

**COAST SALISH TRANSFORMATION STORIES:  
KINSHIP, PLACE AND ABORIGINAL RIGHTS AND TITLE IN CANADA**

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**Abstract**

Transformation stories are an important way that Coast Salish people make sense of their place in the world. George Stse̓'lis, a Stó:lō chief, shared a rich set of these stories and his own genealogy with Franz Boas over a few days in 1889 and 1990. Through a detailed examination of the names of people and places in these stories in the context of Coast Salish kinship and spirit power, the importance of the relationship between humans and non-human ancestors (like animals, rocks and trees), and between humans and places is emphasized. The interpretations of these stories are corroborated by statements made by contemporary Coast Salish story tellers. Beyond the level of analysis of oral tradition, I suggest that these stories have significance for interpreting Aboriginal rights and title issues in Canada today.

**Philosophies and Stories**

Coast Salish people include plants, animals, rocks and places in their reckoning of kin. This old idea - that humans are related to non-humans and places, is important and timely for current political struggles over rights to resources and land. The currency of the idea is regularly emphasized by the cultural advisor for Stó:lō Nation, Sonny McHalsie, who makes it his main point in workshops with Forest companies, municipal planners, fisheries officers and treaty negotiators. Presented clearly, this idea can also provide the kind of information the courts have required to satisfy the burden of proof on the existence of an aboriginal right or title. The idea that humans are related to non-humans and places is, however, not a familiar one to the outside observer. I don't consider myself to be related to a rock in a park, or to a patch of bulrushes growing along the river. How do Stó:lō people come to this understanding? What is the basis for this philosophical outlook, and what are some of its implications?

Now and again, while I was working as a researcher for the Stó:lō Nation, a Coast Salish

community centred in Chilliwack BC, I heard a *sxwoxwiyám* being told. These are traditional stories about how the world was in the past when humans and non-humans had powers to transform themselves into other things. Sonny McHalsie points out that these traditional stories teach about how things in the world are related, and the special responsibilities and obligations that this relationship requires of Stó:lō people today. These stories provide foundations of meaning from which Stó:lō people engage the world.

Most ethnographers who have done substantial work in Stó:lō communities since Boas have recorded these traditional stories and have made some mention of there being a relation between humans and non-humans, though early on it was largely in the context of a debate around the possibility of Coast Salish totemism (Boas 1894:454-5; Hill-Tout 1987:49-50, 73, 109-113, 150-151), and more recently such discussion has centered around the definition of Coast Salish ‘local groups’ (Duff 1952:85-6; Suttles 1987:104, 1990:466; Wells 1987:88, 94-5).

During eleven days spent on the Fraser River, Franz Boas recorded a large body of *sxwoxwiyám* told by Mr. and Mrs George Stse̓̓’lis of *Sts’a’í:les* (on the Harrison River). Most of these eleven stories tell something of the transformations of humans and non-humans at particular places, and of the journey of Qäls, the Transformers, who in Coast Salish ontologies, shaped the world to the form we know today. None of the work with Stse̓̓’lis has been published in English, though a typescript translation produced in the mid-70's and has circulated as a manuscript. Though Boas himself did not make much of the connection between humans, non-humans and places, it is the stories told to Boas on his short visit to the Fraser River that I would like to focus our attention.

As with much of the oral literature of indigenous peoples, these stories are rich in meaning and in the diversity of how they can be interpreted (Basso 1996). To explore McHalsie's idea that humans are connected by kin to non-humans and place, I have read these stories with attention to the details of kin connections, through descent and marriage, and the named places that StSEÉ'lis gave with his stories. Though most of you are at a disadvantage for not having read them in advance, a re-telling would take hours, and a brief summary would really only dispel some of their potency. With some slides illustrating kin connections and mapping places, I will bring you through some examples of how this notion of the bond between people, non-humans and places is a central facet of how Coast Salish people organize their relations with the non-human world.

