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Ligwilda’ḵw Expansion into Northern Coast Salish Lands in the Nineteenth Century

Marie Mauzé

This chapter is based on research I undertook forty years ago when I started fieldwork in the Ligwilda’ḵw (Kwakwāk̓a’wakw) community of Cape Mudge, on Quadra Island, British Columbia. Since then, I have kept an ongoing relationship with several Ligwilda’ḵw families I visit on a regular basis. About six months before my arrival in Cape Mudge in January 1980, a great event had taken place in the village with the opening of the Kwagiulth Museum (now the Nuyumbalees Cultural Centre) in June 1979. The museum was built to house part of the Potlatch Collection confiscated by the Canadian government in 1922 following the illegal organization of a potlatch, an institution banned since 1884\(^1\). In the context of the repatriation of confiscated ceremonial regalia by the then National Museum in Ottawa and the re-appropriation of their cultural heritage in the 1980’s and 1990s, elders and Native consultants’ interests led me to undertake research on the history of the Ligwilda’ḵw. Several of the elders and consultants were aware that their group had been kept on the margins of ethnographic attention when compared to other Kwakwāk̓a’wakw communities.

The essay examines the expansion of the Ligwilda’ḵw into Coast Salish territory in the first half of the nineteenth century. It analyzes the phases of this expansion as well as the causes that likely led to such geographic and social changes. It relies on a variety of sources, including published historical and ethnographic literature as well as unpublished archival material, and data collected from Wiweka’yí and Wiwekam elders in the early 1980s.

The text does not only focus on internecine wars between the Ligwilda’ḵw and the Coast Salish people but also discusses how potential enemies made peace through marriage alliances and exchanged ceremonial privileges considered as immaterial property (Lévi-Strauss 1982, 174) or intangible property (Thom and Bain 2004). The transfer of privileges which was central in the social and ritual life of both tribal groups was validated by the distribution of material wealth.

\(^1\) Because of internal conflicts within the Kwakwāk̓a’wakw community, the Potlatch Collection was divided between two local museums, the Kwagiulth Museum and the U’Mista Cultural Centre. Located in Alert Bay, the latter opened in November 1980.
The first observations of the Indigenous peoples and their locations in the northern part of the Salish Sea come from the journals of the British and Spanish explorers who discovered the area in the last decade of the eighteenth century. Accounts by traders and early settlers provide additional information on the identity and location of Native groups between the 1820 and the 1860s. Ethnographic and linguistic data based on Indigenous voices recorded between the late 1880s and the early 1980s by authors Franz Boas, Edward Curtis, Homer Barnett, Wilson Duff and Herbert Taylor, Joy Inglis, Dorothy Kennedy and Randy Bouchard, and myself provide a clearer picture of population movements in the nineteenth century. The cross-referencing of sources, while being a challenging methodological task because of the varied categories of available data, provide an accurate enough view of the movements of the Ligwilda’xw, and their relations with their Coast Salish neighbors, although for much of the period the Indigenous groups involved are not clearly localized and identified.

What follows is adapted from Chapters 2 and 3 of my book *Les Fils de Wakai. Une histoire des Lekwiltoq* (1992), which is a revised version of my PhD thesis entitled ‘Enjeux et jeux du prestige : des Kwagul méridionaux aux Lekwilttoq (côte nord-ouest du Pacifique)’ (1984). Dorothy Kennedy and Randy Bouchard (2015) produced a few years ago a well-documented report on the delineation of the northern Coast Salish-Ligwilda’xw territory in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, research on the history of the Salish people relying both on Native and non-Native accounts has contributed to a better understanding of the complex relations between the Kwakwaka’wakw and northern Coast Salish people in which the Ligwilda’xw came to play a key role. Publications in the field of colonial history provide complementary insights into the process of Ligwilda’xw expansion into northern Coast Salish territory. They include various topics such as pre-contact spreading of smallpox in the Puget Sound and Strait of Georgia areas and the ensuing demographic collapse (Boyd 1999, Harris 1994). The history of aboriginal and non-aboriginal relations in the nineteenth century (Lutz 1999, 2008; Storey 2016), and the detailed study of the battle of Maple Bay involving allied Salish groups against the Ligwilda’xw (Angelbeck and McLay 2011) bring to light additional information.

