

Culture

The Meaningful Universe: Intersecting Forces in Beaver Indian Cosmology

Antonia Mills



Volume 6, Number 2, 1986

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078738ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078738ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Mills, A. (1986). The Meaningful Universe: Intersecting Forces in Beaver Indian Cosmology. *Culture*, 6(2), 81–91. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078738ar>

Article abstract

The Beaver Indians of Northeastern B.C. view the events of their world as the manifestation of forces operating between the various levels of spirit. This fundamental shamanic world view has undergone several waves of Christian influence. The first part of the paper describes the meaningful universe that resulted from the intersection of the ancient shamanic philosophy with the Prophet Dance religion. The second part of the paper describes the recent conversion of some Beaver to Pentecostal Christianity and then compares this world view to the antecedent shamanic, the current Prophet Dance and the White Pentecostal philosophy. It demonstrates that the Beaver Indian “Meaningful Universe” maintains a striking similarity to its past versions.

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1986

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

The Meaningful Universe: Intersecting Forces in Beaver Indian Cosmology

Antonia Mills
Vancouver, British Columbia

The Beaver Indians of Northeastern B.C. view the events of their world as the manifestation of forces operating between the various levels of spirit. This fundamental shamanic world view has undergone several waves of Christian influence. The first part of the paper describes the meaningful universe that resulted from the intersection of the ancient shamanic philosophy with the Prophet Dance religion. The second part of the paper describes the recent conversion of some Beaver to Pentecostal Christianity and then compares this world view to the antecedent shamanic, the current Prophet Dance and the White Pentecostal philosophy. It demonstrates that the Beaver Indian "Meaningful Universe" maintains a striking similarity to its past versions.

Les Indiens Beaver du nord-est de la Colombie-Britannique voient les réalités de leur monde comme une manifestation de forces opérant entre les divers niveaux des esprits. Cette conception shamanistique fondamentale a subi plusieurs atteintes successives dues à l'influence chrétienne. La première partie de cet article décrit l'univers plein de signification qui résultait de l'intersection de l'ancienne philosophie shamanique avec la religion de la Danse du Prophète. La seconde partie décrit la conversion récente de quelques Indiens Beaver au pentecôtisme et compare ensuite cette vision du monde à l'ancien shamanisme, à la Danse du Prophète d'aujourd'hui et à la philosophie pentecôtiste. Cette comparaison démontre que l'univers signifiant des Indiens Beaver maintient une similitude étonnante avec ses versions antérieures.

The concept that what happens or has happened on a spirit realm affects or controls what happens in this world is at the centre of what I am calling "the meaningful universe". A meaningful universe is one in which there is a supernatural order which affects the order of life in this realm: the trick, then, becomes knowing what this order is and using it to benefit the beings residing on this plane. In this view, this all-too-solid world becomes the passing shadows Plato so poignantly described, and it is the role of healers and curers to reveal the real bodies which are projecting the shadow world we take for real.

The first part of this paper summarizes the Beaver Indian meaningful universe; the cosmology that explains a person's nature, health and sickness, good and bad fortune and world events, and the Beaver Indian methods for revealing and changing these qualities.¹ This is the system which has been described to me over the past twenty years of fieldwork with the Beaver Indians. It represents the meaningful universe of the contemporary Beaver Indians today, in 1986. While much of it was described by Beaver Indian elders, some since deceased, the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren translated what the elders said into English, amplified and expanded on it since it is their meaningful universe as well.

My most recent field trip of 1984 reconfirmed

that the generation who were babies when I first arrived hold this worldview as fervently as the generation that is passing on, despite the fact that the generation that is 15-40 received less instruction in the traditional ways because they were the first generation to go to school. The day school, on-reserve teachers were and are reluctant to let children go off on the trap line or be absent from school for first (and subsequent) menses ceremonies. While this new school environment has changed and diminished the traditional instruction, the generation just entering adulthood is intent on training their young children in the school of vision quests and operates within the framework of the meaningful universe.

This Beaver Indian meaningful universe is itself a composite of ancient and currently held shamanic beliefs and concepts adopted from two waves of Christianity. The first wave of Christian thought reached the Beaver Indians through Indian prophets and meshed with that of the Catholic missionaries who followed. The second wave of missionaries are Pentecostals who have been active for the past twenty years but are only recently making deep and numerous converts. The second part of the paper reviews the elements of the Beaver cosmology which are part of a Pan-North American Indian aboriginal philosophy and points out the discordant aspects introduced by the recent Beaver Indian Pentecostal revival which the Beaver Indians are trying to meld into their meaningful universe. The result is a Pentecostal Beaver Indian cosmology which bears more resemblance to the antecedent Beaver meaningful universe than to the White Pentecostal ideology.

