

## Entrepreneurship among the Namgis: A Research Agenda

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### Abstract

The Namgis People are one of the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations. This paper proposes a research agenda to inquire about how this community – with its own values and traditional economic system – has adapted to today's global economy, all the while maintaining cultural identity.

### Introduction

Different societies measure wealth and status in a variety of ways. A European noble might be proud of his title; an American might flaunt his sports car. In Lesotho, wealth is demonstrated by the number of cattle owned (Dana, 1997). Along the west coast of British Columbia, Indigenous people traditionally used thin shield-shaped pieces of copper, referred to as coppers, to represent wealth and power. These documented significant traditions and particular events, and the value of any one copper increased with time, unless broken. The mythical Wealthy One – also referred to as *Kumugwe* or Copper Maker – is said to have a house made of copper, at the bottom of the sea.

Franz Boas was among the first social scientists who focused on Indigenous people in this region. Boas wrote, “The Pacific Coast of America between Juan de Fuca Strait and Yakutat Bay is inhabited by a great many Indian tribes distinct in physical characteristics and distinct in languages, but one in culture. Their arts and industries, their customs and beliefs, differ so much from those of all other Indians that they form one of the best defined cultural groups of our continent (1897, p. 317).” Benedict elaborated, “They were a people of great possessions...Their civilization was built upon an ample supply of goods, inexhaustible, and obtained without excessive expenditure of labour (1935, p. 173).”

This paper aims to set-up an entrepreneurship study among the Namgis First Nation, one of 25 tribes who belonged to the Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwakiutl) First Nation.

### Historical Background

A wolf was said to have survived a great flood by climbing to the top of a mountain; he was transformed into a man, the ancestor of the Dzawada'enux. Not far away, a giant halibut lived at the mouth of the Nimpkish River. One day he swam to the shore, became a human, and attempted to build a home. A supernatural thunderbird helped him and became a person too. These two were the ancestors of a Namgis family.

Centuries before the arrival of Europeans in America, First Nations tribes travelled the waters around Cormorant Island and Vancouver Island, in *galuda* vessels – large ocean-going canoes. The villages of the Namgis were organised into *na'mima* (units of extended family members), each sharing a Big House. The people had a high respect for nature and always gave thanks when harvesting from the natural world.

Indigenous to the region around the Queen Charlotte Strait, the Namgis lived on Cormorant Island on a seasonal basis. When the Europeans arrived, they encouraged the Namgis to make Alert Bay a permanent home. Alert Bay thus became a fishing settlement. Until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Kwakiutl were a wealthy nation. As noted by Ford, "Bound together by a common language, intermarriage, and a complex system of economic exchange, these people prospered and flourished until the coming of the whites (1941, p. 1)."

Cole wrote, "Canadian lay and mission authorities...long regarded the Kwakiutl as the most 'incurable' of all British Columbia groups... 'a most difficult lot to civilize'... They lagged behind other Indians in the adoption of Christianity... While grasping economic opportunities, they resisted imported values (1984, p. 136-7)." Today, these Indigenous people strive to maintain their traditional beliefs and culture, while facing opportunities and constraints imposed by Westerners.

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the great scholar Franz Boas studied the culture of the Indigenous people of the area, with the help of Mr. George Hunt (Boas, 1897; Boas and Hunt, 1905; Boas, 1910; Boas, 1920). In 1929, the St. Michael's Residential School was built at Alert Bay, to inculcate Indigenous children with Anglo-European beliefs. Nevertheless, Indigenous culture survived. The building was transferred to the Namgis First Nation in April 1975.

## **Indigenous Culture**

The Potlatch ceremony was an important institution (Suttles, 1984) central to the culture of the Kwak'waka-speaking First Nations of the Northwest coast. This served as the foundation for a system of laws, central to the people and as a social mechanism for the redistribution of wealth. Ford wrote, "The potlatch was a means of avoiding anxiety about becoming poverty stricken: it functioned as a banking system for the investment of capital... A chief who had distributed many blankets... could count upon a continuous return (1941, p. 21)."

Healey elaborated, "The potlatch or distribution of property was a system by which the Indians acquired rank (Healey, 1958, p. 40)." The celebration involved mourning, dancing, feasting and gift giving, such as the transfer of a copper and the distribution of blankets.<sup>1</sup> The blanket, either locally made or purchased,<sup>2</sup> was a unit of value that served as interest-bearing investment property. "The double blanket was valued at three single blankets (Healey, 1958, p. 40)."

Ford wrote, "A loan for a few months netted 25 per cent interest, a six-months' loan brought 50 per cent, and a loan for a year or more brought 100 per cent interest... There was a great deal of incentive for a man to pay his debts and the required interest (1941, p. 18-19)." He elaborated, "Finally the chief would make a collection of what the man owned to pay his debts (Ford, 1941, p. 55)." Blankets were used as currency, exchangeable for other goods and services. When cash was introduced, "it was regarded in terms of the blankets it represented (Ford, 1941, p. 19)."