**Moving Southwards**

The territorial expansion of the Ligwilda’xw is a phenomenon unmatched in both scope and speed when compared to other population movements of the Pacific North-West after first contact. However, a cross-check of archeological, linguistic, ethnographic and historical data
McMillan 2003, 247, 258) shows this movement to be part of a wider context of migrations that occurred at least 2,000 years ago in the area occupied by Salish and Wakashan peoples (Kwakw̱a’wakw and Nuu-chah-nulth). The expansion of the Wakashan peoples was the result of intertribal wars caused by the acquisition of new territories holding rich fishing grounds (salmon and eulachon) (Swadesh 1948, 84-86; Donald and Mitchell 1994, 117; Ferguson, 1984). The ancient territory (around 2,500 years ago) occupied by Kwak’wala speakers was likely limited to the northern tip of Vancouver Island, from Brooks Peninsula to the mouth of the Nahwitti River. Later these groups moved from the north-west of Vancouver Island toward Queen Charlotte Sound and the continental coastline, displacing the Tsimshian north and the Salish south, with the exception of the Nuxalk (Mitchell 1990, 357). Around 1830, the Kwakw̱a’wakw territory covered the north-west coast of Vancouver Island as far as Quatsino Sound, extending east to Smith Inlet and south to Havannah Channel (Donald and Mitchell 1994, 113-114; Galois 1994, 237-244). Archeological work undertaken by M. and E. Elbridge in the late 1980s in the northeastern region of Vancouver Island suggests that the mid-eighteenth century “was a period of conflict and displacement, perhaps dating the period of Salish withdrawal, or [marking] a period when village sites were changed” (Kennedy and Bouchard, 2015, 39).

Beyond the fact that the displacement and relocation of tribes was an internal phenomenon specific to the dynamics of intertribal relations, and access to resources, the development of the maritime fur trade, and the establishment of trading posts in the first decades of the 19th century resulted in the territorial reorganization of the inhabitants of this vast region. It also led to an intensification of war expeditions undertaken with the sole purpose of capturing slaves to sell for profit. The slave trade allowed for the acquisition of various types of goods (furs, guns, blankets, etc.) (Donald 1997, 149-154). The collective displacement ended around 1860 with the European colonization of the region, which would soon become the province of British Columbia, and the consequent end of the intertribal wars. Men of the Royal Navy contributed through the threat of violence or violent actions on Indigenous populations to the enforcement of colonial law and order for the safety of settlers during the British colonial period. Naval forces intervened in Native affairs such as internecine wars which in some cases led to the destruction of Native villages (Gough 1984).

In the late eighteenth century (from 1770 to 1800), the Ligwilda’xw were the southernmost Kwakw̱a’wakw group. They may have already made inroads into the territory of Comox Coast Salish speakers. Oral traditions associate the Ligwilda’xw people and their ancestor Wakai with several locations such as the Cape Scott region, at the farthest tip of
Vancouver Island, two villages at the mouth of the Nimpkish River and Tekya (Topaze Harbour) in the region of Sutherland Channel. Tekya is a site of great significance for the Ligwilda’xw. It is the place where they settled after the great flood, and which they made their winter village for several decades (Assu with Inglis1989, 20; Mauzé 1992, 147-148). Observations by early British and Spanish explorers on language, behavior, possession of firearms indicate that the Ligwilda’xw had presumably abandoned their Nimpkish River village by 1792 and had already settled in Tekya which they made their main village (Mauzé 1992, 39-49, Kennedy and Bouchard, 2015, 40-52)². The Ligwilda’xw advanced from Topaze Harbour, encroaching on the Coast Salish territory of the Island K’ómoks and the Homalco toward the south (Johnstone Strait and Discovery Passage) and east (Loughborough Inlet, Phillips Arm) (Mauzé, 1992, 57-61, Kennedy and Bouchard 2015, 52-82). In the course of this movement the Ligwilda’xw -whose core group was the Wiwak a’yi - underwent transformations either through internal splits or by the absorption of exogenous groups, both Coast Salish and Kwakwàk’wakwkw³. The new historical context prompted the Ligwilda’xw to resort to warlike actions to reach economic goals while at the same time it fostered solidarity among the subgroups. Such mutations are evident throughout the nineteenth century in the social history of the Ligwilda’xw (Mauzé 1992, 79-99, 151-190; Galois 1994, 233-276).