### **Non-Humans as Kin**

My first examples show how the first ancestors of certain Stó:lō communities are descended from a human who married a non-human and had human children. **[show slide 1 - K'oā'antel Ancestors]** In the Qäls story (the longest one told by StSEÉ'lis), the K'oā'antel people are descended from the first chief K'alé'tsemes, who had a daughter who slept with his dogs. When her six boys were caught dancing without their dog skins on, their mother took the skins and threw them in the fire, making her children keep their human form.

**[show slide 2 - Tc'ilequē'uk' Ancestors]** The Tc'ilequē'uk' people at Ts'uwä'lē are descended from their first chief, whose daughter was tricked into sleeping with Mink and had a human boy T'ēqulä'tca. Herb Joe of Chilliwack carries this name today.

**[show slide 3 - Siyi't'a Ancestors]** The people at Siyi't'a are descended from a boy whose mother slept with sturgeon and whose father, was a bear who turned himself into a man. The sturgeon-boy later was thrown into the river, caught again, prepared and then eaten. His bones

thrown back in the water and he returned as a full boy who then moved from Squhä́MEN to Siyít'a and was the first ancestor of the people there.

**[show slide 4 - Stseḗlis Ancestors]** The next three examples recount the founding of contemporary communities, with non-humans being transformed into humans at a particular place and having human children. In the story of the ancestors of the Stseḗlis, their first chief dropped from the sky and had 4 boys. These boys married the four daughters of a chief from the upriver village [Qw'áyleqt] K'ōā́leqt, who was the descendent of mountain goat and martin. The people from K'ōā́leqt moved down out of their village high up in the Chehalis River valley and joined the Chehalis community at the mouth of the river.

**[show slide 5 - Pelā́tlq Ancestors]** Another story recounts how the Pelā́tlq people at [Cháychōxil] Tcā́tcōhil are descended from Bullrush and Sandhill Crane, who transformed themselves into humans.

**[show slide 6 - Squhä́MEN Ancestors]** Later in the same story, the people of Squhä́MEN are told to have been descended from a bear that turned himself into a man.

**[show slide 7 - MAP]** Finally, several narratives told to Boas by Stseḗlis recalled a first ancestor who had children who were transformed into non-humans. The descendants of these children, although they were human, could trace their lineage back to someone who had been transformed into a resource found near their home. At Mā́lē, the first chief was transformed by

Qäls into an “iris” that is abundant near there. At K’oā’antēl, the first chief was changed by Qäls into a badger. At Mā’çqui, a chief and his son battled Qäls and were transformed into beavers. At Lek’ä’mel, their ancestor who had received power from the sun, was transformed into a sturgeon after losing a battle with Qäls. The ancestor of the people at Pā’pk’um, was transformed by Qäls into a mountain goat, many of which are commonly found on the nearby Mt. Cheam.

What are some of the implications of kin connections to non-humans being expressed in these *sxwoxwiyám*? Firstly, kin connections to non-humans create the kinds of obligations of reciprocity that people have with their human kin. The most clear example of these obligations is the first sturgeon ceremony which continues to be performed by the people at Squhä’men, whose ancestor we saw was a sturgeon. People rely on these fish and animals - like they do their families - for food and well being. They must hunt or fish for them, while at the same time be their stewards. The *sxwoxwiyám* are a powerful reminder of how the non-human descendants of their ancestors must be respected and cared for.

Secondly, these non-human ancestors become a part of Stó:lō community and personal identity. In each of these stories George Stseē’lis is careful to mention the name of the contemporary community that these people are the ancestors of. This identity is found throughout the Stó:lō world today with ancestor figures often used as logos on soccer jerseys and Band office letterhead. Individuals hold many of the names that their non-human ancestors carried in these stories.

Finally, these kin connections to non-humans are made tangible by the experience of spirit power. Spirit powers are obtained in dreams, visions, or when a song come to a person. They are always given by non-humans that are seen in the dream or manifest themselves in the spirit song and dances. In StSEĒ'lis's Qäls story, a Lek''ä'mel ancestor received his power from the sun - giving him fire and teaching his people "all the skills". He used some of this power in battle against Qäls. StSEĒ'lis's own grandfather received hunting power from a bear who revealed himself to be human when he took off his skins (Boas 1894:460). The experience of spirit power connect Stó:lō people in real, tangible ways to their ancestors in the non-human world.

