Disturbing the Dead: Diversity and Commonality Among the Stó:lō

Kathryn McKay
PhD candidate (History)
Simon Fraser University

Abstract
This article investigates perceptions of changes and continuity in the treatment of human remains as practiced by the Stó:lō First Nation of the Fraser Valley in British Columbia. It examines and compares the manner in which this topic has been addressed in both the historical records and by contemporary Stó:lō society. Ethnographic information gathered during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century is combined with the results of more recent archaeological studies. This information provides the basis of the historical record summarized in this article. This record is then compared to the opinions of modern Stó:lō as recorded in interviews as well as in the 2003 Stó:lō Heritage Policy. The treatment of human remains is a controversial topic in many First Nations communities. Any discussion of this topic needs to respectfully consider the opinions expressed as well as maintain the dignity of the ancestor whose remains prompted the writing of this article.

Introduction

If you ask me what is Sto:lo, I am not just thinking what we did now, I’d like to think as to what we did in the past and what was the importance of those things in the past. . . . In [my] past they weren’t important, but as soon as I learned about them they became important. . . . It must have been important in the past to our elders, so it has got to be of importance to our future. . . . I have to look at it as a tie of the past to the way we live now.\footnote{Sonny McHalsie quoted by Thomas McIlwraith, “The Problem of Imported Culture,” 49.}

This is a story that begins with a set of found human remains. In 1999, the RCMP collected a solitary human cranium, found by a clean-up crew in an old shed at an abandoned gravel quarry in the central Fraser Valley. The first sojourn of these remains was to the laboratories of the provincial coroner’s office where they were ascertained to be of some antiquity, as belonging to a person of First Nations ancestry, and not of interest to the RCMP as a possible contemporary homicide or missing persons case. Consequently, the remains were turned over to Stó:lō Nation Archaeologist Dave Schaepe, with whom the RCMP has worked on other archaeological issues. The remains were accepted as those of an ancestral community member by the Stó:lō Nation, in whose collective territory they were found. In accepting the remains, the Nation took...
responsibility for their caretaking. This return to the Stó:lō, however, was not the conclusion of the journey.

While the Stó:lō Nation did have a heritage policy at that time, it did not deal with cases of found human remains. Schaepe and Cultural Advisor Sonny McHalsie together initiated a dialogue with knowledgeable elders and people with specific spiritual knowledge to determine the proper procedure for reburial. This dialogue served to address the issue at hand and to inform the development of the Stó:lō Heritage Policy Manual which was intended to provide guidance on such issues in the future. As discussion continued, the remains were temporarily housed in a cedar box in the Stó:lō Nation Material Culture Repository, in the basement of Building 1 on the Coqualeetza Grounds.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the manner in which the Coast Salish attitude towards death and burial has been reflected in their cultural practices and oral traditions over time. The main objective is to incorporate archaeological and ethnographic information with oral interviews to produce a description of these attitudes and compare these with the 2003 Stó:lō Heritage Policy for the treatment of human remains. The intention is to examine some of the practices that changed before the arrival of Europeans, some that changed as a result of “contact,” as well as others that remained constant for thousands of years.

The discussion of change and tradition, while seemingly paradoxical, is at the centre of my argument. Until the later part of the twentieth century, academic disciplines such as anthropology and history, as well as “popular culture,” depicted indigenous societies as having only a traditional life founded in a primordial order which did not change until forced to do so by contact with European society. This opinion has led to the conclusion that any resurgence of a native cultural practice is, in essence, a historical recreation or fiction that has been designed by revisionists to thwart the progress or subvert the order of western society.

My argument focuses on the idea that Coast Salish culture has, for centuries, recognized the existence of a community between the living and the dead and has emphasized this connection through both continuity and change in burial rituals. Continuity is represented in the wrapping of bodies and the feeding of the dead. Transformation is evident in the changes in outward burial customs. Current discussion arises most specifically in relation to excavation of burial grounds.

This article is organized into a discussion of three time periods. The first section, Investigating the Past, reviews information on burial practices investigated by the early ethnographic and archeological studies undertaken during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The second section, Let Me Give You a Story, examines the conclusions of a number of more recent archeological studies of the 1980s and 1990s regarding burial practices. These two sections both provide the context for the genealogy of the continuity of burial practice, as well situate the issues central to the current discussions regarding the archaeological excavation of ancestral remains.
The third section, Diversity and Commonality, concentrates on the recent past using information gathered from interviews with a number of Stó:lō community members in the summer of 1999. Although these interviews will focus on attitudes towards death in the “modern” world, they will also include perceptions held about the Stó:lō past.