**Waging war on the Coast Salish**

While they were advancing into the southern Johnstone strait area, from Salmon River (Xwésam)⁴ to Cape Mudge, the Ligwilda’xw also conducted long-distance raids in the Salish Sea area, more precisely in Georgia Strait and Puget Sound, killing and capturing victims. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, they continually harried the neighboring populations, thus demonstrating their superiority by use of firearms, and gradually forcing them back to the limits of their territory. In clearing an area of its inhabitants, they were able

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³ One segment of the Kwix̣a, previously part of the larger Kwagul group, merged with the Ligwilda’xw and settled at Port Neville, then later in the region of Philips Arm (Mauzé 1992, 89-92; Galois 1994, 250-258). According to the first surveys carried out by the Hudson Bay Company, the Ligwilda’xw tribe included six subgroups around 1830 - 40: the Wiweka’yi, the Wiwakam, the Komenox, the Kwix̣a, the Tlaluis and the Xaxamatsis. The Tlaluis were said to have split off from the Kwix̣a (Mauzé 1992, 82, 89-92; Galois 1994, 236). They may also be of Salish origin (Kennedy and Bouchard 2015,73, 81).
to move into h territories, occupying new sites. Around 1850, they were in a position to control both sides of Johnstone Strait and Discovery Passage.

Ligwilda’xw raiders had been waging war in the southern part of the Salish Sea before the Hudson’s Bay Company established a land-based trading post on the Fraser River in 1827. The creation of Fort Langley provided new opportunities to enrich themselves by taking slaves from a set of groups gathering around the trading post. These groups included the Skagit, the Kwantlem, the Tlalam (Klallam), the Songhees, the Semaino (Stz’uminus), the Cowichan, the Squamish and the Noosack ((Maclachlan, 1993, 59, 65, 111, 152, 202-205; Mauzé 1992, 71-74)⁵). The Ligwilda’xw who were considered at the time as “the largest slave-holding tribe among the Kwakwák’wakw, with the largest number coming from Georgia Strait and the Fraser region” bartered their slaves with the Kwagul and Na’witi (Nahwitti), who were part of the northern slave trade network (Donald 1997, 229, 142).

While biased and not free of negative comments regarding the Ligwilda’xw who disrupted transactions between the company’s agents and the groups living in the vicinity of the fort, the Fort Langley Journals (1827-1830) provide a great number of entries referring to repeated attacks of the “ferocious” Yewcultas (Ligwilda’xw). The Coast Salish people, with few or no firearms proved easy prey for the Ligwilda’xw, and served to some extent as a sort of stockpile for captives of war, mostly women and children⁶. In 1829, the situation seemed to be so critical that chief trader Archibald McDonald was in favor of selling guns and ammunition to local Natives “to promote the ruin of that detestable tribe”, so much that he wished “the Complete (sic) annihilation of this truly barbarous banditti [that] would be no loss to the human race” (Maclachlan 1993, 111-112). Protecting the Natives who came to exchange goods at the trading post or giving them the means to defend themselves would have allowed the trade to run smoothly for the company to make profit.

