foreword

I look out over the fields and see a couple of ravens darting in the thermals, spinning in circles and spirals. One approaches the other and does a complete flip upside down, pulls in its wings and falls for a distance before returning on the rising air currents.

It is said that the more intelligent creatures have offspring that play much, and in play they learn the skills they need to live. Ravens then must be continually trying out new things, inventing new games.

As master artist Bill Reid so eloquently spoke of the long , dark, wet and lonely west coast, he often mentioned the need to create stories, myths that would make sense and give a feeling of security among the forbidding hidden bays and coves. It was easy to put great significance in creatures such as the eagle, bear and that smart, black bird that seemed to have so much fun. That bird that would do things for the sheer curiosity and even delight of it. Of course, with these attributes and charm, it wasn't all fun and games in the end.

The stories of the north-west coast people started with someone watching this black bird and over time, it seemed to explain to him or her, the dark creative force in human kind. Order and tradition has a habit of stifling the new or different, the sometimes better way of seeing and doing things. There is a double edge to this, watch the ravens and you know there is a price in change. But without change all things descend into the spiral fall of entropy. So the original maker and teller of the story could not stop, and others in neighbouring villages heard and that spark grew throughout the lands of the north pacific.

I haven't been on that island that Karel and I experienced the vision, or whatever it was, of the Thunderbird, for a long time now. I do know it made a kind of sense, and while Karel later embarked on a series of paintings and later moved to Haida Gwaii, I changed and went down a different road.

It is said that events move in circles, and yes they have. Karel has taken on a task of mystery and difficulty. In doing these paintings he broke tradition and that always upsets someone. Yet when I see these paintings and hear the stories again, I know his heart contains great respect for them and the desire to share their wisdom in visual form. Communication is the reason these stories exist, and I have been talked to in these works. Sit back and just enjoy them, don't try to be too smart.

Terry Jackson

Artist





Let me tell you a story

Long before the Tales of the People, the world existed in chaos, without real light, and almost without life except in the realm of Super natural Beings, and whatever spiritual playthings they created for their amusement. The world was a desolate place when Raven was born. However he became the “Organizer of the Universe”. Not necessarily a Creator-out-of-nothing like the Gods and Beings before him, but rather a Transformer, who in his wanderings chanced upon concealed pre-existing things, stole and changed or multiplied them into their present state. His powers were not coupled with absolute wisdom and honesty, he often covered himself with shame and ridicule. He was greedy, gluttonous and often had erotic inclinations unfettered by morals or principles. But he could be clever and kind, with an inquiring stubbornness. Raven represents much of what is good and what is bad in mankind, and why not? Are you not all because of him ?

Let me tell you about the very early days, the origin tales of Raven.....



Tale one

Birth of Raven

In the beginning, our world was one of beguiling mists, chaos and darkness. Reality as we presume it today did not exist. The darkness contained light, there was land and there was not, things existed that we could never hope to comprehend. All was a blurry reflection of what was and might be.

Around this time a very powerful Spiritual Being roamed about, making his home at the head of a river. Living with Spiritual Being was his sister, and a man named Heron, whom he had created to keep them company. Heron was kindly, tall and wise, much like a spindly Cedar tree as it struggles upward to the sky world. He was in the habit of offering helpful advice to any being or creature that might be about, often proving himself to be a trustworthy friend and confidante.

Why do I tell you this? It was Heron, in a moment of sorrowful compassion, whose guidance brought about the birth of Raven! You see, in many societies, when someone passes to the next world, all their “property” - wives, earthly riches and social privileges - became the inheritance of other female family members. Now this Spiritual Being was a terribly jealous, greedy person. Knowing that his sister’s children might one day receive his inheritance enraged him , and some say he used his formidable powers to prevent this from ever happening.

His sister had given birth to many children, all of whom had died at an early age. How cunning!! It seemed that Spiritual Being had ensured that he would never have to share his riches or powers with any of his sister’s offspring.

Every day his sister would shed bitter tears, crying a mournful lament for her poor little ones. She cried so sadly and for so long, that Heron grew quite concerned. Finally he approached her.

“Sister, you cry a river of tears by day, an ocean of tears by night! What can it be that upsets you so? “he asked her gently.



Birth of Raven

Raising her red rimmed eyes to meet his, she replied

"I long to be a mother. I have lost all my children, dead every one! I cannot keep a child, dear Heron, and my heart bleeds in agony. Why am I forever denied the chance of bringing up a child? "

With these anguished words all the unshed tears brimming in her eyes spilled forth like waterfalls upon her already glistening cheeks, and her wailing began anew.

Deeply touched by her grief, Heron resolved to help the heart-broken girl, and risk the wrath of Spiritual Being. Such a brave and benevolent soul! Drawing her close, he said to her

"When the tide is merely caressing the shore, at its lowest point, go and seek upon the sands a small, round stone, smooth to the touch. Pick up this special stone and place it amongst the burning coals of Grandfather Fire. As soon as the stone is white hot, pull it out, then swallow it quickly! Hence forth may your belly grow, and your tears slow down to a trickle."

With new hope dawning in her eyes, Spiritual Being's sister thanked Heron gratefully. Checking to ensure her brother was no where about to thwart her plan, she eagerly hastened to the river bank. Good fortune! The tide was out at its farthest, and she searched the silvery sands with anxious eyes. In almost no time at all, she found the stone she needed, and quickly carried out the rest of Heron's instructions.

Soon thereafter, Spiritual Being's sister fell pregnant and in time she gave birth to Raven. Now it must be understood, being born of stone has certain advantages. Consider this, can you "kill" a stone? Perhaps we should ask Spiritual Being ?? Perhaps not. Just imagine his fury in finding that his nephew Raven, created from hardest rock, was just as indestructible.

And so it is through Raven's life, though many would try, Raven could not easily be killed. Tough, resilient, practically immortal, he invited hatred and admiration in equal measure. Even love, some would say.



How Raven came about is very obscure, many stories assume he has always been there. It is sometimes difficult to separate Raven the father, the son or the spirit, they often occur at the same time and can be interchangeable. For example the People from Bering Strait tell how the Raven father came from the sky to create the world and everything in and around it. Most of the North West coast People had problems with the concept of a Supreme Being and only referred to him in their stories in a vague and general way. Instead they usually had Raven born out of supernatural entities or an illicit or unusual relationship in the Chief's family.