Investigating the Past

In the past two hundred and fifty years many explorers, missionaries, and ethnographers have compiled a great deal of information concerning the Coast Salish and the Stó:lō. However, information from these times has the disadvantage of being rather speculative and often containing the strong prejudices of the writers. Despite these limitations, a great deal of information can be teased out of these works.

The earliest European explorers to the Northwest Coast observed that the Coast Salish put the dead in a canoe or on a platform that was then placed in a tree. Once the body had decomposed, the bones were often wrapped in blankets and buried in the ground. One of the earliest records of this type of inhumation comes from the journal of Manuel Quimper, who explored the coast for Spain in 1790. While anchored off what is now Sooke harbour on Southern Vancouver Island, Quimper’s pilot went ashore to explore. Quimper reported that: “At the mouth of the river he saw three canoes with a dead Indian in each one. This is the mode of burial these natives practice.”\(^2\)

By 1899 the practice had changed very little. A Kwantlen woman reported a similar type of ritual:

> It was the custom of our villagers to bury their dead within an hour of death. They were in most cases placed in a tiny house raised on posts; but, if there was no house ready, or if they were a distance from the “dead houses” they were wrapped in skins and blankets and placed in pole platforms high above the reach of animals, or in trees. With the dead were placed pipes, bowls, hammers or such things as he made or might require to start life in the next world. Before the burial-house was placed a stone or wooden figure to guard the dead from evil spirits.\(^3\)

Myron Eells, a missionary writing in the 1880s and 90s, described scaffold burials. He considered that this was a variation of canoe burial and was a response to the actions of “unprincipled” white gold seekers who stole both canoes and grave goods from burials along the Fraser River. According to Eells these thefts “incensed the Indians and caused a change in their mode of burial. They collected their dead in cemeteries and because enough trees could not be obtained. . . they built scaffolds. . . instead of using canoes, they

\(^2\) Henry R. Wagner, *Spanish Explorations in the Strait of Juan de Fuca*, 101.

\(^3\) Ellen Webber, “An Old Kwanthum Village — Its People and Its Fall,” 313.
made boxes and elevated them on a frame.\(^4\) He reports that when canoes were used, they were rendered useless by punching many holes through them.

Despite their lack of archaeological sophistication, the writings of some of the early authors, such as Harlan Smith and Charles Hill-Tout, offer some interesting insights into mortuary rituals. Unlike more recent studies which focus on scientific data, these early works describe the human ingenuity needed to construct these mortuary edifices. Both of these men wrote a great deal on the mounds and cairns, most probably because of their prominence in the landscape.

Smith, working with Gerald Fowke, published “Cairns of British Columbia and Washington” in 1901. This short article described the excavation of a number of burial cairns in coastal areas. Smith concluded that: “data tends to show that at one time the cairns were the burial places of the makers of the shell heaps nearby, but on other occasions and in the same region people who used the shell heaps did not bury in cairns.” He also mentions that the great deal of effort needed and care evident in the construction of cairns contrasted with the “rituals” that he saw practiced by the Coast Salish of his time.

Charles Hill-Tout discussed the mounds of the Marpole culture. Unlike his colleagues, Hill-Tout noted that the absence of grave goods was “remarkable in the face of the fact that in all disposals of the dead among modern indians...stone, bone and other objects were commonly buried. . .with the corpse.”\(^5\) He also reported the changes that he saw in the construction of the mounds and stated that some “ were undoubtedly formed when a mode of burial prevailed very different from that practiced by the natives of this region...it is well known that established customs rarely change radically among primitive people.”\(^6\) Although Hill-Tout believed there was some connection between the early inhabitants and the Coast Salish, he considered that the Coast Salish knew little or nothing of the early inhabitants. Further, he believed that the Salish of his time were “quite unconcerned at their (burial mounds of the earlier inhabitants) being opened or disturbed. This indifference in the face of the zealous vigilance they exercise over their own old burial grounds. . .becomes the more striking.”\(^7\) What Hill-Tout considered as “indifference” could have been related to the lack of persons who had the spiritual knowledge to safely approach the site.