Coast Salish warriors of different groups retaliated against the frequent attacks by the Ligwilda’xw and defeated them several times. The most stinging defeat for the northern raiders occurred in Maple Bay in Cowichan territory sometime around 1840-1850. It involved a large alliance between tribes from the Puget Sound and the Gulf of Georgia (Cowichan and Nanaimo). The circumstantial alliance involving hundreds of warriors who had obtained arms and ammunition from Fort Langley (Maclachlan 1993, 228). They engaged in a coordinated

⁵ See following sources: Maclachlan 1993; McKelvie 1947, 34, 50; Waite 1977, 17-18; Maud 1978, vol. 2, 49-50; Curtis 1913, 33-35; Curtis 1915, 106-108; Amoss 1978, 10; Tate, nd., 9-13; Boas 1889, 325.
⁶ In addition to the issue of limited access to weapons, the weakness of the Salish populations resulted from a smallpox epidemic in 1782 in the region around Georgia Strait and Puget Sound (Galois 1993, 235; Harris 1994).
canoe battle and succeeded in destroying the Ligwilda’xw fleet and killing its warriors. While hardly mentioned by the Ligwilda’xw, the famous battle is vividly remembered in Coast Salish oral accounts to this day. The latter attack was supposedly the last great battle on intertribal wars, but did not end the cycle of intertribal conflict (Angelbeck and McLay 2011). The building of Fort Victoria in 1843 changed the situation and encouraged the Ligwilda’xw to use new raiding tactics. Instead of bringing war to the distance, the Ligwilda’xw raided distant aboriginal groups that navigated from the Alaska Panhandle along the Inside Passage through Johnstone Strait and Georgia Strait to visit, trade and work in Victoria or further south in Puget Sound (Lutz 2008, 167-171; Storey 2016, 51). In the 1840s, the Ligwilda’xw had taken over several K’ómoks villages located at the extreme northern end of the Salish Sea, along Discovery Passage, and were thus able to take control of the sea route used by the northern tribes – the Haida, the Stikine (Tlingit), the Nuxalk and the Tsimshian – to reach Victoria. Thereafter, the Ligwilda’xw instead of engaging into regular trade economy in Fort Victoria carried out raids on any boats that came within their range to seize manufactured goods and take slaves (Mauzé 1992, 74-76).

Moving down Johnstone Strait

There is a gap of over 30 years between the observations of the British and Spanish explorers in 1792 and those of the Hudson’s Bay Company traders in the 1820s. At the end of the 1820s, the Fort Langley Journals (1827-1830) refer to the “Yukletaws”, “Yewkultas” or “Yucultas” (Maclachlan 1993) as northern tribes with no further location details. By the end of the 1820s, the Youcattas (Ligwilda’xw) already controlled the region around Seymour Narrows (ʔuʔtəwə)9, The earlier censuses made in 1834 by William F. Tolmie (1863), serving at Fort McLoughlin, placed the Hachaamdsis (Xaxamatsis)10 in Johnstone Strait, and three other Ligwilda’xw subgroups (Wiwaka’yı’, Wiwakam, Tlaluis) in Desolation Sound, which at the time comprised Loughborough Inlet, Bute Inlet and Cordero Channel, in the northern part of the Gulf of Georgia. James Douglas (1840), future chief factor of the Hudson’s Bay

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9 Xwēmkwu in Comox language (Kennedy and Bouchard, 1983, 167)  
10 The real identity of the Xaxamatsis is still an enigma. It is likely that the Xaxamatsis included members of a Salish village located up the Salmon River and members of the Ligwilda’xw group. (See Mauzé 1992, 92-96; Kennedy and Bouchard 2015, 67).
Company in Fort Victoria, located the Neekultas (Ligwilda’xw) on Vancouver Island, across from Thurlow Island and in Loughborough Inlet. According to Douglas, the linguistic boundary at that time between Kwakwak’awakw and Salish speakers passed through Port Chatham across from Nodales Channel, at the junction between Johnstone Strait and the Discovery Passage (Mauzé 1992, 58).

The conquest of Discovery Passage likely accelerated with the establishment of a trading post at Fort Victoria (1843), affording the Ligwilda’xw a position from which to exert control over the vessels using this sea route to bring Indigenous groups from the north to Fort Victoria. The other route, through Cordero Channel, along the continental coastline, was also controlled by Ligwilda’xw raiders: there are reports of taxing travelers from their village on Big Bay on the eastern coast of Stuart Island (Yuculta Rapids); they were quick to kill any who refused to comply with their demands (Duff’s Notes 1961). The Ligwilda’xw secured a strategically advantageous position for themselves, allowing them to control both passageways from north to south.