Tale two

Origin of Land

A very long time ago our world was under shadow of darkness, though some say there was a sentience of light that was only apparent to the various powerful beings that inhabited it at that time. The Earth seemed to be naught but a deep, mysterious and seemingly infinite expanse of ocean. There existed no land as we know it today, although there was a strange, low stone reef that was barely visible above the surface of the water. One day, or was it night, Raven was flying on the salty sea winds, showing no particular interest in his surroundings as he drifted aimlessly. Eventually boredom and fatigue led him to the low shoal, seeking a flat place to rest upon. As he approached, Raven spread his wings wide and stretched out his legs. Suddenly he cawed in surprise. What's this, there was no place to land! The entire reef was covered by a mass of Supernatural Beings. They all lay idly about, draped over the wet rock and each other. Softly moaning and sighing they shifted about, trying in vain to get some sleep. Hovering above, Raven observed that some of the weaker Beings had slipped down the overcrowded rocks. These poor creatures dangled helplessly as the sea lapped at their wet, sleepy bodies. Tired himself, with no place to rest, Raven continued on his way.

Where did Raven go, you ask? I must admit, the space between here and there, now and then, is a little foggy; although it is known that Raven visited the house of his friend Loon not long thereafter. Resting sleepily by the fire, Raven noticed that every so often Loon would leave his place and hurry outside. Each time Loon would sound a plaintive cry before coming in to sit again, pensively gazing into the flames. Finally, Raven's curiosity was aroused.

"Tell me Loon, why do you go outside to call so often?" he asked his friend. Loon answered:

"I do not call on my account. The Supernatural Ones tell me that they have no more room on which to settle. It is They who need help, and that is why I am calling."

Remembering his visit to the crowded reef, Raven replied, "I will attend to it", and bid Loon goodbye.



Origin of land 1

Intent on helping the Supernatural Beings, Raven flew about deep in thought, until the neighbouring sky caught his attention. Raven drew himself into the upper world, by running his beak into it from beneath, creating a gap just large enough for him to wiggle through. To his surprise Raven discovered a cluster of five villages in the Sky world, and being ever curious, he quickly made his way to one of them to see what he could find.

Stopping in front of the Chief's house, Raven noticed a newborn child fast asleep. The Chief's daughter had just given birth, and after many hours of celebration, all of the villagers were inside their homes, sleeping like newborns themselves. Since Raven wanted to find out more about this Sky world and its inhabitants, he seized the opportunity. Glancing about stealthily, Raven deftly skinned the child, starting with its feet. Covering himself with the skin, Raven took the child's place.

None of the aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, not even the child's mother, could tell the difference. They played with the newborn, telling stories and singing songs, not realizing it was Raven in disguise. By and by our feathered friend started to feel hungry, in time becoming absolutely ravenous!

Once all his fellow Sky world inhabitants had bedded down for the night, Raven wrapped a blanket around himself, wriggled out of the cradle and crept outside. Eventually he returned to the Chief's house carrying a bulging blanket before him. Going over to the fire, Raven threw the contents of the blanket into the hot ashes and vigorously kneaded it all together. He then proceeded to eat his mysterious meal with great gusto, the flickering flames reflecting his secret feast for all to see. That is, for one at least, wide awake and observing with interest. An old woman, matter of fact the oldest inhabitant of the village, was sitting in the darkest corner of the house, covered in deep shadow and horrified curiosity by what she had seen.

Raven ventured out again the following night, and performed the same fireside act, his invisible audience watching from the shadows. After much joyous slurping and satisfied murmuring, Raven returned to his cradle and slept quite soundly, save for a few gaseous belches as the night wore on. The old woman however, remained alert and lost in thought.



Origin of land 2

The next morning Raven's village was abuzz with a disturbing tale, under cover of darkness something horrible had happened in the Sky world. All the people in the other four villages had emerged from their dreams with one eye missing! The Chief's house was suddenly as full as a river during salmon spawn, as all the villagers came seeking comfort and guidance. The old woman slept fitfully in the corner, rocking gently as she snored a cloud bound song. Spying her, the Chief's daughter gently removed the old woman's veil of slumber by stroking her hair. Speaking urgently, the young girl said:

"Wise Mother, awaken! A new darkness has descended upon our brother's and sisters!"

Shaking herself free of troubled dreams, the old woman looked about her in confusion. So many people, all talking at once! So much noise! Looking to the Chief's daughter with questions marking her eyes, her face turned white as snow when the girl told her of the vicious attacks on their neighbours. The old woman glanced across to the gleaming cedar cradle, where the baby lay gurgling happily. Realisation dawned on her face like a brave morning sun battling bleak, stormy night skies. Motioning the Chief's daughter aside, the old woman drew another villager to her, reasoning that the information she needed to share would be too much to bear for the young mother. Sneaking fearful glances at the newborn, she was relieved to see its mother making her way across the room to attend to the child.

Speaking in hushed undertones, the old woman began to tell her tale of what she had observed from the shadows.

"As our world did sleep and the fire burned bright, the night revealed a mystery to me. All is not as it seems with yonder child. One, two times, I have seen him leave this house, returning some time later clutching a bundle close to his belly. Approaching the fire, he piles his findings on the ashes. While eating his hastily made meal, strange popping noises filled the house and chilled my heart with foreboding. You say the other villagers awoke with one eye missing? I say we look upon that child with new eyes ourselves, before the same tragic fate befalls us all!"

Shocked they all realised what had happened and knew the child was not what had been at birth.

Exhausted from her unnatural sleep, yet grimly determined to rid her people of the child and its gruesome appetite, the old woman gathered all the villagers together in such a way that they formed a line which spiraled around the Chief's house and into the Sky world beyond. Taking Raven from his unsuspecting mother's loving arms, the old crone began to croon a lullaby over the baby's head. As others joined in her song, the old woman passed the baby to the villager beside her. So Raven was passed down the line from person to person, and soon enough the hypnotic sound of their singing drew him into the realms of dreams. Fast asleep, Raven was finally passed to the last person in line, who quickly threw him out of the Sky world to the Sea world below to the anguished cries of the Chief's daughter and the sad explanation which would follow.

Awakened by the sudden cold, watery embrace, Raven found himself floating upon the ocean. No longer a sky child, chagrined Raven looked down upon his true form. As the sea shifted about in great soporific wave patterns, Raven was lulled back to sleep again.