### **Kin Connections to Place**

Places are also connected to people by kinship. Many places are ancestors who were transformed by Qäls into stone or some permanent physical feature which defines the place. StSEĒ'lis often mentions places by name, evoking a long standing Coast Salish cultural tradition of imbuing places with a sense of history, community, and spiritual power.

There are many examples of such places in the *sxwoxwiyám* told by StSEĒ'lis. The hunter and his dog are turned to stone at K''oä'lets near Yale. T'ēqulá'tca, ancestor of people from Ts'uwä'lē lost battle with Qäls and was changed to stone at Tc'ilequē'uk'. At Sk'au'ēlitsk', their ancestor (whose daughter found the Sqoā'eqoē mask) was transformed to stone at the mouth of the Harrison River. LEqyiles was the old toothed-vagina woman who lived on the Harrison River. She bit off Mink's hand when he tried to feel her genitals so Qäls changed her to stone.

"Oneleg" was transformed to stone at StSEĒ'lis in two different stories. In one, he was a salmon-

harpooner who had his harpoon-head stolen by Qäls. Qäls wanted to make “Oneleg” happy after he returned the harpoon head so he transformed him to stone where there would always be many salmon. In another story, “Oneleg” was challenged by Qäls to see who could catch most salmon. First Qäls stole his harpoon-head, but eventually defeated “Oneleg” by changing him to stone.

Powerful ancestor places form a living part of the Stó:lō connection to the land. Their *shxwelí* or life-force can be found in the rocks and bodies of water throughout the territory. The power of the being that was transformed, fills these places. The rocks and cliff sides where Lequiles and “Oneleg” were turned to stone can cause the weather to change. Ancestors found at particular places also are a potent force in the personal spirit powers which can be experienced at these locations. In 1933, Diamond Jenness recorded Old Pierre’s account of Wolf-power, which illustrates clearly how power is connected to a particular place:

When Khaals reached New Westminster, in the dawn of time, he transformed a family of Indians into wolves, and ordained that they should help the generations of people who should come after them. Hence all New Westminster youths secured the wolf for their guardian spirit and became excellent hunters of deer, elk, bear, and other game. Similarly their women, aided by the spirits of female wolves, became splendid mat-makers and weavers of woolen garments. Wolves, of course, roamed everywhere, and their spirits aided Indians of other groups, but it was only the New Westminster people who obtained really strong wolf spirits. (Jenness 1955)

Finally, places which have been imbued with stories and names form part of people’s community identity. Stories and names provide a conceptual bond between people of a ‘local group’. The local groups like the Chilliwack, Kwantlen and Matsqui are villages or groups of villages whose residents can trace their kinship to a ‘first ancestor’ who lived at these named places before Qäls came did his transformations. Identity with a ‘local group’ connected through a common ancestor is flexible and dynamic, people aligning themselves in different communities at

different times in their lives. Thus, the ancestors who live in places create social identity as well as provide a source of spirit power to their descendants. In these stories, ties to the land clearly become integral to Coast Salish culture.

### **Personal Significance of Kin Relations**

[show slide 8 - StSEĒ'lis's family tree] How these kin connections to non-humans and place work for individuals can be seen in the genealogy of George StSEĒ'lis himself. Many of his extended family members carry the same names as the ancestors he told about in his *sxwoxwiyám*. In most cases, StSEĒ'lis also pointed out the community that these relatives were from. For instance, QĒ'lqELEmas, was the powerful Indian Doctor who did battle with Qāls near Yale; Ts'áytsēmiltxw [Ts'ā'tSEMiltQ], was also the first ancestor who dropped from the sky at StSEĒ'lis; Xálacha [Qā'latca], was the name of the Bullrush who turned himself into a man at Pelā'tlQ; and Xáwulets [Qā'wulets] was the name of an ancestor from the head of Harrison Lake who had once been a bear.