Attacks designed to drive the K’ómoks from their villages took place after a series of raids and counter raids involving the Ligwilda’xw and Coast Salish groups in which the role played by the K’ómoks was ambivalent (Galois 1994, 268). According to Native historians James Smith and Billy Assu, raids were conducted out of several Ligwilda’xw bases. They also reported that the Ligwilda’xw drove the Comox out of Gowland Harbour (Gwigwak’ulis) in Discovery Passage from their bases at Green Point (Loughborough Inlet) and Yuculta Rapids (Duff’s Notes 1960). Smith and Assu mentioned that Ligwilda’xw had established a village at Whiterock Pass (tatapa’ulis)11, between Maurelle and Read Island (Duff’s Notes 1960; Drucker’s Field Notebooks). Seen as a crucial step in their conquest of the passage, the Ligwilda’xw (Wiwakam) would occupy the village at Whiterock (Dawson 1887, 75). Other K’ómoks sites were taken over along Discovery Passage; as such, Kanish Bay (Qanis) on the eastern coast of Quadra Island became a winter village where the different Ligwilda’xw groups gathered for potlatches and ceremonies (Duff’s Notes; Drucker’s Field Notebooks). There are reports of a raid carried out by the Ligwilda’xw around 1835, where the K’ómoks Eeksam of Campbell River (łamataxw)12 were all but exterminated while gathered to fish on the banks of the river; the survivors rejoined the Pentlatch at Comox Harbour (Meade 1980, 20). The Ligwilda’xw attack on Gowland Harbour, where the

11 T’ át’pu7us in Comox Coast Salish (Kennedy and Bouchard, 2015, 156). Transcribed in the Kwak’wala language as t’et’epe7uyas by Kennedy and Bouchard (ibid.). This was a firmer Homalco settlement.
12 Tl’ámatexw in Comox language (Kennedy and Bouchard, 1983, 167)
K’ómoks had taken refuge, was a decisive moment in the fight to take control of Discovery Passage (Curtis 1915, 110-112). The inhabitants of Point Mudge eventually resettled with the Pentlatch. The last Comox villages (Campbell River, Gowlland Harbour and Point Mudge) came to be abandoned as a result of the attacks and raids carried out by Ligwilda’xw warriors.

According to several testimonies collected by Hudson’s Bay Company’s employees the definitive occupation of Discovery Passage, with the settlement of the Wiweka’yi at Cape Mudge, did not occur until the 1840s. In his 1839 survey of the populations around the Gulf of Georgia, James Murray Yale of Fort Langley mentioned the Tsiloths (Catloch or K’ómoks) residing “on the east coast of Vancouver Island, at Point Mudge” (Yale 1838-1839). In May 1840, Douglas (1840) noted in his journal the presence of three K’ómox villages off Point Mudge, one of which was surrounded by a palisade. In September 1841, George Simpson, traveling aboard the Beaver, commanded by Captain W. H. McNeill, made the same observation (Simpson 1847, 186), without giving exact details of their location. Some years later, in December 1847, J. Thorne, captain of the Beaver, made a stopover in Discovery Passage and traded there with the Ligwilda’xw in the area around Seymour Narrows (Mauzé 1992, 60).

A few years later, in February 1852, the crew of the Beaver stopped at Duncan Bay, north of Campbell River to cut firewood. The crew members warned the Natives of their presence by firing a few shots, and were met by several boats of the Uculty (Ligwilda’xw) tribe (Beaver Journal, 1850-1852). The following year, in January 1853, at Point Mudge, Douglas reported that around 100 people had spent the entire day alongside their vessel. He also recorded that the Comox resided at Point Hope (Cape Lazo), near Comox Harbour, suggesting that the Comox had left Point Mudge to settle further south (Douglas 1853-1859).