Hill-Tout described a number of mounds and noted that certain mounds often had a layer of charcoal between the layer of stones and that of the soil and clay and speculated that these were the remains of some sort of ritual fire.\(^8\) What is significant is that he did note the presence of charcoal and evidence of ritual burnings that corroborates the idea that the

\(^5\) “Prehistoric Burial Mounds of British Columbia,” 120. “indians” is not capitalized in the original.
\(^6\) Ibid., 121.
\(^7\) Ibid., 120.
\(^8\) Ibid., 124.
current practice of burning provisions for the dead has been an important practice for generations. Importantly even at this “early date” of archaeological exploration the evidence of the longevity of these mortuary practices was evident.

More recent archaeological studies have the benefit of both advanced technologies, such as means to accurately date materials, as well as a more culturally sensitive outlook. Archeological evidence demonstrates that significant changes in the manner of burial have occurred from 2500 BC until the present. During this time, the Coast Salish buried their dead in middens, mounds and cairns and in above ground interments. As well, this archaeological evidence demonstrates that many of the religious or spiritual ideas of the Coast Salish have their roots in earlier eras and that these concepts have persisted into the ethnographic record.

The Arcas study of Marpole phase midden burials in Tsawwassen reports that bodies were wrapped in a cedar mat or blanket and often placed in a cedar box. Once the body was dressed and wrapped, it was buried in an unused area in the midden. In some cases, there is evidence that food and other goods were burned at the gravesite. The authors speculate that this practice is related to the feeding of the dead.

Information from the site at Scowitz on the Harrison River, the location of a large settlement approximately 2000 years ago, also suggests the continuity of some burial traditions. Despite the age of this settlement, the Stó:lō connection to these ancestors is supported by Nicole Oakes who states that “by 2000 years ago, if not earlier, the cultural ancestors of the Stó:lō were practicing life ways which closely resembled those observed by early European visitors to the area.”

Discussion in the Present

The study of death and its rituals reveals more than just how a people die, but also how they live. Social, religious and cultural ideas that motivate the living are reflected in the manner in which a people perceive death. Changes do not necessarily represent the evolution or progress of a culture, nor do they signal a loss of traditional values. Rather, they depict the ability of a culture to live and adapt in a changing world. Rituals and ideas that remain stable over time establish continuity and are not necessarily restraints; rather, they illustrate integral parts of a lasting cultural identity. A discussion of the perceptions and practices of a number of modern Stó:lō confirms that many of the practices of the past have continued into the twenty-first century. This section will also examine Stó:lō ideas concerning the archaeological studies that have informed much of this paper.

---

9 Archaelogical Investigations at Tsawwassen, BC Volume 4, 46.
10 Ibid., 58
Death and burial are personal and religious subjects and many people do not feel comfortable discussing this topic with “outsiders.” This section will not examine directly the intricacies of modern practices, rather it will address the evidence that the age-old practices of wrapping the body and feeding and burning goods for the dead are still important to the Stó:lō. In order to distance the discussion from the mention of the recently deceased, these topics will be examined in the context of the reburial issue.

In a larger sense, the issues that concern reburial also relate to a definition of community that encompasses both the living and the dead. This idea prescribes that a certain amount and type of interaction between these two states of being is necessary in order to “keep the world right.” While it is impossible to know if these beliefs have been held in the past, discussion of them gives voice to the possibility. In essence, this section will examine current practices that concern reburial and the treatment of human remains by looking into the past for guidance into the future.

Let Me Give You a Story

I interviewed five members of the Stó:lō for this section: two female Stó:lō elders, one man who works as a cultural interpreter in the “Longhouse Extension Programme” run by the Stó:lō Nation at Coqualeetza, and two women who work directly with academics involved in scientific excavations comprised this group. The two elders, Rosaleen George and Elizabeth Herrling, are frequently interviewed and are respected as sources of the Halq’emeylem language, customs, place names and other aspects of traditional Stó:lō knowledge. The two women, Betty Charlie and Helen Joe, and the man, Jeff Point, are all middle aged. They too are involved in the preservation of Stó:lō rituals such as the proper means for burial and reburial and the tradition of the longhouse. Questions included the propriety of testing remains, the spiritual power of remains, the length of time for genetic studies, the protocol around such studies, and the respectful treatment of remains.

In addition, the experiences of another Stó:lō man, now deceased, were recounted in an informal conversation with Stó:lō cultural advisor Sonny McHalsie. As well, the attitudes of many of the Stó:lō elders were evident in a discussion of the treatment of human remains that took place on May 25, 2000 at the meeting of the Stó:lō Elder’s council or “Lys” at the chambers on the Coqualeetza grounds. These interviews provide a variety of opinions on treatment of human remains. This discussion should in no way be considered a presentation of a “monolithic” set of Stó:lō beliefs. Like most groups the Stó:lō are a diverse people with a variety of attitudes and beliefs, unified by a sense of community.