After many hours or days, time was not as measured as it is today, unsure as to whether he was awake or dreaming; Raven thought he heard a voice say:

"Raven! Your mighty Grandfather wishes to meet with you, come now to his house."

Turning around, Raven saw no one. As he continued to float around, still not sure as to his state of wakefulness, he heard the voice again. As before the invitation was offered, yet no one appeared to guide his way. Now fully awake, perplexed, Raven flipped over onto his belly, scanning the water below him with curious eyes. A Grebe was diving nearby, perhaps? As Raven drew nearer, he again heard the same voice, this time he knew who had been talking to him. Raven found he was floating against kelp with two heads. Looking down into the water he saw the kelp changing into a house pole as it disappeared into the depths. Climbing down to the bottom, Raven found the Sea world very similar to the Sky world, with a village spreading out into the distance.

As he made his way to the front of the house he heard someone call:

"Enter my son, word has arrived that you have come to borrow something from me."

Puzzled Raven entered the Great house. Inside he saw an old man as white as snow sitting at the very rear of the house. After the usual greetings befitting that of a Great Chief, he told Raven to take a box that was hanging in the corner. After opening the lid, Raven found five more, each one somewhat smaller than the one before. On opening the innermost one, Raven saw two cylindrical stones, one covered with shining spots, the other black. The old man told Raven to take out the stones and put each one into the water starting with the spotted one, then bite off a part of each and spit it on the rest. At first Raven did it in the wrong order and nothing happened. However when he did it the right way, the black stone stretched out to form the islands found in the Pacific north west, and the spotted one expanded into the mainland to the east. The spit pieces stuck and became trees.

Immediately the Supernatural Beings left their crowded abode and swam to the islands, where they say, they exist to this day.



This version of the creation of land is only found among the Haida. Some Peoples from northern Canada tell how land was formed from earth brought up from the bottom of the ocean by Beaver or Muskrat. Those from the Alaskan peninsula mention that of all the animals and birds only the Arctic Duck was successful in bringing up earth from the bottom of the sea.

There are stories from Siberia that has Loon be the one that brought earth out of the water. Most other Peoples assumed land was already in existence but covered with water when Raven appeared. Over time, as the water dropped, the surface of the land was shaped by the receding waves and currents into mountains, valleys and plains.



Tale three

The Origin of Rivers and Streams

Raven and Eagle were often traveling companions, although Raven sometimes took advantage of Eagle's trusting nature.

This was especially true during one hot, dry, day, when Raven and Eagle were wandering along the seashore. As the day progressed they both became very thirsty. As they succumbed to the relentless heat with parched throats and blurring vision, Raven could see no alternative but to drink some salty sea water persuading Eagle to do the same. Soon enough they became sick, beset by fierce stomach cramps, diarrhea and overwhelming nausea. Unable to continue their walk, Raven and Eagle were forced to stop and rest in an attempt to recover. Raven busied himself making a fire. As he stumbled feebly about, gathering kindling as best he could in his weakened state, Raven was surprised to see Eagle covertly pull a water-tight basket from under his arm and drink from it – without getting sick! Time and again Eagle drank from the basket, never once offering any water to Raven. Angered by Eagle's selfishness, Raven resolved to take the basket for himself.

Unfortunately the opportunity to steal Eagle's basket was looking very remote, as the basket never left his side. Raven decided to resort to a devious means of obtaining that which he so desired, and sorely needed.

Searching for more firewood, Raven found some hemlock branches which he threw on the fire. The pitch and needles made the fire burn brighter than ever throwing out a lot of heat. Again Eagle took out his basket furtively to drink from it. Raven spat on the sand in disgust. Moving quickly, Raven climbed up into a tree behind Eagle, and scurried out to the end of a slender bough which hung directly over Eagle's head. Using the full force of his strength, Raven jumped up and down on the branch, which eventually broke under the weight of his rage. Can you guess where the branch fell? Right on top of Eagle of course, who dropped his water basket in surprise and ran away in a fright. Raven had nimbly jumped clear of the falling branch, and was quick to act. Picking up the abandoned basket, he gleefully flew away with it.

Eagle soon realised that he had been tricked and quickly flew after Raven catching up to him in no time at all



Origin of rivers and streams

Screeching his displeasure, Eagle tried to sink his claws into Raven in an effort to bring him back to earth and regain his prized possession. The sudden movements and gyrations of Raven to avoid his pursuer tipped the basket, spilling a stream of liquid onto the ground below. As the water splashed down upon the earth, salmon streams were formed. Their aerial combat continued for some time, but eventually Eagle gave up his pursuit being no match to the nimble maneuvers of Raven.

Raven, however, continued on, fresh water spilling from the basket until it was empty creating rivers and streams all over the land.



A variation of this tale has Raven, in his travels, chancing upon an everlasting spring of water belonging to either Eagle or a great Chief.

Among some People of the North West coast, fresh water belonged to a man called Ganuk, a powerful Chief whose existence goes back to the beginning of the world. Raven wanted this water badly, since there was nothing like it on earth. A plan formed in his head. He told the owner of the spring he would stay and keep him company that night. As soon as Eagle/Chief was asleep, Raven crept around and found some animal excrement which he placed on and around his host's blanket.

In the morning Eagle/Chief thought he had defecated in his sleep, and went outside to wash his blanket. Raven immediately went to the spring and started drinking from it. He was discovered just as he almost finished all of the water. Raven jumped up and flew away, spilling water from his beak as he went to form rivers and streams. Others say, Raven was so full, he urinated as he flew, forming the rivers.

Another tale associated with this myth and found among various Peoples, is the theft of fresh water lakes. These lakes originally belonged to the Beaver People on the land now known as Haida Gwaii, but were stolen by Raven

who was attracted to the number of fish contained in them. He rolled up the lakes and taking them in his beak, flew from tree to tree, as Beaver desperately tried to regain his stolen property by gnawing down the tree. Having no luck, Beaver sent Loon and Marten to try and catch Raven, however they also failed. Raven eventually flew to the mainland where he dropped pieces of the rolled up lakes wherever he went.

A variation of the origin of fresh water comes from the Alaskan peninsula. After the big flood, as water receded, Bittern tried to help it along by swallowing the water. In his effort he swallowed it all. To bring some of it back, Plover scratched Bittern's stomach, causing water to flow out forming the rivers and lakes.