According to information collected from fur traders, the Ligwilda’xw occupied the area around Discovery Passage between 1842 and 1847; possibly around 1845 according to Taylor and Duff (1956, 63); or between 1845 and 1852-53. In 1853, the Wiweka’yi, had established a village at Cape Mudge, a mile from Point Mudge. According to chief Harry Assu, the Wiweka’yi decided to settle at Cape Mudge rather than Campbell River due to the abundance of blueback, young Coho salmon offshore from the first of these villages (Mauzé 1992, 62). In the 1850s a Ligwild’a:xx subgroup had control over a salmon-fishing site on the Qualicum River after its inhabitants were wiped out by disease or wars against the Opichesaht. This Ligwilda’axw camp was itself almost destroyed by fire and its occupants killed during an attack by the Haida in 1855 who were travelling in the area in retaliation for a raid the latter had suffered near Cape Mudge (Walkem 1914, 42-43).
The legend of the Ligwild’a’xw as a renowned group of warriors came to an unhappy and bloody end in 1860, when the gunboat *Forward* was dispatched to Cape Mudge to seek restitution of stolen goods on behalf of traders who had been attacked in Georgia Strait. When the Ligwild’a’w refused to comply, the ship responded by opening fire, their cannons blowing the boats moored along the beach to pieces and destroying the defensive wall that surrounded the village (Mayne 1862, 245-246). Two years later, the Wiwaka’yí suffered heavy losses after contracting smallpox following an ambush on a Haida group who had returned from Victoria with the disease (Daily Colonist, July 1st 1862, Boyd 1999, 188-189). Northern tribes had in fact been coming to Victoria and spending several months there since the Gold Rush of 1858. In April 1862, a sailor disembarked in Victoria carrying smallpox. Instead of taking quarantine measures, the colonial authorities evicted the northern Native people from the city, causing the epidemic to spread the entire length of British Columbia and killing several thousands of Indigenous people (Boyd 1999, Storey 2016, Van Rijn 2006).

**Further South migration**

Long before establishing a village at Cape Mudge, some of the Ligwild’a’xw who still lived in Tekya and others in Port Neville seem to have claimed fishing rights on Comox Harbour. Narratives about a conflict between the K’ómoks and the Ligwild’a’xw reported that the latter had moved to Comox Harbor to catch herring (Curtis 1915, 108). They continued to camp in Comox for fishing after the Wiwaka’yí had moved to Cape Mudge and the Comox south to join the remnants of the Pentlatch. Regardless of whether they actually planned to settle here on a longer-term basis or not, the colonial authorities ensured this did not happen, concerned as they were to protect their colonists, who in 1862 had begun to arrive and establish permanent settlements land in the Comox Valley. Rumors regarding Indigenous peoples’ hostile behavior were well spread among colonists who also were afraid of tensions ready to burst out between aboriginal groups (Lutz 2008, 168-169.) There were around seventy colonists in the region at the time, who employed Native peoples as labor force, while remaining wary of the thefts that they had committed (including stealing potatoes from the fields). Disputes sometimes required the intervention of the colonial authorities (Hayman 1989, 123-124), especially in this very case when acrimonious relations between Ligwild’a’xw and the K’ómoks were felt according to colonial discourse as nuisances for the peace of the settlers. In 1865, by order of the Governor of Vancouver Island, Arthur Kennedy, three gunboats were dispatched to Comox to defend the colonists there against the Natives, who
were deemed dangerous. The commander was also asked by the K’ómoks chief to dispose of 50 men in the event that the Ligwilda’χw would attack his people. Whether or not the situation was really threatening, Admiral Denman, who led the expedition, was charged with driving the Ligwilda’χw back toward Cape Mudge and prohibit them from ever returning. They agreed to be escorted back to Cape Mudge, though by Denman’s recommendation they were permitted to return to Comox Harbour to fish, on the condition that they would not seek to settle there permanently. In March 1866, Robert Brown, who led the Vancouver Island Exploring Expedition, visited Cape Mudge, “now a very miserable collection of 10 or 12 huts” to see that all the inhabitants had left; some of them had traveled to Comox Harbour to assert their long-standing fishing rights (Brown 1866, 19; see Mauzé 1992, 62-64).