These ancestral names are hereditary - they are passed on through family lines. Where an ancestor has been transformed from or into a non-human, the name stands to connect people whose family are descended from those non-human ancestors. Where ancestors come from particular communities, or were transformed into non-humans or stones at a particular place, their names live on at those locations. I believe that George StSEĒ'lis was making this connection between names and family, humans and non-humans, people and places, when he explained his family tree in such detail and at the same time he told Boas the traditional stories.

### **Aboriginal Rights and Title in Canada**



Though there is not much time left to consider fully the implications of these stories for specific assertions of Aboriginal rights and title in Stó:lō territory (this is the goal of my larger study), I do think that some general points along these lines can be made.

The source of Aboriginal rights and title is in the common law of Aboriginal people. Since the supreme court decision in *Delgamuukw* ([1998] 1 C.N.L.R.) oral traditions have come to be accepted as a valid type of evidence for the definition of these common law rights, and is to be given serious weight and consideration when judging their existence. To prove the existence of an Aboriginal right, a First Nations must prove that the right was integral to their distinctive culture prior to contact. In the case of a claim for unextinguished Aboriginal Title (which is a type of Aboriginal Right), a First Nation must show that they, as an organized society, had exclusive occupancy of the land prior to the assertion of crown sovereignty.

These traditional stories, passed on through generations, certainly satisfy the pre-contact or sovereignty criteria for the existence of an aboriginal right or title. Even the most conservative critique who might reject contemporary tellings on the basis that the stories are being made to suit the land claim, would have a hard time arguing that these stories recorded by Boas were tailored to suit the political ends of late 20<sup>th</sup> century aboriginal leaders.

In providing evidence for Aboriginal Title, these stories prove most valuable. Considered as a body of common law, traditional stories provide a straight forward proof for a society being organized and holding title over the land. They provide evidence of occupancy over a broad

range of areas, through the actions of their ancestors as far back as the creation of the world. Given the threads of kinship and spirit power which bond people to particular named places these stories go beyond demonstrating occupancy and can satisfy the more difficult *Van der Peet* test, proving that places are integral to the distinctive culture of Coast Salish people.

In providing evidence for specific aboriginal rights, these stories must be read in the narrow light of the right being claimed. Stó:lō people clearly have an aboriginal right to engage with the non-human world in various economic pursuits. This right must be tempered with the obligations and respect required by their ancestors towards their non-human kin. From this flows the necessity of Aboriginal people to be involved at all levels of the resource management process. The aboriginal right to have a meaningful say in how natural resources are managed gives Aboriginal people a great deal of leverage in their present-day negotiations.

Telling and re-telling these stories can move forward contemporary aboriginal claims for rights and title beyond the burden of proof stage and into more important and delicate negotiations over co-management. This action relieves First Nations of the cumbersome task of ‘proof’ and shifts the onus to non-Native Governments to prove that their infringements on aboriginal rights or title is justified. Possibly more significantly, these stories can provide common law foundations for Aboriginal self-government efforts outlining for current and future generations of leaders, the kinds of social contracts that they will have with their ancestors, who are again going to be resources which Stó:lō people will have a say in their control.