Tale four

Theft of Light

In the very beginning, when chaos reigned, there was no real light in the world. At least not as we know it today, where the Sun, the Moon, and the Stars can be expected to appear at regular intervals. The Spiritual Beings had no need for real light and everyone else made do as best they could in the darkness. This state of affairs went on for a very long time until Raven heard some rumours of its existence. Apparently a Great Chief had Light hidden away in a box keeping it all to himself. When Raven heard this, his eyes glistened greedily and he began to scheme a way to steal it.

With his super natural powers it did not take Raven very long to determine where this Great Chief lived. He decided to observe the main house for a time at a discreet distance, in order to establish the daily household routine and form a plan of action. Sneaking around the Chief's home at night, Raven discovered a dense grove of trees behind the house. Perfect! Raven flew to the uppermost branches of a spruce tree and settled in to await the new day.

The Great Chief's household awoke quite early and Raven noticed with interest a beautiful, young girl leave the house and wander towards his hiding spot. Coming ever closer, the girl stood right under Raven's hideaway. Carefully he peered through the bristly branches to determine what she was doing. With her back to Raven the girl crouched down singing softly to herself as water bubbled up from a spring and into her submerged container. Once it was full, the girl hoisted it on to her hip and made her way back to the house. Raven maintained his watch for another day, noting that although there was much activity to and from the house, there was absolutely no way he could enter the home unnoticed. It was time to resort to deceit and trickery.

When the young girl came out to fetch water the following morning, Raven turned himself into a spruce needle and unceremoniously fell into the water hole floating around on its surface. Absorbed in the task of filling her water container, the girl did not see the spruce needle float into her vessel. Feeling thirsty, she lifted the container to her lips and drank deeply. Raven hardly believing his luck, disappeared into the maiden's mouth.

"Daughter! Daughter!" bellowed the Great Chief from the house.



Theft of light

“Yes Father, I’m coming!” replied the young maiden. Thirst quenched, the Great Chief’s daughter returned hastily to the house and her father’s side.

After a much lesser time than usual, the young girl found herself pregnant. Raven had changed his form once more, this time from a spruce needle to child. The pregnancy was not all together abnormal, the Chief’s daughter had many admirers and all children were welcomed. There was great rejoicing at the news and the whole village waited in anticipation for the Great Chief’s first grandson.

Soon enough she gave birth to a healthy boy who ate a lot and grew much quicker than normal. It was thought that he was very special and would grow to be large and strong, befitting a grandson of the Great Chief. However, despite his robust constitution, the child cried and whined constantly to the consternation of the great Chief and his family. Longing for some peace and quiet, the Chief and his daughter tried everything they could think of to soothe the child without success. Finally, in desperation, the Chief reached into the deepest recesses of his belongings and brought out the box that contained Light. He hoped that the shining object would capture his grandson’s attention and put an end to his crying. Of course this is exactly what Raven wanted. As soon as the Great Chief took the lid off the box, the child changed into his true form, that of Raven. Before anyone could react, he grabbed Light in his beak and with a few powerful strokes of his wings vanished from sight through the house’s smoke hole.

Although Raven managed to make good his escape, there was one consequence he had to bear. Raven, whose feathers were as white as summer clouds, embraced Light and was singed as black as night, as he is to this day.



The stealing and placement of Light was a turning point in the world, marking an end to Chaos and the beginning of a social order. It was inevitable that white Raven, born out of a white hot stone, would liberate Light and be burnt black in the process. The transformation from darkness and white form, to that of light and dark form

In the Tlingit version of this tale, to pacify the crying child, the Grandfather (Great Chief) first gave him a bag of stars. After playing with it for a time, Raven let the bag go and all the stars flew out through the smoke hole and scattered about in the heavens. Some time later the child again started to cry and whine, this time the Chief gave him a bag that contained the moon. Again Raven played with the bag, eventually taking the moon out and letting it go into the sky. The only thing that remained was the box containing the sun, which Grandfather was reluctant to open. But like most grandchildren, Raven got his wish and after receiving the sun, immediately changed into his true form and flew out of the smoke hole with the sun hidden under his wing.

Most of the tales follow the theme of Raven stealing daylight from someone else through some subterfuge. The someone else could be a white bear, a sea gull or another person. An addition to the story, found primarily in some northern and Siberian tales, is the existence of a curtain or barrier between the sky world and the earth, thus shutting out light. Raven convinces the spiritual beings to lift the curtain and let daylight in. However this daylight was found to be inadequate and Raven sets out to find another sun. At this point the tale continues like the others.



Tale five

Raven Creates other Animals

Raven was terribly pleased with himself for stealing Light – what a feat! Some time later, musing on his clever coup, Raven carried his thoughts down to the banks of a river, and immersed himself in self-congratulatory solitude walking silently along the waterway. Coming around a bend where water rushed by like a liquid serpent, Raven was startled by a sudden commotion on the opposite bank.

Rising above the gurgling hiss of the river, Raven's senses were assaulted by a cacophony of raucous cackles and rowdy shouts. Peering into the darkness, raven could just make out a number of men fishing for eulachons, and they were being more than a little boisterous in expressing their camaraderie. How dare they disturb his silent reverie? Ignorant, the lot of them.

“Be quiet!” Raven shouted, just loud enough to be heard above the rushing river, and the fishermen's own noisy revelry. His request, perhaps unheard, was ignored.

“Silence!!” Raven thundered, “Else I shall break daylight upon your boorish heads!”

Everyone had heard about Light, but as few had ever seen it, Light struck fear into many a heart. Nonetheless, unfazed by this threat, the fishermen jeered back at Raven,

“Ha! We know all about you – and we know all about Light. How on earth can you have Light, feeble Raven? You are not the Great Chief!”

Laughter rang out across the river, and the ruckus, unabated, grew louder than before. Incensed by their insolence, Raven lifted up his wing a little and shimmering rays of Light shone forth. The startled fishermen jumped about in consternation, making even more noise. Delighted by their terror, Raven lifted his wing completely and Daylight broke upon the world.



Raven releases light and creates other animals

Alarmed by this turn of events, the frightened fishermen thought only of escape. Some jumped into the water, while others ran into the woods. Those who chose to swim became sea creatures - seals, walrus, otter and the like. Those who stayed on land turned into deer, moose, and bear. Perhaps this is why we still think of all these beings as humans in disguise. It certainly explains why some animals, on occasion, choose to resume their human form.