Harris explained, "the Kwakiutl potlatch was not the result of maniacal whims, but of definite economic and ecological conditions... Preparations for potlatch required the accumulation of fresh and dried fish, fish oil, berries, animal skins, blankets, and other valuables. On the appointed day, the guests paddled up to the host village and went to the chief's house. There they gorged themselves on salmon and wild berries while dancers masked as beaver gods and thunderbirds entertained them (1974, p. 113-114)." Through the giving of presents, the giver attained social status.

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<sup>1</sup> Blankets were, in former times, used for bride payments.

<sup>2</sup> The Hudson Bay Co. gave one blanket in exchange for 36 skins or 15 minks (Ford, 1941, p. 61).

With pressure from the Church, the Dominion of Canada outlawed the Potlatch in 1884. The Namgis resisted, and in 1921 this resulted in mass arrests, confiscations and jail terms for individuals caught practising such traditions. At Alert Bay, it was decided to hold such celebrations during stormy nights, when law enforcement officers hesitated to travel to Cormorant Island. When the Indian Act was revised in 1951, the section prohibiting the potlatch was deleted (Webster, 1984).

### **The Kwakwaka'wakw Economy**

As discussed by Duff (1965), the different Kwakwaka'wakw groups owned land, with clearly defined and mutually respected boundaries, but the patterns of ownership and utilisation were unique to their culture. "Underlying the power of property... was the people's oneness with all creatures (Stewart, 1984, p. 19)."

Prior to the arrival of the Europeans, the local economy was largely one of subsistence. People trapped and hunted beavers, birds and elk. They made tools of bones and of wood. Benedict wrote, "The great occupation of the men, aside from hunting and fishing, was woodworking (1935, p. 174)." Traditionally, trade included food (such as nuts and salmon) and slaves (Muckle, 1998). The Namgis had a long history of profitable trade with people further north. Harris noted, "Always eager to attract traders, they made their villages conspicuous by erecting on the beach carved tree trunks (1974, p. 113)."

Much Namgis activity involved subsistence self-employment, close to nature. The people made fishnets from human hair. Skunk cabbage leaves (*Lysichiton kamtschatcehse*) was used to wrap food (Turner and Bell, 1973). Ornaments were made from abalone shell (Ford, 1941). Thread was spun from the wool of mountain goats; this was used to make blankets, as were tanned skins (Boas, 1897). Blankets were also made from soft cedar bark (Ford, 1941). Bedding was made with branches of bracken fern (*Pteridium aquilinum*) and red alder (*Alnus rubra*) was used to make dishes and cutlery (Turner and Bell, 1973). Cedar was also used to make bowls and dishes. Ford wrote that self-employed "wood carvers, hired by others who desired their services, were well-to-do and respected members of Kwakiutl society...Whereas wood carving was a speciality of the men, the production of textiles was that of the women (1941, p. 5-6)."

Containers were very important in Kwakwaka'wakw society. This included boxes and baskets. "The Kwakiutl did not make boxes for the sake of making boxes, but to provide themselves with containers. As soon as they discovered that the metal containers of the whites served the same purpose and were, at the same time, easier to get than the boxes were to make, they abandoned the art of manufacturing wooden boxes. The same thing happened with many other items of their material culture, and the majority of the native technical processes fell into disuse and disappeared (Ford, 1941, p. 5)."

The inner bark of the cedar was used for weaving (Stewart, 1984). Fishing nets were made from twine woven from cedar bark. Shredded cedar bark was used to make diapers, and mattresses. Cedar root was woven to make cradles. Branches were used to make lassos, with which mountain goats were caught. The withes (curved branchlets that hang down from branches) were used (mostly by men) to make strong ropes.

The Kwakwaka'wakw made canoes from logs of the red cedar, and paddles out of yellow cedar. The bark of the yellow cedar was used to make aprons, blankets and capes.

Some sales had an economic motivation, others a symbolic one. Boas wrote, "Coppers are always sold to rivals, and often a man will offer his copper for sale to the rival tribe. If it is not accepted, it is an acknowledgement that nobody in the tribe has enough money to buy it, and the name of the tribe or clan would consequently lose weight (1897, p. 345)."

With the coming of the Europeans, the Kwakwaka'wakw became commercial fishermen, sealers, loggers, and wage labourers. "Kwakiutl women, besides working in the summer canneries, worked as washerwomen and prostitutes... (Cole, 1984, p. 136)."

In 1870, entrepreneurs Wesley Spencer and Aulden Huson established a saltery at Alert Bay, to preserve salmon, and the Namgis were persuaded to move there, to provide labour. By 1881, Wesley Spencer and Thomas Earle were partners in a local cannery, and a store was built (Healey, 1958). In 1886, work begun on the construction of a sawmill. In 1902, the British Columbia Packers Association purchased the cannery from its founders. "By 1909, the fishing industry was well established (Healey, 1958, p. 49)."

In 1912, the Dominion of Canada built a wireless station at Alert Bay, and during WWI, the Customs House was built, overlooking Broughton Channel. In 1920, Moses Alfred and his partners built the Nimpkish Hotel, on Namgis First Nation land. Shortly thereafter, entrepreneur Dick May built a machine shop adjacent to the shipyards. In 1925, the McJanet family purchased Mr. Alfred's shares in the hotel, placed the building on a scow and had it towed to the village (Healey, 1958).