In order to understand the Stó:lō attitude towards human remains, the Stó:lō perspective of the dead must be examined. The Stó:lō view life and death as cyclical. This is made evident in their language. In Halq’emeylem the word for “great grandfather” is the same

---

12 Sonny’s transcripts of his interview with Henry Murray have been misplaced.
as for “great grandson.” While this may seem like a semantic limitation, the underlying sense is one of the connection between ancestors and descendants. This cyclical connection imbues the Stó:lō perspective with respect and responsibility for the living as well as the dead. Ancestors, no matter how long they have been dead, must be treated with respect.

This connection between the living and the dead is illustrated in a story told by elder Rosaleen George. She tells of a group of men who were instructed by an owl to find the remains of a long dead Stó:lō:

They were all sitting around the campfire and it was hunting season. They were hunting for deer. There was an owl and it was making noise. These men were kind of annoyed with that owl and one of them says [about another member of the party] well he’s a Doctor. He should be able to understand what the owl is saying. So they told him why don’t you do something and find out what he wants. So he left the group and went further back, and it was dark by this time and the owl said I’ve been here a long, long time and I am tired. I am tired and I want to rest. So they didn’t hunt, they went around looking for this thing, this dead body where the owl said it was. And when they found it . . . there was nothing but bones left. . . . I don’t know if they found out who he was.

This story emphasizes the idea that it was more important for these men to find these remains than it was for them to hunt for food for the living.

Many modern-day Stó:lō have continued to practice their rituals despite the adoption of Western practices. Unless there are extenuating circumstances, the dead are buried four days after death has occurred. The body is usually washed, dressed and wrapped in a blanket. Following the ceremony, a feast is held. At this feast many of the goods of the deceased are distributed to friends and family. As well, an important aspect of the feast, called a “burning” is performed. Food and goods, such as clothes, are burned in order to feed and clothe the deceased. The Stó:lō maintain that the act of burning allows the essence of the goods to move from the worldly, physical plane to the spiritual plane. Helen Joe, who often conducts these burnings, explains:

A burning itself is a way of providing for our people who have passed on. It is a belief. . . [that] we take care of one another. It is kind of understood that once the people get to the spirit world there are different things they do — but they don’t have means to feed and clothe themselves. They don’t have the material means, but because they are used to these things, they still need them. So, it is our job here on the earth to set the table and call them. So we have the food that is there, the water, the tea, the juice that they used to drink. . . . We prepare it, we cook it,

---

14 In this context a doctor means an Indian doctor who can be referred to loosely as a “shaman.”
15 George and Herrling interview.
16 Joe interview.
we cut up the fruit . . . take the candies out of the wrappers. When everything is ready we have the fire. Once it goes into the fire and you see the smoke going up from the fire, that means that a part of that food and anything else that goes into the fire, once you see the smoke going up that means the spiritual part goes to the spirit world so the spirits there can partake in the meal. . . . It is like any other meal with your family.\textsuperscript{17}

She continues to explain that if the deceased is “not hungry,” the spiritual food is shared with others in the spirit world who do not have anyone to take care of them or have been forgotten by their descendants. The dead, just as the living, share goods among members of their community.

The ritual of the burning is not limited to the post-burial feast, but is considered the main method for the living to continue to take care of the dead. Further, the Stó:lō feel that the deceased are able to communicate directly with the living and request additional goods and food to be burned. Betty Charlie related the story of an ancestor who was cold and requested another blanket be burned for her use in the spirit world.\textsuperscript{18} She also considers that burnings should be done as a means of showing respect for the dead in places that are being studied, such as at Scowlitz: “Burnings should be done, mostly for the people at the site because we are invading their territory. It is out of respect.”\textsuperscript{19} Burnings then provide spiritual sustenance for the dead and are seen as acts of common courtesy acknowledging the responsibility that the living have towards those in the spiritual realm.