And what of Raven? Why, I do believe he continued his walk in relative peace.



The fact that after stealing Light Raven kept it hidden under his wing occurs only in the tales of the North West Peoples. He only releases daylight when he asks a favour and is refused. It usually involves fishermen and besides making less noise, could include asking for fish or giving him a ride across the river. This refusal in all cases led to Raven releasing Light, frightening the fishermen and leading the story into another theme, the creation of the other animals. Some variations incorporate the fishermen turning into whatever animal corresponded to the clothing the individual was wearing. Since other "animals" were not in existence, it can only be assumed that the "clothing" referred to the spiritual essence of the respective animal.

The northern and Siberian Peoples believed that after Raven stole Light, he tossed it into the sky immediately, either whole (bringing daylight to the world) or in various pieces, explaining the existence of Sun, Moon and stars.



Tale six

The Deluge

Powerful Spiritual Being and his sister were having many problems with her son Raven. Of course there were those that were common to other growing creatures such as stubbornness, developing independence, and a tendency not to listen to their parents. However his lusty sexual appetite was somewhat abnormal. Although this was accepted earlier on as a temporary stage of evolvment, it soon became quite an embarrassment to his family as he worked his way in and out of various women's beds. Some of the villagers had complained to Powerful Spiritual Being and his sister, having witnessed the disgraceful sight of Raven entering one home after another, and choosing a good-looking woman to lie with. Unfortunately the women Raven set his sights on had little choice in the matter, as he would overwhelm them with his flattering tongue and magical powers a taking his pleasure regardless. To add incestuous insult to village-wide injury, Raven had sexual intercourse with his aunt as well as his mother. No woman, it seemed, was safe from his insatiable advances.

This went on for some time, until finally everyone in the village had enough and both mother and son were driven out of the town by abusive language. With unrepentant Raven in tow, Spiritual Being's sister made a visit to Great-Breakers, another of her brothers. He too was a very powerful Chief, who lay claim to complete dominion over the ocean waters. Being more forceful in language and deed than her other brother, she hoped that Great-Breakers could instill some discipline into his wayward nephew's behaviour.

Alas, from the moment they arrived Raven did his utmost to annoy his Uncle, from running rowdily about the house while Great-Breakers was trying to sleep and defecating repeatedly on the floor, to flirting with his Uncle's wife. Far and away, this last misdemeanor was the worst. Raven actually managed to bewitch his Aunt into liking him far too much. Suffice to say, Great-Breakers was fonder of his wife than his nephew, and the day was not far off that Raven's roving eye would land him in very deep waters indeed.

One day, when the Chief was away on one of his many trips around the island, Raven approached his Aunt's chambers with the sole intent of



The deluge or how Raven achieves dominion over the ocean waters

seducing her. After some time it thundered ominously on the island's underground side. When Great-Breakers returned, he asked his wife,

“A short while ago I heard a loud noise very similar to that which is heard when we lie together. Do you know what caused it?”

His wife, still under Raven's spell laughed at him and replied licking her lips,

“I suppose my husband that I must be the same with you as I am with Raven, your nephew!”

These words made Chief Great Breakers very angry.

The next day, early in the morning, Great-Breakers sat unmoving in the centre of the house. On top of the finely woven Chief's hat he wore, a small, round speck of foam started to swirl. Raven looked nervously at his Uncle, unease worming its way into his belly like an unwelcome visitor. With a growing premonition in his head, he quickly retrieved his Raven's skin and sky blankets from his Mother's bed, wakening her in the process. Turning to gaze upon his eerily quiet Uncle, Raven was shocked to see a blur of motion revolving on top of Great-Breaker's head. A current of water appeared from under the brim, soon swelling to tidal-wave proportions. In no time at all the seawater had filled the house to its rafters and showed no signs of abating. Donning his skin and sky blankets, Raven scooped up his mother. With a number of fierce flaps our feathered friend rapidly flew upwards to the sky world and ran his beak into its underside, hugging his frightened mother to his chest. When Raven felt the rising seawater lapping at his tail, he kicked back indignantly and screeched,

“Enough, you too belong to me!!”

At that point the waters stopped rising and began to recede. Slowly Raven retracted his beak, and carrying his weeping mother returned to Chief Great Breakers house. Conceding defeat his uncle said resignedly,

“You shall be known as the Chief of Chiefs.”



Although some of the Peoples put the deluge or flood story at the beginning of the origin tales, and continue with the creation of land, it would seem that the two “flood” stories are separate. The first, where water covered the Earth at the beginning of time, and the second, where water covered the Earth as the result of some act.

Generally, most of the flood tales from around the world can be placed in the category of universal punishment. Because of licentious living, wicked behaviour, or just disobedience, Supernatural Beings set out to cleanse the Earth, usually leaving two or more creatures to re-populate. Similar to Raven, many stories involve anger at incestuous behaviour. However, in his case, Raven comes out on top as a triumphal figure rather than a chastised mortal.

Another creature that figures prominently in flood stories is Eagle. To pacify the angry Supernatural Beings, Eagle persuades all the birds to shed their feathers on the waters as a sign of peace. Setting an example Eagle was the first with the rest of the birds following. After this act the water receded. In this tale Eagle is the submissive figure rather than the aggressive one of Raven. With many Peoples, scattered Eagle down, or the giving of an Eagle feather is still considered a symbol of peace.



Tale seven

The Theft of Fire

Until this time, the only Fire known in the world was that of the Sun, which only shed its fiery warmth on the earth by day, and that strange Fire enjoyed only by the Supernatural beings and great Chiefs with power to make it happen. It was not available to the general denizens of the Earth.

One day Raven was meandering along an ocean beach, very similar to many found along the great oceans today, when he spotted something not far from shore. What caught his attention was the orange and red glow of the object reflecting on the slate gray waves. Although it appeared to bob about on the tides it never came any closer. As evening came and dusk settled over the land, the object seemed to glow brighter, and Raven saw that it very much resembled Fire. Determined to have it in his possession, Raven asked his friend Hawk, who had a very long bill, for assistance. Raven beseeched him,

“Hawk, brave warrior that you are! Your bill is so much longer than mine, your flight that much the faster. Please go and try to gather some of that Fire in your beak. If you do get hold of it, by all means don’t let it go!”