Ligwilda’χw territory in the 19th century
In Mauzé, 1992.
Between the 1850s and 1860s, the Ligwilda’xw held a territory comprising winter villages and summer sites spread across a great distance between Port Neville and Tekya (Topaze Harbour) to the north and Qualicum and even a bit further to the south in Georgia Strait. The Wiwakam occupied several sites in Loughborough Inlet and relocated in Campbell River at the turn of the 20th century. Before residing with the Wiwaka’yí and the Wiwakam, the Kwexa had two villages in Phillips Arm, and the Walatsama lived in Salmon River until 1918 when they moved definitely to Comox Harbour (Mauzé 1992, 88, 90, 96). According to chief Harry Assu the K’ómoks and Ligwilda’xw groups also shared sites on Hornby Island and Denman and the Island Halkomelen from Cowichan, Ladysmith, Chemainus and Nanaimo camped near the village of Cape Mudge during the summer months and fished salmon (Mauzé 1992, 194, Assu with Inglis 1989,12, 14; Thom 2005, 362-365).

Although some of these sites were fishing sites only occupied on a seasonal basis, the fact remains that, in the mid-nineteenth century, the Ligwilda’xw controlled the northern part of the Salish Sea including Johnstone Strait, Discovery Passage and a part of Georgia Strait. It is also recorded that by 1873 the Ligwilda’xw had expanded as far south as Nanoose Bay where they had a village and spent several months a year showing that access to resources fueled hostilities between neighboring groups (Kennedy and Bouchard, 2015, 115).

Making peace through marriage

Relations between the Coast Salish and the Ligwilda’xw were marked during the first half of the nineteenth century by hostile attacks fueled by slave raiding. The Gulf of Georgia and Puget Sound Indigenous groups suffered during several decades of the Ligwilda’xw warfare and conquest of new territories to access to rich fishing grounds. More than perhaps with the other Salish groups, the relations between the Ligwilda’xw and the Island Comox were ambivalent, ranging from outright hostility to military collaboration, participation in Ligwilda’xw potlatches, and marriage alliances 13. Oral traditions say that marriages and potlatches were organized to make peace, to ease access to resources, as well as to transfer chiefly names and prerogatives, which exemplifies that conflict resolution processes were deeply rooted in the cultural context. Intermarriages between K’ómox and Wiwka’yí families,

13 An early case is reported in the Fort Langley Journals of a marriage between a Ligwilda’xw woman and a Kwantlen chief before the company arrived which was followed by a period of peace between the two tribes (Maclachlan 1993, 203).
and between Halkomelen and Wiwaka’yi families continued through the first half of the 20th century (Assu with Inglis 1989,13-14).

Among the Kwakw̓a̱k̓a’wakw where social statuses were governed by an internal hierarchical system of ranks, marriages were arranged as a means of obtaining status through the transfer of names and dancing privileges. Chiefs were responsible for family property including intangible possessions such as names, songs, dances, and narratives about how the ancestor of his group obtained the right to use a dance in ceremonies. Although the K’ómox had a more flexible social organization, marriage alliances with the Ligwild’axw were considered a source of prestige.

In his Family Stories, Boas’s main collaborator, George Hunt, recounted the story of a young the K’ómoks man who by marrying a Wiwaka’yi woman received a name and a seat in one of the numaym of the Wiwaka’yi as well as the right to the Sisiul (double-headed serpent) dance in the Winalagilis ritual of the winter ceremonies (Boas and Hunt 1921, 951-954). Potlatches and winter ceremonies were also organized in Comox by Ligwild’axw high ranking chiefs. In 1876, a Wiwak a’yi ai chief from Cape Mudge named Johnny Chiceete (Chickite) was initiated in the Hawinalal dance also part of the Winalagilis ritual. At the end of the potlatch, Chiceete burnt a large war canoe (McKelvie 1972: 29-37). Conversely, privileges belonging to the K’ómoks were transferred through marriage to the Ligwild’axw. Around the turn of the 1900s, a noble Wiwaka’yi family from Cape Mudge earned the privilege to use the Sxwayxwey mask through marriage to a K’ómoks woman. In 1876, a Wiwak a’yi ai chief from Cape Mudge named Johnny Chiceete (Chickite) was initiated in the Hawinalal dance also part of the Winalagilis ritual. At the end of the potlatch, Chiceete burnt a large war canoe (McKelvie 1972: 29-37). Conversely, privileges belonging to the K’ómoks were transferred through marriage to the Ligwild’axw. Around the turn of the 1900s, a noble Wiwaka’yi family from Cape Mudge earned the privilege to use the Sxwayxwey mask through marriage to a K’ómoks woman. In 1876, a Wiwak a’yi ai chief from Cape Mudge named Johnny Chiceete (Chickite) was initiated in the Hawinalal dance also part of the Winalagilis ritual. At the end of the potlatch, Chiceete burnt a large war canoe (McKelvie 1972: 29-37). Conversely, privileges belonging to the K’ómoks were transferred through marriage to the Ligwild’axw. Around the turn of the 1900s, a noble Wiwaka’yi family from Cape Mudge earned the privilege to use the Sxwayxwey mask through marriage to a K’ómoks woman.