Beaver Indian Cosmology

Today, the Beaver Indians say that before man, long ago, *Yaqesati*, the androgynous, if embodied, "being that sits in the spirit realm", decided to create the world. *Yaqesati* thought out the world and from the power of thought, created it. First there was only water, and on the water *Yaqesati* drew a cross. Earth-diver was created and sent down to the bottom of the depths to bring back substance to earth. Beaver couldn't reach the bottom but Muskrat dove as deep as he could and when, half drowned, he floated up to the surface of the water *Yaqesati* found a little grain of earth under his fingernail, took it and placed it on the center of the cross that was upon the water and told it to grow.

So the land grew upon the water, expanding outwards until *Yaqesati* saw that it was big enough. (Several myths tell how *Yaqesati* sent Wolf out to run around the periphery of the earth to see if it was big enough. When the second Wolf did not return *Yaqesati* decided it was sufficient).

Yaqesati thought forth all the plants and animals and people and breathed into the first person some of his/her creative power, some of the power of thought. First-person mis-used this power of creation and where *Yaqesati* had created a good form of every species, first-human created a distorted form which preyed on man. *Yaqesati* retired from the earth to spirit realms which the Beaver portray in intricate sacred maps. From there he sent *Usakindji*, a great spirit being, to subdue the man-made monsters. Most of the Beaver Indian myths describe how *Usakindji* tricked, overcame and rendered innocuous the Giant Animals that first-human had loosed upon the earth, how *Usakindji* cut up the bodies of the monster prototype and so produced the present form of bear, beaver, wolverine, etc., or sent the monster off the surface of the earth and underground.

It is in this same round disc of a world that the Beaver Indians lived until recently: it is in this world that even the most modern and educated still live today. "Just lies," said Nathan jovially, an old Beaver Indian medicine man and one of our mentors, pointing to the spherical globe we had borrowed from the White school teacher in response to young Indians asking us to teach them some geography. Many of the youth live in a world that includes Newton's law of gravitation, a world where people would not fall off Australia, but in the bush, the world the Beaver inhabit is the world by *Yaqesati*, established by a cross upon the water.

The cross has two axes. The horizontal axis describes the cardinal directions: east, south, west and north, each symbolizing a part of the day, the year and the cycle of life. The east is the point of sunrise, of return of the warmth of spring, the place through which the souls of the animals the *Duneza*, or "Real People" as the Beaver call themselves, return to earth to be hunted once again. The south represents noon as the sun hangs low in these northern skies: it symbolizes warmth and nurturance. The west represents sunset, the coming of darkness, fall-time and the place human and animal souls exit the world when they have been dispatched. The north is both night and autumn, cold and winter, the symbolic time of inward turning and teaching by the white-haired elders, grandmothers and grandfathers, medicine men and women who help guide the youth through the perils of the winter of human souls. The meanings of these horizontal directions are expounded more fully elsewhere. (See references to Mills: 1981, 1984 and Ridington: 1969, 1970, 1976).

The vertical axis is that through which life flows. Underneath the world lurk the monsters *Usakinji* sent below. The grease of their bodies, says the late *Duneza* prophet Charlie Yahey, is the oil for which

the White man drills and with which he fuels all of his extravagant machines. No one but the White man would think of exhuming those underworld monsters. For the Beaver, keeping them there requires continual vigilance, a point we will return to later.

The heavenward axis symbolizes the point of transcendence which allows each human being, each *Duneza*, to connect with the spirit world, a connection necessary for life. The Beaver Indians believe that this contact is easily made by the infant and young child—a being that has recently come back from a spirit realm and joined a body, a process starting at conception. Initially a baby's soul can travel, leave its body, *in utero* or after birth and the problem is one of not frightening the soul of the young so that it does not return to its body. As the child grows older, the body and soul form a more cohesive unit.

From the time the child is weaned—after the birth of the next baby, usually when the child is about three—the elders prepare the child to go on a “vision quest,” that is, to seek the experience of the spirit realm. For this the child may be sent out into the bush without food. Alone, the child may experience that mystical moment when he comes in contact with, what can it be called?—the essence of the outer reality.

For the *Duneza* it may come in the form of a visit from a spirit animal, the original prototype of the species *Yagesati* created long ago. *Mechi*—“chief”—these spirit leaders of a species are called. The spirit being may give the child a song, instructions or guidance. It is the essence of private communication. Anthropologists commonly call the vision acquired in the vision quest the “guardian spirit”. The *Duneza* call it *muyine*, which translates, more or less, as “own song.”