Flattered by Raven’s request, Hawk agreed to try. Flying out to the object, Hawk seized some of the Fire. Alas, by the time Hawk had flown back to shore the red-hot flames had burnt off most of his bill, which explains why Hawk’s beak remains so short to this day.

Accepting the piece of Fire from Hawk with many thanks, Raven gathered some red cedar twigs from the forest, and some smooth white stones from the beach. They say these stones were the same as the one that so long ago caused Raven’s birth. Bending over, he carefully put fire into the wood and stones. By sharply striking the stones together Fire erupted between stone and wood.

Fire has been found in these things all over the world since that day.





Theft of fire

In the north-west, Raven is usually the principal character of this tale. He discovers and instigates the seizure of Fire, if it cannot be bought. In most cases Fire appears floating on the water by itself, is situated on an island, or rests on some type of structure. The act of actually fetching Fire, or trying to, has been attributed to Deer (loses its tail), Hawk, Swallow, or Owl (loses a large portion of their beaks), Snake, Turtle and Spider. In some tales even Raven himself, either in his own form or disguised, steals Fire. It has been said that Raven turned black because he was burned by stealing Fire rather than Light.

It was generally thought that Fire was originally brought to Earth by Thunderbird through lightning, the Sun touching the ground (as it went down), or through the gift of a fire drill by the Creator. The latter could even be Raven's father giving a tool that would release fire from the material containing it.



Tale eight

The Origins of Humans

Although the world was not an empty place, most who dwelled in it flitted in and out of reality like wisps of smoke, tangible one instant and not the other. Those who actually occupied the land and waters, the animals, birds and fishes, were interesting to observe, but did not satisfy Raven's craving for play and control. They and the Supernatural Beings often ignored his advances.

Feeling rather lonely, Raven decided to create some playthings to keep him company, which he called humans. At first he created crude forms from stone which he found walking along the rock strewn beaches. Although their rounded, smooth features were pleasing to the touch, he quickly grew tired of their slow dull mannerisms and dull personalities. Besides, how much fun can one have with a companion that's almost impossible to play with and lives far too long besides? How boring.

Believing that he might be better off fashioning his friends from earth, there was certainly plenty of that, he worked with great enthusiasm to create some people from the sun warmed clay found along river banks. Raven wasn't particularly fond of their rather bland colouring, yet was prepared to surrender his sense of aesthetics for the sake of some new amusement.

As he regarded the humans he had created with a small measure of pride, the skies above opened up and rain began to fall. Looking about in dismay, Raven realised that his creatures were all getting rather moist and doughy. Eventually the earthen beings transformed into mud, and oozed down to become one with the ground once more. Somewhat despondent, Raven left the muddy remains of his handiwork and walked dejectedly into the forest.

Gazing up at the canopy of trees which provided shelter from the falling rain, he found himself irresistibly drawn to the myriad shapes and colours found in different leaves. He was fascinated how they formed from a tiny bud, and then unfurling in the wind's sweet breath turned to a verdant liveliness. After dancing and playing for some time they eventually detached from their mother tree and fell down to Earth, signaling the change of seasons and the end of a life cycle.



Origin of humans

Raven gave this process considerable thought as he stood on the forest floor, and found it to his liking. Arriving at that conclusion it was only a matter of moments he decided to make humans out of leaves and this time he was satisfied. His reasons? One can only guess. Leaves develop quickly, die eventually, and dance gracefully in the wind.



The origin or birth of humans can be categorized into three general areas. The first, and most frequently told, encompasses the creation out of stone versus vegetable matter. Since the latter developed much faster and conveniently included the concept of death, “As leaves die in the fall and winter, man shall wither away”, it ended up being the material of choice for Raven in most stories found among the various Peoples.

The second category is quite different and there are several versions contained within it. In this case Raven does not create or transform humans out of something else, but rather “finds” them or brings them out into the world. The primary tale tells of Raven, in his travels, hearing some strange sounds coming from either a cockle or clam shell. When he investigates further, he finds the shell full of two legged, pale skinned, male creatures. These eventually become part of a game Raven invented involving chitons. In the end the creatures disappear and the chitons evolved into male and female humans. A second version has Raven marrying or having intercourse with a clam whose offspring are born as humans.

The last category is more confusing and Raven’s role is mainly one of teaching humans how to procreate, rather than one of creator. In this, as well as the previous category, the coming of death in the world is introduced in the following tale.



Tale nine

How Death came to the World

After some time, Raven became completely intoxicated with a beautiful girl who had skin as white as fresh fallen snow. It was lust rather than love, since it was doubtful Raven could love any other being than himself. Day and night he flirted shamelessly with the maiden, but to no avail. Raven was not one to give up on anything he set his mind to, so he eventually resorted to trickery to lie with the young girl. Soon afterward she became pregnant and over the usual amount of time gave birth to a son.

The boy, right from birth grew very quickly. This was probably because Raven provided anything the child wanted. He had the best of food and drink, and was spoiled like no other by both his parents. When word of the child's birth and remarkable growth reached the Supernatural Beings, they knew that they had a way to teach Raven a lesson. They had grown weary of his antics and were secretly jealous of his growing powers and popularity. Under the cover of darkness the Supernatural Beings sent Thunderbird to kidnap the child and bring him back to them. While Raven and the child's mother slept, Thunderbird swooped down seizing Raven's son and without missing a beat of his strong wings, clawed his way back into the night sky.

It wasn't until early the following morning that Raven discovered his child missing. Beside himself with grief and anger he searched everywhere, and questioned all he came across for information of his lost son. It was Owl who mentioned seeing the large shape of Thunderbird passing by, silent as Death, clutching a child in his talons. Raven knew then who were the instigators of the foul deed. Using all his powers Raven pleaded and threatened the Supernatural Beings to return his first born to no avail.

Much time had passed before the Supernatural Beings relented. After taking considerable satisfaction in Raven's distress in the beginning, they had grown bored with his despair. Concluding that a proper lesson in servility had been served they returned the child. Unfortunately the passing time and for reasons one can only imagine, the boy appeared and acted very different than the infant Thunderbird had abducted. Raven refused to recognize the child and sent him away. This is the cause of Death coming into the world.



How death came into the world

To this day one can still hear at times the usual defiant cries of Raven turn into haunting, keening mews as he grieves for his lost son.



There is an important relationship between Raven, Eagle and Thunderbird, which is also a complicated and confusing one.