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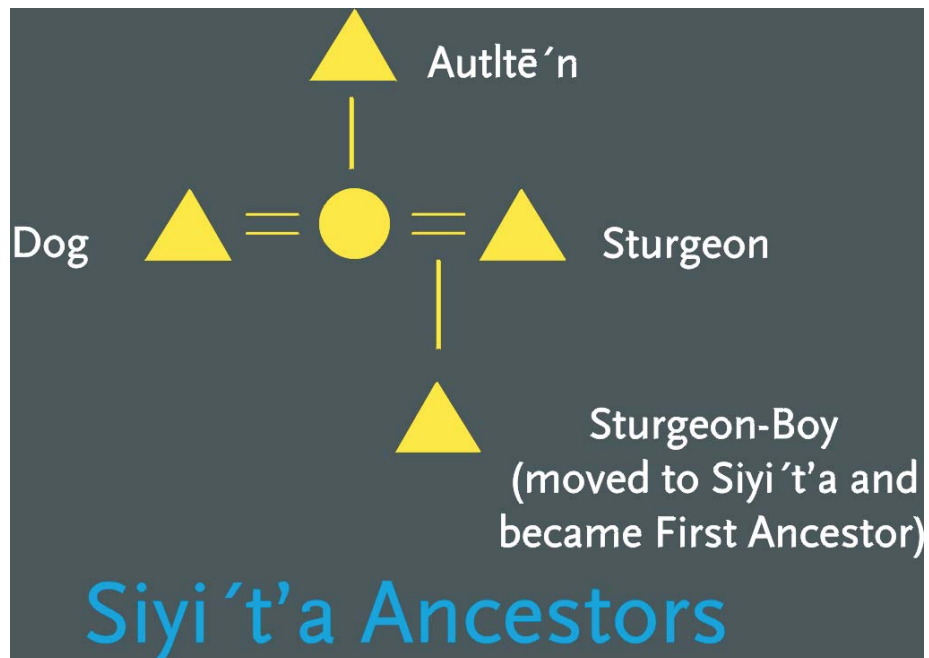
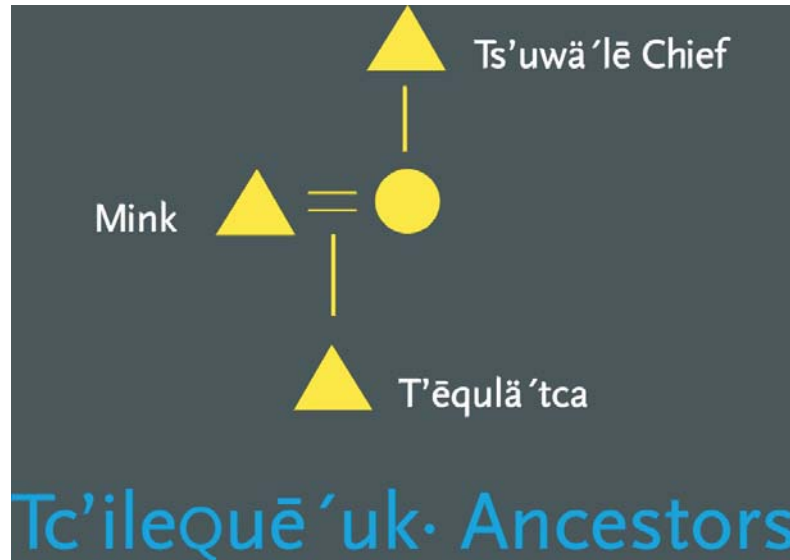
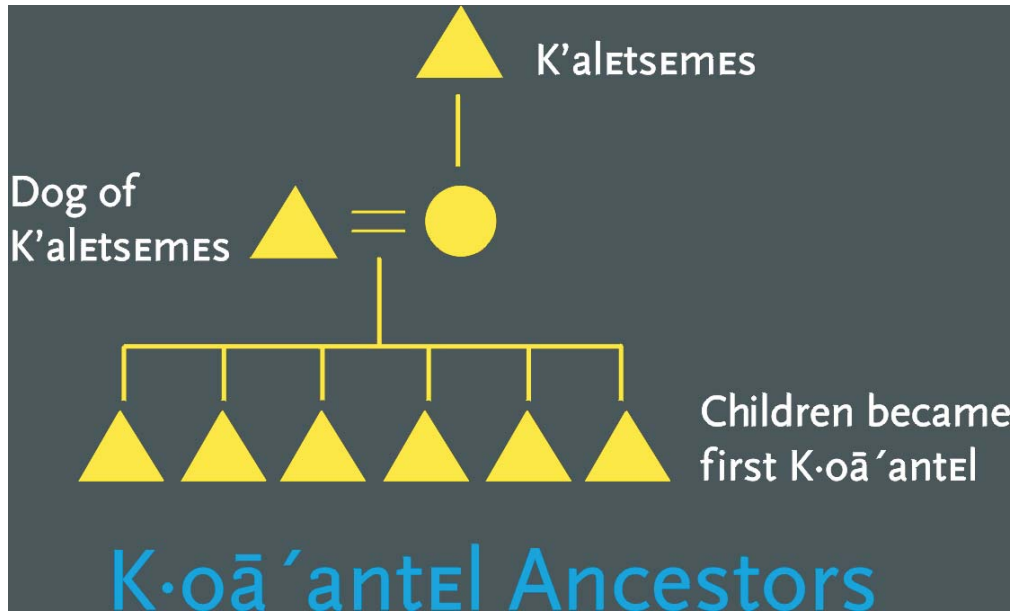