The early experience of *muyine* often leaves the child dazed, unable and unwilling to return to camp. The parents and/or the elders follow the child on his/her vision quests through their dreams, go out and find the child and bring him/her back into camp where they use their *muyine* to help the child to integrate the experiences s/he has had. The healing ceremony the child receives gives a living demonstration of the end he or she is to attain: the curer will use his coat and medicine bundle as a symbol of his integration of the spirit world, symbolically encapsulated in the bundle and his coat, the mundane protection he wears from an animal who has given up its life.

The process of understanding the contact the child has had and learning to use it will continue for the rest of the person's lifetime; indeed, the *Duneza* say, throughout the succession of reincarnations that each person will experience. Throughout one's lifetime the individual will constantly use his/her

muyine and grow in the knowledge of its implications. The original vision may be amplified by any number of subsequent visions and dreams.

Sometime after puberty, usually when s/he has a camp or home of his own, the individual will himself or herself assemble a medicine bundle. It serves as an antennae and as a transmitter and receiver for his/her dreams. Dreams transmit messages from the spirit realm, telling where the game will be which the hunter seeks to find, or where and in what perils is the soul of someone sick.

The medicine bundle, also called *muyine*, hangs in camp or home, over the place where the owner's head rests when asleep: an outward symbol of the person's contact with the spirit realm. It is one of the few objects the child is not allowed to touch, yet several adults have told how, as curious children, they had taken down a parent's or grandparent's medicine bundle when no one was around, opened it up and seen the contents “come alive... jump in my hands.” Some have described curing ceremonies performed when they had thus inadvertently come into contact with “more power than they could hold.” Others point to scars, real visible scars, left from the experience. (The public health nurse would say they were left by T.B.)

Each new camp the people make as they move in pursuit of game (and even the new picture-window, two storey, middle class homes the Department of Indian Affairs has authorized), is ideally set up so that there are no women's trails that cross to the east of the medicine bundles. To the east are the trails the men take when they leave camp to seek game. In the opposite direction are the trails that lead from camp to camp and to the source of water: here the women and children carry out their daily activities. As important as the trails the men take in pursuit of game are the invisible paths of their dreams which travel from their heads, pointed towards the east, to the place from which the souls of their future game are sent. Thus, the most familiar patterns of camp life are determined by the *Duneza's* orientation to the medicine realms.

The specific *mechi* or spirit animal who comes to the seeker is his “medicine animal.” It is both a teacher, helper and guide and a reflection of his or her specific personality. Thus, someone whose medicine is bear is noted for having a bear-like personality: sometimes gruff, giving a strong cuff to those who trifle with him, largely a “loner” who “hibernates” by going psychically within, and one who can come out of his/her introspection like a hungry bear at springtime, in a mean mood. Yet a bear person is also capable of warmth and playfulness; a powerful friend or foe. On the individual level, the recognition of one's own *mechi* is used as a key to one's nature, good

or bad, so that one can learn to make use of the good qualities and control the difficult ones: it is the level of control of one's *mechi*, not the specific kinds one has, that determines one's medicine power and the degree of deference and respect one is accorded.

On the social level this knowledge is the basis for paying the proper respect: children learn very early that you "don't mess around with the old people... it is like they have hand grenades inside them." Not only the bundles, but the medicine people are due respect.

No one announces their medicines publically; to do so would be boasting and several oft-repeated myths tell how the *mechi* wreak revenge on the foolish fellow who flouts the trappings of medicine power without the inner realization of its mysteries. Yet while maintaining the necessary humility, everyone knows the *mechi* of the people who camp and move together; the signs are subtle but explicit.

Associated with every *mechi* are a series of taboos or proscriptions: one person who has bear medicine, for example, may not eat am or berries, and makes special offerings of the body of the bears whose lives he takes. A person whose medicine is spider cannot listen to the sound of a taut line or string being plucked, as in a guitar or violin. If they should, their medicine would become "too strong", would start to take over their being and they would be transformed into the giant prototype *Usakindji* was at such pains to send underneath the earth. If the taboo is broken, the transformation of the person begins with his/her "guts turning to ice," a gut-level hardening and freezing against the human species. Next the victim eats his/her own lips and then starts hunting and eating what were once his/her own people. S/he has become *wechuge*, a cannibal monster, a re-embodiment of the man-devouring monsters sent beneath the earth, possessed by such a being.