As the local economy developed, activities included dairy farming, poultry raising, and vegetable-growing. Dairy farming was introduced to Alert Bay, in 1929, by entrepreneur G. H. Skinner (Healey, 1958). A boat-shed was owned and operated by a Japanese family, until they were deported during WWII.

Ford (1941) chronicled the life of Kwakwaka'wakw Chief Tlasis (Stranded Whale) Charles (Charley) James Nowell, an individual who developed entrepreneurial skills that helped him manage within his people's complex economic system. About the sea, Ford wrote, "In days before white contact, it was the primarily source of food; today it is the chief source of money (1941, p. 7)." For decades to come, most people in Alert Bay would continue to make a living from the sea.

In 1958, Healey wrote, "Over half a hundred businesses in Alert Bay serve the community. All but two, the Rainbow Theatre and Clark's Rooming House, are situated on the waterfront road (p. 94)." There were two hotels in Alert Bay at the time, the Nimpkish Hotel and the Harbour Inn, owned and operated by Richard Bice.

## **Background to Entrepreneurship in Alert Bay**

Cormorant Island is shared among four entities, namely: the Village of Alert Bay, incorporated 1946; the Namgis First Nation; the Whe-La-La-U Area Council, which leases lands of the Namgis First Nation; and the unincorporated Regional District of Mount Waddington. Integration and inter-marriage are becoming increasingly common. There are two schools on the island, namely Alert Bay Elementary and the Indigenous T'lisal'gilakw School, on the reserve. Children may attend either the Indigenous school or the other, regardless of their origin. Likewise, the economy has become mixed, with Indigenous and non-Indigenous entrepreneurs working side-by-side.

Cormorant Island has a cosmopolitan mix of entrepreneurs. In 1986, Seasmoke Whale Watching was jointly established by David and Maureen Towers. David's background was in logging. Maureen was a registered nurse who grew up on a farm in from New Zealand, and trained as a midwife in Australia. When Fletcher Challenge closed down several segments of the logging industry in Vancouver Island, David found himself without a job. Now, the couple is self-employed, operating a small accommodation business, as well as the whale watching outfit.

Also in 1986, Brenda Gordon launched the Looking Good Hair Salon, which employs one person. Brenda was born in Alert Bay, as was her father; her mother was a nurse, originally from Austria. A licensed aesthetician and hairdresser, Brenda has been training to become a qualified weight trainer, in the gym that she also owns and operates.

In 1992, Jim O'Donnell founded Pacific Eagle Aviation based at Alert Bay. In 1999, Kristi Hagen and Bernie Jones came to Alert Bay; they have since opened Eagle's Landing Bed and Breakfast, as a secondary source of income. Bernie is a community development consultant, and Kristi is a clinical counsellor. Not far are the Oceanview Cabins, a family business owned by Joyce and Neil Langille. Neil Langille was among the self-employed building contractors. Bob and Maxine Williams owned the restaurant at the Old Customs House.

## Proposed Research

Much change has happened since 2000, as people have had to diversify or leave, largely due to the collapse of the salmon fishing industry. There were formerly three grocery stores and there was business for all; only one remains. There were 635 firms in the region in 2000. By 2002, there were 617 firms and these tended to be small; over 90% of these had fewer than 20 employees.

What is the picture like now? Who are the entrepreneurs who have remained? Are they Namgis? What is the rate of creation of new ventures? In what sectors is entrepreneurship surviving? Is occupational clustering a characteristic here? What is the role of women entrepreneurs in the economy? Is entrepreneurship creating jobs?

It is proposed to return to Alert Bay to administer in-depth interviews to potential entrepreneurs as well as to entrepreneurs. If time and budgeting constraints permit, the mode of inquiry for cross-cultural research should be ethnographic. In contrast to traditional research with deductive designs and cultural assumptions, an inductive research design would allow the researcher to be totally immersed in the field, purposely with no *a priori* variables or cultural assumptions. This strategy has enhanced cross-cultural efforts in anthropology and sociology; it would also benefit the future research of cross-cultural issues in entrepreneurship and small business, as pioneered by Bherer *et al.* (1989).

In order to ensure quality of measurement, research design should attempt to minimise instrumentation bias. In an ethnographic study, the researcher should remain in the field long enough to shed ethno-cultural biases; then, once accepted in society, unobtrusive observations may be attempted. Where surveys are used, questions should be verified for ambiguity.

In order to capture the complex interplay of personal, social and environmental factors, the research would use a research design similar to that of Bherer *et al.* (1989): indepth interviews with a wide variety of individuals, including persons other than those self-employed.

It would be of interest to identify the impact of cultural background on enterprise, whether formal or informal. Are entrepreneurs in Alert Bay serial entrepreneurs? What are the explanatory variables for their activities? Where does their capital come from, and why? What is the role of state officials? Does government policy encourage or hinder them? How do they feel about risk, and about globalisation?

For the sake of validity, the same question might be asked more than once, in various ways and on different occasions, for example once before dinner and again after a few beers. Several items in the same domain help to increase reliability.

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