Respect for the dead, both for their physical remains and spiritual essence, is of prime importance. Jeff Point maintains that:

\begin{quote}
If human remains are mistreated, respect is lost for both parties. [the dead and the living] If they are treated with respect [then] generations down the line, our children, will see that, then they will have respect. All remains should be treated with respect. We should respect our past [ancestors], no matter how long ago they passed on.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

Most importantly, if respect for human remains is not maintained the interaction between the dead and the living can become dangerous for the living, especially for children. Elder Rosaleen George tells a story concerning the mistreatment of a skeleton. In this situation, the spirits of the people came back and interacted with children, attempting to coax the children to follow them to the spirit world:

\begin{quote}
There was a skeleton rolling around. They don't know that it would affect lots of people. These little people, they lived on the earth. [My niece] was playing with this little spirit, it was one of the little skeletons that have been rolling around. The little ones can be coaxed away. I phoned around and no one had heard
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Charlie interview.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Point interview.
anything [about the bones]. Finally Frank Malloway said that he heard that I was concerned. And I said “I am, they are our little people.” So he went and asked the chief if we could bury them in the cemetery, so that’s where they are now. And those little people didn’t come around anymore. Ever since they put them in the ground, they have been at peace.21

This preoccupation with the safety of children also suggests the connection that the Stó:lō feel exists between the generations. Children, as more recently reborn spirits, may have a greater affinity with the spirit world than adults who are more accustomed to the physical world.

Betty Charlie addressed another aspect of danger in her first person experience concerning a white academic who did not believe that any danger was involved at the Scowlitz digs. The man was sent to cut weeds with a weed-eater near the open excavation site. Despite warnings, he did not apply temelth, a red ochre paint that is considered by some to have protective qualities, nor did he behave in a respectful manner. According to Betty:

Andrew was a student and he was over there and he kept asking questions about spirit and stuff. And he told us that he didn’t believe in stuff like that — that he was cool and didn’t have to wear the temelth. And they were clearing one day and he went out to an area, like a wall of rocks — a platform. And his job was to clear out the nettles and he was over there by himself. And that should never have happened. Students shouldn’t be over there by themselves. And he had the weed eater, he was over there cutting nettles and we were in area A and the next thing I saw was Andrew coming out of the stinging nettles without his weed eater and he was screaming that there was a man standing there on the platform. And I said that that was okay, it was probably just the man from mound one. He asked if is it okay to go back to work and I said yes. So he did. So the next thing, he was coming out of the nettles and he was white and pouring sweat. He got over to area A and he dropped on the ground and he stayed there. And they took him over to the hospital by boat and the doctors couldn’t find anything wrong with him. His body temperature was below normal and his blood pressure was high and they couldn’t explain it. He was okay, but the elders came and they talked to him. They explained that he had to go back to the job because he started it. It was hard, but he did it. But he wasn’t allowed to use the weed eater, he had to use a machete because the elder told him that the people there didn’t like the sound of the weed eater. He got sick because he didn’t believe. He didn’t believe that there was anything over there. He was just over there for school, and then he got hit with whatever was over there and now he believes. When we are working over there in those mounds, we hope that they don’t find anything. As soon as somebody said there was a skull, we were out of there. It was really hard.22

21 George and Herrling interview.
22 Charlie interview.
One of the most eloquent points that Helen Joe makes is that spirit power is much stronger than physical power. It is for this reason that dealing with the dead can be dangerous. She offers:

I’ll give you a story. There was an incident from my mother’s people down in the States. They had some remains that were returned back to the community and I’m not sure where they came from but they had evidence that one person that was there was a woman because they found this comb and it was carved and when they saw the comb I guess there were ones who were working there who wanted to duplicate it. So they asked a group, it was a group of elders, I guess they had an advisory group, if they could duplicate it. And they had the go ahead to duplicate it but they had to make sure that the comb, the original comb was put back with the remains before they were buried. But from what I have heard they put the duplicate in with the remains and there was a group that was involved with that. And one lady that was involved with it ended up having a stroke and she’s not healthy, she lost the use of one side. Another man has had numerous surgeries and his health is just not right. The man, who was supposed to have duplicated the comb, actually carved the comb and then put it back and apparently it was not the original that went back, he has died. There was another spiritual person who was in the community who wasn’t really involved but he was kind of on his last stages of leukemia and they always say that the spiritual part of your being sometimes gets much greater at that period of your life because you are getting ready to go to the spiritual part of the spiritual world. So they say that the spirits sometimes get extra strong or have that extra energy to take your spirit to the other side. This man, while he was laying in his bed in his home he said this old lady came and she said “I didn’t mean to hurt anybody, I just wanted my comb.” And this was the day that they had the young man’s funeral who died. . . . the comb needs to be returned, if the process isn’t taken care of properly then people could get hurt. There have been no problems at the Scowlitz site because they have been taking care of those people by doing a burning [when necessary]. I have been involved in some of the burnings over there.23