The last full blown *Duneza wechuge*, *Tsekute*, lived and ate humans around 1860: genealogies we have so painstakingly collected show kin, old-timers' siblings and spouses he devoured. More recently people have begun to go *wechuge* but have been cured before the transformation reached the critical stage of eating one's own lips. This still happens today.

When an old person arrives at a camp or home of people who are not familiar with his or her taboos, the hosts ask if the food they are offering and the behavior around the person is all right. For if the person is served something taboo, s/he must eat it and everyone will suffer the consequences. The cryptic connection between the tabooed food and/or behavior is encoded in the myths of how *Usakindji* overcame those early monsters, stories told around the fire during the long nights of winter, or in summer

hunting camps. Today the story teller competes with T.V. and videos.²

Through this necessary deference, through opening of the medicine bundles in healing ceremonies and singing of *muyine* songs, and through countless innuendos and cues, everyone comes to know at least some aspects of each others' medicine *mechi*.

On the interpersonal level, medicine *mechi* are used in a way analogous to astrology in the East Indian system as described by Pugh (1983). By knowing one's own *mechi* and those of the people one deals with, one can understand conflicts and personality clashes. In the world of the *Duneza* the response of each individual is a reflection of the interplay between his/her nature with the nature or *mechi* of others: a bear interacts differently with a coyote, a rabbit, a mountain lion, and so do people whose natures are like these. The old people unravel for the individual the complexities of the interplay of species specific behavior through the telling of the myths. T.V. and videos have not eclipsed the poignancy of these analogies.

Muyine, then, is vital to every level of *Duneza* life. With it the *Duneza* elders follow the child on his vision quest and the paths of the people as they move to follow their dream leads to where the game will be. Through one's medicine one learns the source of what we call "bad luck." The *Duneza* say "bad medicine." Through it the healer finds the cause of his patient's illness, and knowing the cause, launches the appropriate cure: reparations to offended animal spirits or *anequle*, or counter-attack on a medicine adversary. Some involve visible ritual, some more notably a direction of will: ritual carried out in a realm experienced only by the curer and sometimes by the patient.

In the *Duneza* world there are no accidents. They who play *chiile*, a drum-stick gambling game where the odds are all you have, do not believe in chance. When something does not go well the individual seeks through dreams to know the reason. His or her dreams may show that someone is using his/her medicine power against him/her, that s/he is involved in a medicine fight. These psychic battles may last for years without the opponents even seeing each other face-to-face. In their inner eyes they see these conflicts as the cause of ill health and misfortune and/or death. Dreams may reveal that the same symptoms were caused by the *mechi* of the animals if one has knowingly or even unwittingly offended, harmed or hurt one of the members of the species. Or, alternatively, one may find the cause to be offense taken by the *anequle*, a small race of elf-like spirit people who cohabit the same territory as the *Duneza*. All this one knows through dreams.

Serious illness in oneself or one's family may require the knowledge and expertise of a reputed medicine man or woman. After the immediate kin have tried to use their *muyine* to effect a cure, without success, and appeal is made to an elder known for his/her prowess at dreaming. Such services require that a tribute be made to the curer. The cure involves diagnosis: the medicine man or woman dreaming the cause of the problem. It may be one of the causes mentioned above: *anequle*, or a medicine fight which had gone undetected before, or it may be the theft of the patient's soul by a range of spirit beings, most commonly the soul of someone who has died but lived such a confused life that s/he cannot find the intricate network of paths that lead to the series of realms one may potentially inhabit in heaven (*yaqe*), before eventual reincarnation.

Having made the diagnosis, the healer must alter the situation: in the case of a medicine fight, the healer may use medicine power to overwhelm the adversary of the patient, one of the reasons that the injunctions of the prophets of the past 130 odd years to refrain from medicine fights have not been more universally followed.

One case described to me involved taking the eleven-year old patient from one reserve where the healers had been unable to cure her, to the reserve of the, then, living prophet. The prophet entered a dream state and found the problem to be theft of the child's soul by a Slave Indian who had died recently when she was drunk and so was unable to find the spirit trail to the after-life realm.³

In this case, the prophet found the ghost and the lost soul stuff, and, after a dramatic and exhausting battle with the ghost, the prophet rested the missing soul substance from her and restored it to the patient, who was then healed.

I have never seen such a ceremony, in part because when I am there it is easier to have us take patients to the hospital where the White man's medicine may aid and abet the *Duneza* forces being used to effect a healing. The White medical practitioners naively think the Beaver credit them with the cure. To the *Duneza* the underlying causes are the same, though being a pragmatic people they respect the White man's medicine and treatments. After all, their medicine people too know a large pharmacopia of herbal cures.