Eagle is universally admired for courage, swiftness and strength. He is distinguished by being able to fly extraordinarily high, bringing him nearer to the Sun and the “Great Mystery”, than any other creature. Eagle is considered the principal servant of the Sun and in his spiritual manifestation takes the form of the Thunderbird, messenger of the Supernatural Beings.

This concept is especially found and demonstrated through the Sun Dance of the Plains Peoples.

In Siberia and eastern Asia, the Thunderbird is often referred to as being the same as creation-deity Supernatural Raven. In many tales of the north and north-west, Raven occurs in three guises, Raven-the-bird, Raven-the-father and Raven-the-spirit, each one being the same in one sense or in opposition and conflict in another. Often we find Raven-the-father inflicting punishment on Raven-the-bird (because of jealousy or disobedience), through Raven-the-spirit, also known as Supernatural Raven, or Thunderbird.

The relationship broadens when we consider the connection between Raven as creator and Raven the trickster. Many cultures believe that Raven (in what ever guise), in creating the world also performed a kind of trickery. Although having presented human beings with many gifts, most come with strings attached, and Raven can never let a chance go by to make a fool of humans.

The Thunderbird's role is usually seen as a protector of humans (benevolent), but sometimes turns contrary, carrying off People, Whales and even Reindeer to their doom (malevolent). This contrariness is associated with the Trickster figure. In the Plains Peoples, seeing a Thunderbird could make one a Trickster figure or Sacred Clown. The Trickster likes to pull pranks, but is just as often a victim of those same pranks. He is thought to be a sexual predator using his tongue and deceit to get what he wants, although usually getting into trouble in the end.

All this is associated with Raven. In many visual reproductions of Thunderbird found among the Peoples of the north-west, one finds his profile is somewhere between that of Raven and Eagle, again illustrating the relationship between the three.



Tale 10

The Origin of Fog

One day Raven was paddling his canoe along the seashore, when he saw Petrel walking upon the beach. Pulling his canoe ashore, the two began to talk. As the day grew long and their conversation danced about, Raven asked Petrel:

"Tell me, old friend; how long have you been?"

"Why Raven," responded Petrel, a gleam in his eye, "A very, very long time indeed!"

"Ptah!" spat Raven, "That is no time at all! I have existed much longer than you - I have been here since before the world was made."

Foolish, boastful Raven - he did not realise that Petrel, also known as Ganuk, had been present long before his own mother had given birth. Some say that Ganuk/Petrel was the first being created, before even time existed. He is known as the most Ancient of Ancients, though not much is known of his life, let alone his origins. Perhaps he prefers it this way. Whatever the case, Raven and Petrel continued to argue; eventually Petrel grew weary of Raven's ignorant arrogance. Pushing Raven's canoe out to sea, Petrel put on his tightly-woven 'fog-hat', whose roots can be traced back to the time of Chaos. Calling upon his Supernatural powers, Petrel created a gloomy fog, thick and heavy as pitch. Raven couldn't make out his own feathered tail, let alone discern the direction in which his canoe was headed! To no avail, using his own skills and Supernatural abilities, could Raven lift the fog. Finally, in defeat he called out into the bewildering mist,

"Enough, enough! Petrel - call off your fog! There is nothing I can do to clear it. Your powers are far greater than mine; you must be older than Raven. Powerful Petrel, lift up this formidable fog!!"

Smiling, Petrel lifted his hat, and watched as Raven disappeared into the thinning murk, without once looking back.



Origin of Fog



Stories on the origin of fog mainly pertain to the north west coast where fog is an obvious and important part of life. Since it is often assumed that power is directly related to age, these tales also re-introduce the conflict of Raven and Ganuk (sometimes called Raven's brother-in-law), as to who appeared in this world first.