Helen continues this discussion with a reference to burnings and an admonition that even a hug given in love by a deceased person can be dangerous to the living recipient:

I guess to go on, the spiritual part of our lives is much stronger than our own human one, much greater. Not just stronger but greater. . . . When we used to have our burnings we would fix the plates cause we prepare the plates for our people and we would have them just heaping, and we would have all kinds of stuff and we would have just everything on them. And he [an elder] told us he said you know you don’t need to have that much food. We putting a normal portion of fish and a normal portion of smoked fish and maybe a normal sized, one medium potato and a vegetable and cake and fruit and everything else and we had it all on the plate and he said that’s too much for them he said if you can

23 Joe interview.
look at a piece of fish that is maybe a half an inch that like giving the spirits a whole fish. That’s how great their size and strength, whatever it is that they have, that’s how great it is compared to us. So he said you only need to give them a little bit of each. One little inch square piece each of fried bread is like giving them a whole piece. So those kind of things, like portions, we had to learn how to fix. And then when you go up to a child or you go up to someone in your family and you give them a hug and you give them a good hug, a hug that feels good, we all enjoy being hugged, you like hugging your family. But if you were to experience that from a spiritual being, that hug would almost squeeze you to death. Because that energy is so strong. You know so he said we have to understand that the spiritual strength and the spiritual part of our people is so much greater than the human being and we have to be careful.24

This remark makes the point that the dead are not evil or malicious but are simply more powerful than the living.25 Further, it explains some of the wariness with which the Stó:lō approach their dead. Rosaleen George explains

it all depends on how these people were when they were on earth. If they were very possessive, it’s pretty hard to take something away from them. . . . Our grandparents never let us take anything away from the cemetery. Sometimes they hung things on the cross and my grandmother always said “don’t you fancy anything in the grave yard. Don’t think of anything — just be happy that it’s there.” That’s one thing my sister and I were told by my grandmother.26

The respect shown to the dead, then, is both an aspect of concern for the ancestors as well as an acknowledgment of their enhanced “spirit power.”

**Diversity and Commonality**

Although all the Stó:lō who were interviewed do not agree with the excavation of human remains for study, those interviewed did seem to agree that graves could be moved for a proper reason and if the movement was done with respect. Sonny McHalsie relates a story from the late 1930s that was included in an interview he conducted with Henry Murphy. As a youth of approximately twelve years, Henry was playing on a hill side and found what he knew to be human remains. Realizing the significance of his find, Henry promptly told his father and uncle. Rather than rebury the remains in the same place, they moved the bones to a place where they would be more secure. Sonny notes that the important issue was the respectful reburial of the remains in a place where they would not be disturbed rather than interment in the same spot. According to Sonny, this was done without the intervention of any state authorities.27 This story suggests that work done at

---

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 George interview.
27 McHalsie, informal discussion.
sites, such as at Scowlitz, is acceptable to those Stó:lō who define it as a “rescue operation” rather than solely a scientific expedition.

The ability to move graves was reiterated by three of the participants. Betty Charlie stated if the dead are apprised of the reason that they are to be disturbed, they have the same capacity for reason as do the living. One of the two elders who were interviewed also compared the dead to those that are sleeping. She felt that if the dead are gently made aware of the situation, rather than yanked out of their beds, they will respond in a positive manner. Rosaleen George states that: “The spirits are bothered when they are moved around. What if you were sleeping and someone just came along and bothered you. They just wake them up, that’s what they do to those skeletons.”

Jeff Point mentions practices from the past:

My grandfather told me there was a great big box of them [bones] and our people used to move them if they were moving, migrating from one place to another they would drag this big box with them. And on my grandmother’s side — they had a house similar to this one and there were shelves and they stayed in there. Now to get to that point of view, you see our people didn’t bury people, it wasn’t until the Europeans came here. So they buried them all. So now I always tell them, to me if we wanted to keep these remains in a little box to me its okay. But it’s not up to me. There are people older than me and if they say it is wrong, we have to abide by it. This is all I can say about it.

Elder Vince Stogan comments on the role of the government in the movement of graves:

We had huts, fence around it, they just put people in those huts, pile them up, one family in each hut. We have to destroy all those, bury the bones in the modern cemetery. Government said it should not be done like that. The huts were made of cedar. The spirits live on, they are always around. My grandfather was a healer, but we help people with problems. . . .We go to a Chinese cafe down the street. . . .They say they do that in China too, burning of food and spiritual counseling.