The ultimate in the dreaming experience is that of the Beaver prophets (*naachi*=dreamer). Whereas the average or younger person dreams to know how to heal his/her friends and relatives and how to conquer foes human and supernatural, the older people who are the medicine men and women and especially the shaman-prophet, dream for the benefit of everybody. They transcend the individual medicine squabbles by

focusing on achieving a level of harmony greater than the interpersonal. The recital given above of all the concerns with various forms of medicine fights belies the fact that the Beaver way of life aims at harmony and respect: respect towards the individual animals whose flesh sustains them, and to the spirit beings like "The Keeper of the Game" who dispenses them: respect towards the powers and qualities of other *Duneza* and respect for the total harmony of all levels of *Yagesati*'s creation. The medicine people and the prophet make a concerted effort to sustain the world by honouring its order. Chief among the medicine people is the prophet, formerly the shaman.

The Beaver Indians have had a succession of prophets since about the middle of the nineteenth century. Apparently diffused from the Plateau Prophet Dance described by Spier (1935), the shamans-become-prophets adopted some of the pacific message taught, if not practised, by Christianity and welded in onto their ancient conception of the transformations the world has and will undergo. The transition from the ancient tradition of shaman to prophet was an easy one, documented and described more thoroughly elsewhere (see Mills, 1981; 1983).

The scope of the visions of the shaman-become-prophet is vaster than the rest of the peoples': his soul goes to the realm from which things originate; an intangible thought-realm where dwell the grandfathers, the Beaver prophets who have died before and now live on a different level than the souls of other deceased *Duneza*. The grandfathers, sometimes conceptualized as six, act as guides to the future. They see the past that is hidden from most men and what lies ahead because they exist in a realm beyond time. On this plane the prophet is shown how things will be and therefore what can be done to avert harm—to change what the people on earth perceive as the future. The shaman makes the seventh of this special council.

While the prophet's soul is away on this journey, his head pointed to the west, the direction the souls take to find their after-life, the community waits, not crossing the path of his dreams, the path of the setting sun. When the prophet dreams to the west, all motion on the camp stops and changes as the channel cuts across the paths to most mundane activity. Somewhere in the surrounding circle of the world, out in the bush, hunters seek the game to feed the prophet and the expanded community that will come to the Prophet Dance. In camp, activity comes to a standstill. The community waits.

When the prophet returns he comes back with messages from the grandfathers and sometimes a new song. Quietly, reverently, the community listens. The prophet tells the people what he saw in heaven.

Then there is the healing of the whole community, the Prophet Dance.

In the Prophet Dance all the songs from all the *Duneza* prophets of the last one hundred and thirty years are sung from morning until late into the dark of night: sung by all the older men and, as they tire, the middle-aged and then the young men. Men, women and children dance to the songs that "lead the soul to heaven." *Ahatayine* they are called; "all our father's *yine*: medicine and song." A feast is prepared each night. At midnight the singing ceases and everyone eats together. The prophet speaks again, in a solemn tone, using the special shamanic language.

The shaman speaks of many things; the weather to expect, what hardships, what sources of trouble to watch out for. The prophet tells people to act rightly; not to pack stories, *i.e.* spread gossip, to care for orphans, not to use medicine power to harm others, not to drink too much. "Drinking, the devil will come to you," he says. He speaks of problems brought by money, cars and children going to school.

For three days and nights the community, augmented by relatives from other bands, sings, dances and eats a ceremonial meal together and listens to the prophet. Everyone pulls together. The dancing is called dancing to heaven and is "a kind of prayer." The dance is serious business: it helps to maintain the right world order, and it is also a lot of fun. Verbal high jinks abound. People bask in the cohesiveness of the gathering, waking and dreaming around the ceremonial fire. Everyone pulls together. Everyone is put back on the right path. Medicine fights are forgotten and past slights and injuries pale under the effort to produce and the effect of the Prophet Dance. The people listen to the prophet's warnings. What does he say? The world is going, soon, to come to an end.

What does it mean, the world is going to end? How and why? Shocked by the thought of such finality for years I pondered, "Is this symbolic?" And also, "Is this from the Christian Armageddon tradition?" Does the prophet simply mean the ancient Beaver Indian way of life is coming to an end? In 1969, an old *Duneza* medicine man had received the gift I brought him from the (aborted) Cheyenne Sun Dance, solemnly. I had come to know he would not open it in public. He held the paper bag gently in his hands and surprised me by saying: "The *Duneza* are finished. Our way of life is coming to an end. But it is all right because the spirit is going to the White man."