In 1941, the Walatsama of Salmon River merged with the Comox, and the reserve that had been established for the Walatsama in 1886 thus became a de facto Comox reserve as well (Kennedy and Bouchard 1983, 167; Mauzé 1992, 96). Following the amalgamation of the two First Nations bands, the K’ómox were placed under the supervision of the colonial Kwawkewlth Agency. Since then, the Comox reserve has been considered the southernmost Ligwilda’xw settlement (Assu with Inglis 1989, 11). Today the K’ómox First Nation is a member of the Kwakiutl District Council.

In Comox, Kwak’wala eventually became the dominant language (Kennedy and Bouchard 1983, 17, 23) and has remained the spoken language in ceremonies and potlatches.

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14 The initiator of this marriage between John Dick from Cape Mudge and Maggie Frank from Comox was the Wiwaka’yi ai chief Sewish (Mauzé 1992:105). The Sxwayxwey mask was included in the Potlatch Collection confiscated to the Kwakw̓a̱k̓a’wakw people in 1922 following the illegal organization. Along with other ceremonial regalia, the mask was returned in 1979 to the Kwagiulth Museum in Cape Mudge. See also Kennedy and Bouchard, 1983,53.

15 See https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/environment/natural-resource-stewardship/consulting-with-first-nations/first-nations-negotiations/first-nations-a-z-listing/k-moks-first-nation-comox-indian-band
However, today “the K’ómox First Nation and its members are undertaking the huge task of language revitalization,” and collaborating with “sister nations Homalco, Tla’amin, and Klahoose, who share the same traditional language” (https://komoks.ca/cultures/).

The K’ómox consider themselves as being part of two main cultures, Northern Coast Salish as well as Kwakwaka’wakw (ibid.). The artist Andy Everson of both K’ómoks and Kwakwaka’wakw (Kwikwasut’inux) descent who lives on the K’ómox reserve, considers that the Comox area “was a point of intersection for two large cultural groups: the Salish and the Kwakwaka’wakw” (in Glass 2021, 369). His own work as well the monumental carvings and paintings in the Comox Big House testify to the strong connections and identification to Kwakwaka’wakw culture.

Conclusion

The southward migration of the Ligwild’axw into the Salish Sea which probably began in the 18th century, a few decades before the contact with Europeans, has a long history. We do not know all the causes at the origin of this expansion movement, but we do understand the complexity of their relations with their Coast Salish neighbors, which were sometimes marked by open hostilities, sometimes by occasional alliances according to circumstances. This movement was at first part of a more general matter of access to the rich waters of the Salish Sea (see Wadewitz, this volume). With the establishment of the HBC land-trade posts it was amplified by the possibility through the slave trade of procuring goods of European origin, including weapons, which signaled their superiority in war matters. The use of the Royal Navy to break up the hegemony of the Ligwild’axw, and to allay the anxieties of the settlers who started to appropriate Indigenous lands in the Comox Valley had put a stop to further displacement of the Coast Salish population. Around the 1860s, fishing sites occupied seasonally, located away for winter villages, if not entirely shared, were no longer the object of major conflicts, more so when marriage alliances reinforced kinships ties. What started as warfare for control of fisheries and obtaining economic wealth resulted in the exchange of intangible wealth between the Ligwilda’xw and the K’ómoks.

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