Tale eleven

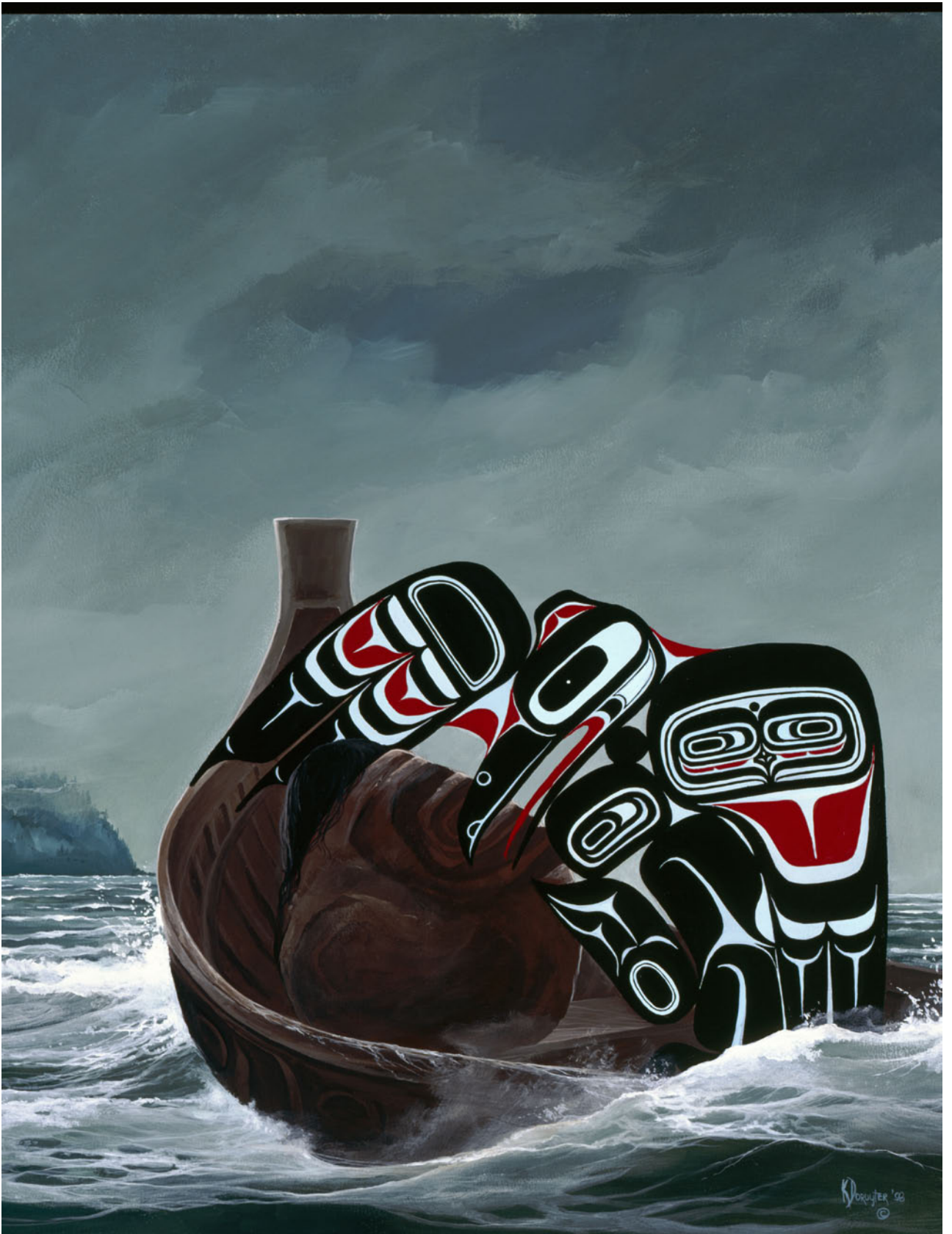
The Origin of Salmon

Although salmon had been around for some time, the delicious fish was available infrequently and usually depended on the generosity of the Supernatural Beings. They, of course, had access all year long. Raven had a marked fondness for eating salmon whether it was cooked over an open fire, dried or turned into oil and mixed with berries and ground up roots. He decided that there was no reason for the recurrent absence of salmon in the local streams. At least there should be some regularity in the appearance of the fish to help to plan for times it was absent.

After thinking over various schemes, devious and otherwise, Raven decided to abduct the Salmon Chief's daughter and add her to his family. He felt this was the only way, since wherever she went the salmon would follow. Not only would he secure himself another comely wife, but he'd have access to salmon year round. What a marvelous means of appeasing his appetites!

After traveling a great distance by sea and stream to the Salmon Chief's country, Raven was terribly put out to hear that Killer Whale had recently married the Salmon Chief's daughter. As well we know, Raven is hardly ever one to be deterred by an obstacle – especially a matrimonial one. After observing the village and its inhabitants, he befriended one of Killer Whale's slaves in an underhanded effort to gain access to the Salmon Chief's daughter. So enchanted was the poor fellow by Raven's slippery tongue and persuasive manner, that he agreed to assist Raven in an attempt to kidnap his master's wife. The slave set to work, laboriously carving out a log destined for the household fires. Raven then hid inside the hollow interior. One day while Killer Whale was away hunting, the slave carried the log and its dastardly innards into the house unnoticed by anyone. On several occasions, while no one was about, Raven tried to embrace the young woman. However she only saw the advances of a splintered, old log, and threw the piece of firewood away in fright.

When Killer Whale and his hunting party arrived home after several days absence, Raven was perched jauntily on top of the house pole, preening his ebony feathers and singing the praises of the hunters. Flattered by this and



Origin of salmon

unaware of Raven's foul intent, Killer Whale invited Raven into his home as a welcome, although unexpected guest for the night. Warming themselves by the fire, Killer Whale's brothers tried to engage Raven in conversation. Rebuffing their friendly enquiries with rude snorts of derision, Raven turned instead to Killer Whale, and asked most impertinently,

"Tell me, Killer Whale, what need do you have of such a large belly?"

Killer Whale, somewhat taken aback by his guest's candor, regarded his stout paunch in surprise. "Why, I suppose I have never given the matter much thought. Perhaps to house all the scrumptious salmon my lovely wife keeps feeding me!!" At this his brothers all laughed uproariously, patting their equally full bellies in contentment. Raven was less amused. A discussion ensued regarding the relative merits of maintaining a trim torso, while still enjoying the finer foods of life.

"It all comes down to elimination," intoned Raven slyly, delighted at the twisted turn their conversation had taken. Eventually the fire was reduced to embers, and Raven had convinced Killer Whale to part with his majestic mound.

Thus, when raven produced a large gleaming knife and approached his host, the giant creature thrust out his sacrificial tummy most willingly. Slicing into the soft expanse of flesh, Raven parted the folds of Killer Whale's skin and pulled out his enormous stomach, killing him instantly. Swiftly turning to the three brothers who gaped in amazement, he performed the same brutal act upon their bellies as well. The house was soon awash in the blood of the four trusting, and one might say gullible, brothers. Grabbing Killer Whale's grief-stricken wife by the braids and dragging her down to the river, Raven hurled her into his waiting canoe and hastily set out for home. Upon hearing of his daughter's abduction, the Salmon Chief sent all his boats in furious pursuit of the kidnapper and murderer. Having departed the Salmon Chief's country at night and having the tides in his favour, (one might remember at this point that Raven controlled the ocean waters), none of his pursuers caught up with him.

When Raven was within sight of his home, he turned to face the long snaking trail of canoes in the distance which had followed him. Calling upon his supernatural powers, Raven changed all of his pursuers into salmon, and assigned each of them to the nearby rivers and streams. So it happened that one now finds salmon in all the waters. However, the Salmon Chief through his daughter could still control their comings and goings in annual cycles, and so it is to this day.



Salmon are very important to the northwest and northern people and there are a number of tales as to their origin. Other versions of the story have complicated plots and sub-plots.

One tale relates how Raven marries Fog woman. Whenever he became hungry, she would wash her hands in a basket of water producing a salmon. However a quarrel ended their relationship, but since she was made of fog, Raven could not grab her when she ran away. Ever so often she would return to him each time with the same ending. This way salmon come and go to local rivers and streams.

In another tale Raven tries various ways to procure salmon. Carving them out of wood was unsuccessful since they were either too tough or floated out to sea becoming other fish. The belief that twins have special powers over salmon had Raven see out a grave of twins. By giving life to a dead female twin who claimed to be a salmon and then marrying her, Raven made her produce as much of the salmon as he wished. When in his absence she produced and gave away these fish to others in the village, Raven became very angry and insulting causing her to disappear. Again bringing into the story the cyclical movement of salmon.





As Raven continued to wander around the world he had shaped, more and more tales appeared reflecting his behaviour as a trickster and shape shifter. These were passed down among the Peoples of the world, each tale changing over the years, as only Raven's personality can change. But, that is another story.....



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