The subject of “found” remains, as opposed to excavated ones, elicited an interesting historical point. The Stó:lō maintain that there are a variety of explanations for the discovery of remains outside the bounds of established cemeteries. While some were simply buried before the establishment of cemeteries in the “modern” sense, many of the cemeteries are associated with Christian denominations. The Catholics, for example, would not bury those who were not baptized or who were considered to have clung to their “heathen practices.” This restriction did not allow those Stó:lō who followed the

---

28 George interview.
29 The interview was conducted in a room off the kitchen used for the Longhouse. It was probably 12’ wide x 20’ long.
30 Point interview.
31 Vince Stogan, “When I came home my Elders taught us that all our people who have passed on are still around us,” 452.
traditional religion, whether wholly or in part to be interred in “holy ground.” Betty Charlie relates:

The elders will tell you that a long time ago they put up fences around the cemetery. The priests used to come along and baptize people. The priests would change their names. That is how some people lost their Indian names. And some of the elders wouldn’t. . .so they [the priests] would bury them outside the cemetery gates. So that's why they find so many outside the cemetery.\(^\text{32}\)

For reasons of dogma, Catholics did not allow the bodies of those who had committed suicide to be buried in church grounds. This prohibition pertained to all Catholics and was not meant to discriminate against the Natives; however, recent revelations of the treatment of Native children and youths in the church run residential schools, which have resulted in suicide, make this discrimination doubly ironic.

The excavation of burials and the related topic of testing human remains seems a particularly apt discussion. Not surprisingly, those who were involved with the Scowlitz site considered the study to be valid one. Betty Charlie explains the situation:

I got involved in the Scowlitz site because of [various academics] and Sonny McHalsie when they “discovered” those mounds. A lot of the elders knew about it, but when they don’t want anybody coming in and vandalizing the site, they don’t tell anyone about it. They had to pick two people to work with the university, and Cliff and I were those. Cliff’s dad wouldn’t speak to us. He was in anger. “What’s the use in keeping quiet,” he said “we’d have every grave digger in the Fraser Valley over there.” It was mostly anger that we were going to be part of it.\(^\text{33}\)

Those who feel that studies, such as Scowlitz, should be allowed do maintain that certain precautions must be taken. These precautions ensure both the respect for the dead as well as the safety of those who are working are maintained. Betty Charlie suggests that a “kit” composed of a blanket and cedar box should be required for all “digs.” The blanket would be available to cover any remains while the cedar box would alleviate situations such as happened in the past in which remains were placed in a plastic bucket. However, despite her work with the archaeologists, she admits:

We tell them that we don’t really like it when they are getting close to the centre of a mound. We’ll watch and tell them stories, but we don’t really like it. . .it does give you a funny feeling. Especially when they are getting near the centre, and you hope that there is nothing there.\(^\text{34}\)

In contrast, Jeff Point and the elders Rosaleen George and Elizabeth Herrling feel that there are no good reasons to excavate the dead. Jeff wonders:

\(^{32}\) Charlie interview.  
\(^{33}\) Ibid.  
\(^{34}\) Ibid.
I mean it is kind of odd. I wonder if I went to England and started digging up the coffins. It would upset a lot of people. If it washed out...by all means pay respect, but there are ways of finding out [facts about Stó:lō history without excavations]. I wonder what the English would think if my people wanted to do a scientific study on them. If the tables were turned, what kind of excuse would they find? I feel that scientific excavation is wrong.  

Once remains are “found,” either through excavation or “serendipitous” means, the debate focuses on testing. Jeff Point feels that testing, while wrong, could be done to determine identity or familial ties:

I actually say...it should be done. Basically because of what has happened to our people...it would be good to know whereabouts these people came from. A lot of our people went missing. So actually it is wrong to do thing like that. But today for today’s interest it should be done. To let the family know.

In contrast, the two elders maintain that any testing is inappropriate and disrespectful. All participants feel that reburial should occur as soon as possible, hopefully within the prescribed four days, as in the burial of the recently deceased. The two women feel that any material that has been removed for testing could be reburied at a later date. Betty Charlie states:

There should be a proper ritual, but no boxes and no washing. They should be put back exactly the way they are found except for a new blanket. If there are bones they should be numbered and graphed and put back exactly the way they are found. They should be able to take a piece of bone, like a baby finger. Once it has been dated it should be put back by someone who knows what to do.