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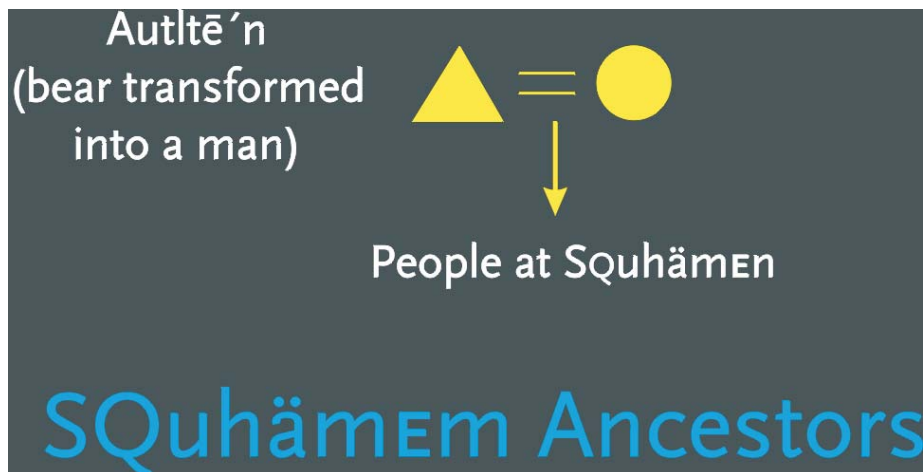
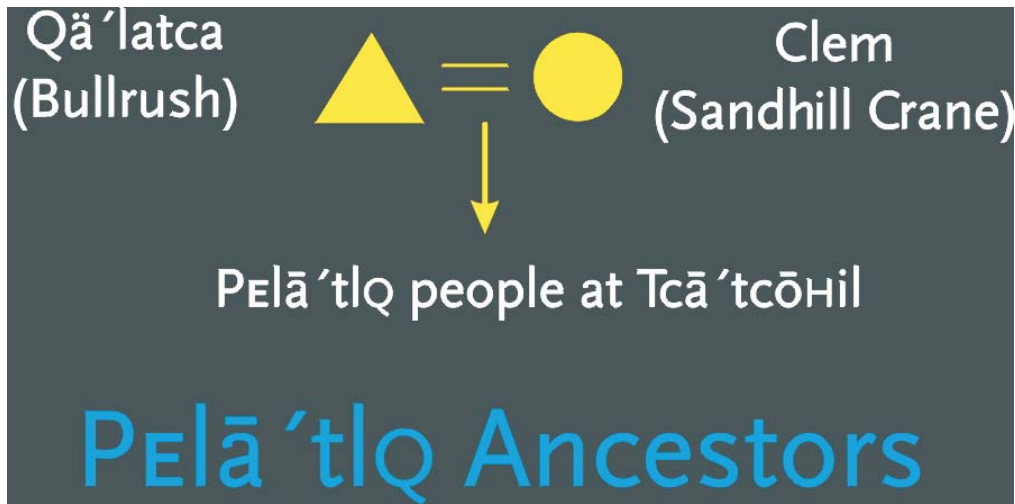