Could this be what the prophet was referring to? A world in which the White man lived on while the *Duneza*, the real people, lived in a "real realm" elsewhere? The *Duneza* are remarkable for maintaining their Prophet Dance long after many tribes had

abandoned, or at least apparently abandoned, their version of the Ghost or Prophet Dance. Could they have maintained it because they had inverted the hope and intensely held prophecy of the classic Sioux Ghost Dance, *e.g.* that the White man would disappear and the Indians live again in a land full of buffalo? Did the *Duneza* prophets promise life in an afterworld where game abounds for themselves and this material world for the White man? Such nuances are worth pursuing.

The answer to my questioning was complex. "No, the world is really going to be destroyed." "It can be by fire, or by water, however *Nahata* (Everyone's father) wishes." The White man's world would be destroyed as well, the White man too. And yet the prophet talked of preparing for the time after: having dropped their bodies both the real people and the others would live on in another plane.

Four times already, the *Duneza* say, *Yaqesati* has destroyed the world when its pattern has become too divergent from the harmony of the original plan. This is only another such instance. This is clear to the *Duneza*.

The *Duneza* believe that the world is going to end because too many people have forgotten, or never learned, to respect the forces necessary to keep the world going. The White man is particularly oblivious to it: only when he and Indians can hold it in their minds can it be maintained.

The *Duneza* prophet tradition and people sound a note of hope not found among those disparate groups sounding the alarm of an atomic apocalypse, or the born-again Christians predicting Armageddon (unless one is among their chosen number). For the *Duneza* life will go on, if on another plane. For them the transition from living on this plane to living on another is easily made. The whole experience of vision quests and dreaming is a excursion into that realm. Life will go on, they say. The White man has so narrowly defined life as happening in his material world.

The last *Duneza* prophet died in 1977. He had prophesied that there would be no major prophets among his people in the future, but I was told during the summer of 1984 that the people would and should listen to the missionaries who come among them.

In July 1984, I arrived on the eve of a three-day "Christian rally" which one of the four *Duneza* reserves sponsored. Several of the ministers were White preachers, but one was a Slave Indian originally from Kantah. The *Duneza* had erected a big tent, with a long axis like a cathedral rather than the circular tipis made for prophet dances. For three days there was singing and witnessing and curing and testimonies and baptisms and each day the *Duneza* provided a communal meal.

Some *Duneza* from other reserves attended as well, although not all participated. At another *Duneza* reserve there had recently been an Alcoholics Anonymous Rally led by Interior Salish from Alkali Lake. The AA Rally had included singing and drumming and the building and use of a big sweat lodge. The *Duneza* from the reserve which had held the AA Rally decried the Christian Rally for “losing their Indian heritage,” and did not attend. However, the Christian Rally was attended by White born-again Christians from the surrounding community who were delighted that the Indians had “given up their tom-toms in favour of Jesus.” White men tend to find the Beaver Indian prophet songs disturbing and foreign while the country and western style songs of the Christian Rally do not sound threatening and pagan to them.

At the end of the rally, after a Biblical scene in which droves of *Duneza* were baptised in the river while friends and relations sang hymns from the shore and the bridge, the *Duneza* went to the community hall and held an all-night Prophet Dance. For them it was the fitting and appropriate way to end the rally.

One of the White preachers at the rally was still within ear-shot and came to put a stop to the “pow-wow.” As he was walking to the hall, intent on telling the assembly that this was a thing of the devil, Jesus whispered to him, a *Duneza* told me the next morning, “It is all right. I am here too.” So he watched the dance but did not participate.

He did not pass his revelation on to a Pentecostal service two days later, made up mostly of the local Whites, in which the resident White missionary reported on his frustration at working with the Indians and his attempts to unseat the devil from their hearts and minds. Conversely, the two Indians at this service wondered if the falling down and loss of consciousness of a White participant, when the minister laid hands on him was not a thing of the devil. At the same time other White Pentecostals told me that the Beaver Indians’ acceptance of Jesus as their personal saviour had made them stop drinking and become just like themselves.

In my view, the Meaningful Universe of the converted *Duneza* looks very similar to the Meaningful Universe of the unconverted. Belief in reincarnation is just as deeply accepted as a premise by the converts as the non-converts. The converts even joke about how unimportant sacraments like marriage are, given that such ceremonies were not a part of their ancestors’ lives, but they make such jokes after they are safely married. For the *Duneza* the puzzle is why the Whites don’t understand that the Prophet Dance is about the same thing as the Pentecostal Revival Meeting. The literate *Duneza* are pleased to learn that the Old

Testament and the New had their own prophets too. They can comprehend the possession of people described in the Old and New Testaments completely. Why, they sometimes wonder, can they see the similarity between their tradition and the Biblical one while the Whites raised as Christians cannot?