All participants believe that some sort of ritual should accompany the reburial of the human remains. Further, there is agreement that the remains should be handled as little as possible except that they should be rewrapped in a blanket. Jeff Point states: “I feel that it should be left the way it was found. Leave in that state and rewrap it, because our people wrap loved ones in blankets.” In general the use of a cedar box was not considered essential. Jeff Point comments that the use of the box or coffin is of recent origin and is not a traditional practice.

Although the sample group is small, clearly a number of customs that date from the earliest known times are still important. Burnings are still being practiced and are considered to be one of the main ways to interact with the dead. They are a means to both care and show respect for the deceased. Wrapping of bodies, while not discussed as a separate topic, has been mentioned numerous times during the interviews. Finally,

35 Point interview.  
36 Ibid.  
37 Charlie interview.  
38 Point interview.
feeding the dead is one of most central practices that maintain the continuity of community between the living and the dead.

**Conclusion**

The Stó:lō approved the *Stó:lō Heritage Policy Manual* in May of 2003. This document addresses the treatment of human remains. Section 5.2 of the Manual states that burial grounds should be avoided, but provides that burials may be recovered and moved under certain circumstances.\(^39\) Importantly the Manual prescribes the actions that must be taken when human remains are disturbed through either “incidental discovery” as well as “archaeological investigation.” Section 5.3.6.1 of the Manual states:

Either at the time of recovery or as soon as possible following recovery, the ancestral remains should be placed in a wooden (western red cedar) box and wrapped in red, cotton cloth. These procedures should be performed by or under the instruction of a shxwlá:m. The wrapped and packaged remains may be temporarily housed in the Stó:lō Material Culture Repository, or other appropriate facility, while analyses — if any — are carried out and reburial plans are made.

Acceptable analyses may include sampling for radiocarbon dating, dietary analysis, and DNA analyses. Collected remains should be described and analyzed by a professional physical anthropologist. Analyses should be overseen by the SRRMC Archaeologist to ensure maximum analytic accuracy and to ensure that cultural protocols are followed. Such analyses and/or sampling should be completed prior to reburial.\(^40\)

Finally, let us return to the ancestral remains being temporarily housed in the Stó:lō Nation Material Culture Repository. In May of 2000, I attended a meeting of the elders council at which Schaepe and McHalsie were discussing details for the reburial ceremony. One of the questions that concerned the elders was that the gender of the person was unknown. As discussed, an important component of the reburial would be the burning. Since this skeleton had not been found in an undisturbed grave and had been removed from the burial site, it was essentially naked and in need of clothing. It was a general feeling that further testing, which could ascertain the gender of the person, was not acceptable as most of the elders felt that the remains had “been through enough.” Finally, one elder remarked that this type of testing was unimportant. She suggested that any person today would be happy to wear jeans and a T-shirt. In a very modern response to a traditional question, it was decided that these modern clothes would be burned at the reburial ceremony.\(^41\) Seated amongst the others, wearing cedar clothes or Hudson’s Bay

\(^{39}\) David Schaepe and Albert ‘Sonny’ McHalsie, 13.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{41}\) Lyss meeting, May 25, 2000. Notes in possession of the author. Lyss (Lalems Ye Sto:lo Si:ya:m) is also known as the House of Chiefs.
Blankets, is another Stó:lō person dressed in jeans, a T shirt and a baseball cap, enjoying the salmon feast, reunited with the rest of the family and community.

Bibliography

Interviews
Joe, Helen. June 1, 2000. Tape and Transcript Stó:lō Archives, Chilliwack, BC.
Point, Jeff. May 31, 2000. Tape and Transcript Stó:lō Archives, Chilliwack, BC.

Published sources
———. *The Upper Stalo Indians of the Fraser Valley*. Victoria, BC: Anthropology in British Columbia Memoir no. 1, 1952.


Stogan, Vince. “When I came home my Elders taught us that all the people who have passed on are still around us.” In *In the Words of Elders: Aboriginal Cultures in Transition*, edited by Peter Kulchyski, Don McCaskill and David Newhouse, 443–58. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.


**Unpublished sources**


*Kathryn McKay* holds a BA and MA from the University of Victoria. Her Masters thesis, “Recycling the soul: Death and the continuity of life in Coast Salish burial traditions,” is directly related to the work she did at the Stó:lō Ethnohistory Field School in 2000. She is currently a PhD candidate in the Department of History at SFU.