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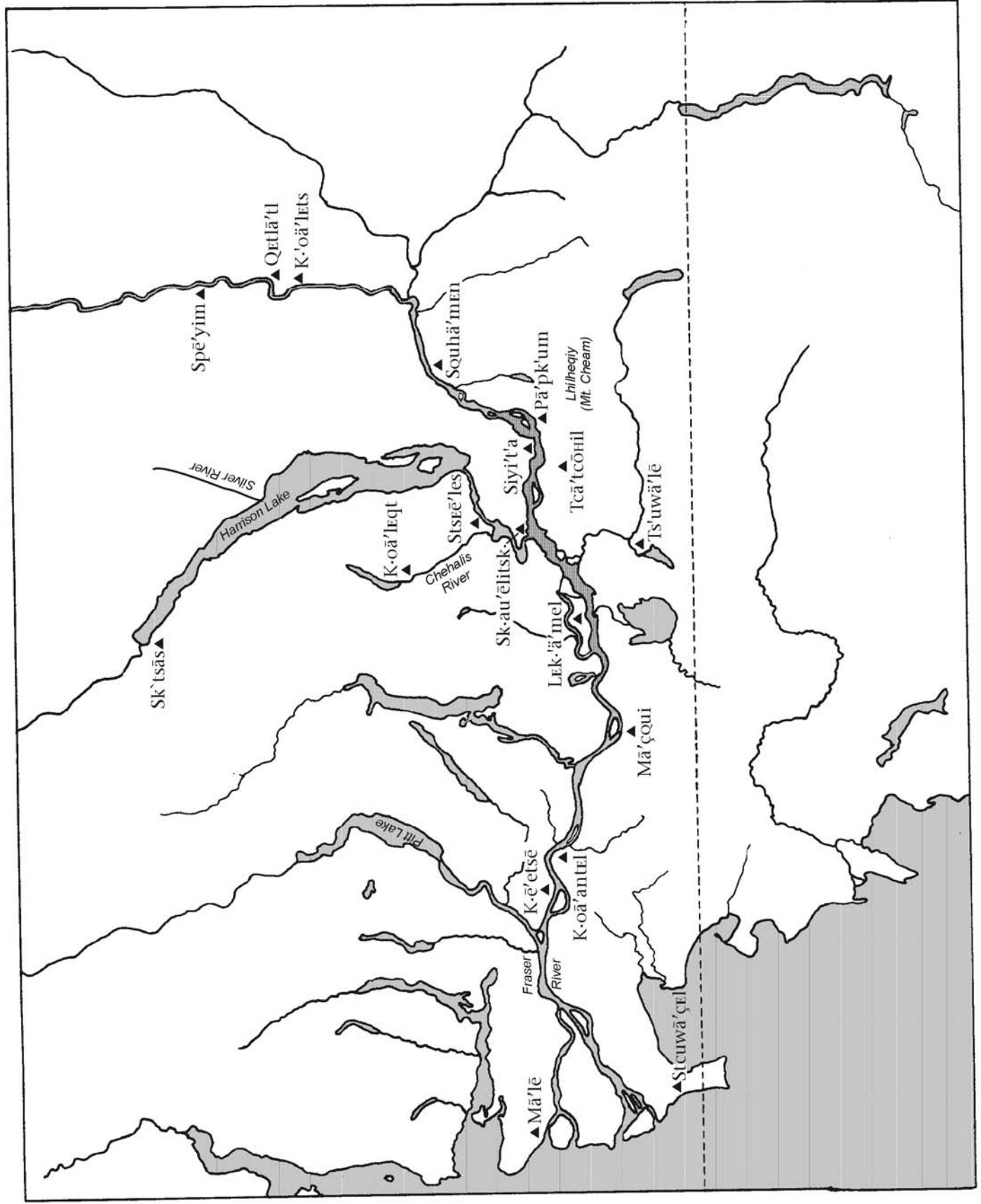


Figure 1. Xwélmexw Communities Mentioned in Text (spellings based on Boas 1895)