The resident missionary and the local White Pentecostal congregation represent the standard dichotomy of responses: either rejection of the whole of the *Duneza* Meaningful Universe as pagan and of the devil or the assumption that the *Duneza* Meaningful Universe is the same as their own because it shares some of the same elements, in this case acceptance of Jesus as their personal saviour.

In fact, there is a striking retention of the basic shamanic world view in both the Prophet Dance formulation and the very recent conversion to Pentecostal Christianity. Elements discordant with that ancient tradition have been introduced and are vying for their place in the *Duneza* Meaningful Universe. The inconsistencies the *Duneza* can support and tolerate because the Pentecostal conversion offers to them a reprieve from a drinking pattern which had become part of their culture and expectation.

Alcohol was, obviously, unknown in the aboriginal shamanic times. It became a part of the trader’s goods and part of the *Duneza* experience shortly after the first prophets appeared. The *Duneza* pursued it with the same intensity as a vision quest. Going to the Hudson Bay post became synonymous with getting liquor. As trips to town became more frequent with the construction of roads and highways, the frequency of drinking increased until drinking itself was no longer the intense but infrequent stepping out of their competent independence but the cause of untold grief. To the modern *Duneza* the Pentecostal conversion not only offers a legitimization of spiritual experience in the White men’s eyes, but a serious commitment to abstain from drinking, which allows lives which had become out of control and degraded to resume their proper integrity. Most *Duneza* feel some initial pangs of disloyalty in becoming Pentecostal as opposed to Catholic Christians, but find the Catholic endorsement of wine as part of the priest’s sacrament an impossible vantage point from which to renounce alcohol.

The chart below summarizes the common elements of these three stages of the on-going evolution of the *Duneza* cosmology and contrasts them to the modern Pentecostal cosmology held by some of the local White community. It is based on the isolation I have made elsewhere of the fundamental traits of a Pan-North American Indian shamanic cosmology (Mills, 1981, 1984). The Beaver Indians’

CHART I
Characteristics of the Beaver Indian Meaningful Universe :
Shamanic, Prophet Dance, Pentecostal, compared to White Pentecostal.

	A Shamanic	B Prophet Dance	C <i>Duneza</i> Pentecostal	D White Pentecostal
1)	P	P	P	A
2)	P	P	P	P/A
3)	P	P	P	P/A
4)	P	P	P	P
5)	P	P	P	A: chosen people saved
6)	P	P	P	A: second coming to come
7)	P	P	P	A: absent/anathema

Key: P=present A=absent

- 1) The belief that everything—the earth, plants, animals and humans—is imbued with spirit.
- 2) The belief that each individual should maintain a prayerful attitude towards the things he uses as all forms of life are responsive to the thoughts and wills of people.
- 3) The individual should seek attunement to the spirit world through vision quests.
- 4) The belief that some people are better able to contact the spirit realms—these people become the shamans adept at crossing the bounds between the living and the dead and predicting the future.
- 5) The belief that group rites are necessary to uphold world harmony.
- 6) The world has been transformed repeatedly in the past.
- 7) Belief in the reincarnation of the individual.

response to Pentecostal missionaries is, as far as I have been able to ascertain, typical of that of other North American Indians. The retention or change in these basic shamanic traits and their shape in the new Pentecostal version is described below.

TRAIT 1: The belief that everything is embued with spirit

The *Duneza* maintain their belief that spirit resides everywhere and in everything whether they are Pentecostal or not. This contrasts strongly with the White community, Pentecostal or otherwise, which believes that some life forms should be eradicated.

TRAIT 2: Prayerful attitude necessary as thoughts and will gave an influence

While the White Pentecostal tradition emphasizes prayer, it is to Jesus, while the *Duneza* prayer is more typically to the spirit element behind specific kinds of creation. The Pentecostal tradition condemns this as pagan, heathen and inferior. The *Duneza* who have accepted the Pentecostal tradition have little difficulty shifting the locus of prayer. Prophet Dance prayers themselves are sometimes addressed to *Ahata*, “Our Father.”

TRAIT 3: The individual should seek attunement with the spirit world through vision quests

The Pentecostal attitude towards the vision

quest is again one of condemnation, whereas falling down, becoming unconscious and/or babbling in incomprehensible tongues is considered a sign of Jesus’ having chosen you. The Beaver Indians initially found this experience as foreign as I did, but in increasing numbers they are adding this to their spiritual experience. They do not altogether disvalue *muyine*, however, but, as one *Duneza* educated to White standards said, the conditions of respecting the animals and the holders of *muyine* which are necessary to acquire and maintain it are hard to fulfill in the modern world, where your food comes not only from the game respectfully dispatched, but from the unknown vibration of packing houses and supermarkets. Nonetheless, this personal power continues to be valued by the *Duneza*, while there is some confusion about how it should be used.

The Prophet tradition itself said, and says, that *muyine* should not be used to kill others and doing so impedes ones being able to get to “heaven.” However, the *Duneza* still believe that *muyine* is useful and necessary to ward off others *muyine* attacks and is part and parcel of one’s personal charisma. This engages individuals in a situation analogous to the Western and Russian stockpiling of nuclear arms: you can’t give up *muyine* (or nuclear arms, the argument runs) and be left vulnerable. Perhaps the *Duneza* are more realistic in that they recognize and

accept that having *muyine* it is inevitable that it be used.

The switch to accepting each death as “the will of God” as the Pentecostals put it, rather than the result of a medicine fight has not been entirely made. Holding others responsible slips easily into the Pentecostal framework of seeing various and sundry acts and results as “things of the devil.” Whereas to the White Pentecostals the maintenance of medicine powers is seen as highly unChristian; to my eyes it is less unChristian than the belief, not shared by the *Duneza*, that those who have not accepted Jesus as their personal saviour are eternally damned to hell-fire and perdition.

Perhaps the White ministers sense the *Duneza* reservations on this point of dogma, for they did not emphasize it at the three-day Rally. The *Duneza* are familiar enough with the doctrine, however, from their Catholic conversion of several generations ago. Therefore the *Duneza* who accepted Jesus as their personal saviour at the Rally told me they felt a relief that now they knew they would make it to heaven. Nonetheless, they danced at the Prophet Dance at its end, symbolically walking the steps to heaven, with great enthusiasm. For them there is nothing inconsistent in drawing strength from both the Pentecostal and the Prophet Dance ceremonials.

As Paul Radin has noted (1954), North American Indians vary in their predilection for thinking in philosophical terms as much as any population. For most the elements of the different traditions they embody do not have to fit into a consistent and logical whole. They can be afraid of being damned and also believe that they, like everyone else, will be reborn again and again, a point we return to below.

TRAIT 4: Some people are better able to contact the spirit realms than others

In the shamanic world the shamans were the people most adept at establishing contact with the spirit realms. In the Prophet tradition it is the prophets, who travelled to heaven and saw the future, who are credited with the greatest spiritual heights. As an illiterate *Duneza* said, “The priest reads about God. The prophets experience God.” In the Pentecostal services there is recognition that some ministers are better able to heal and to effect others so that they lose consciousness and speak in tongues. The Pentecostal tradition however credits Jesus and the Word of God with miraculous powers and apparently makes no distinction between any of the people who have been saved or redeemed by having made Jesus their personal saviour. The Pentecostal ceremony aims at giving participants a spiritual conversion experience, or at least the experience of seeing others have one.

TRAIT 5: The belief that group rites are necessary to uphold world harmony

Both the shamanic and the Prophet tradition emphasize that it is by bringing people together to strive for harmony that one maintains the world on its correct course. Both the Prophet Dance and the Pentecostal group ceremonies are to strengthen the participants’ experience of Jesus and convert others. Pentecostal group ceremonies are to strengthen the participants’ experience of Jesus and convert others.

The *Duneza* have changed the format of public testimonials from the Pentecostal form to something which conforms to their tradition of being reticent about spiritual experiences. The testimonials that describe the transformation from a degraded and alcohol-marred life are acceptable, and are typically delivered in English. However, when it comes to describing actual spiritual experiences the *Duneza* switch into their own language and the descriptions become cryptic encodings of visionary experience. Thus one *Duneza* gave out two hints of his experience, talking about a vision of “something blue,” and “something wavering.” The *Duneza* have no difficulty at all in incorporating the miraculous cures of the Pentecostal tradition, which are another variant of public curing ceremonies of their own tradition.

TRAIT 6: The world has been transformed repeatedly in the past

As described above, the shamanic and prophet tradition saw this world has having been transformed a number of times. The Bible study evenings which are becoming frequent social gatherings for the literate *Duneza* instill the Old and New Testament images of the wrath of God and the impending end of the world in a much more frightening way than the Beaver language versions recounted by the past *Duneza* prophets. The contemporary Pentecostal *Duneza*’s understanding of why the end of the world is to take place and what it means, as described above, remains quite different from their White Pentecostal brothers.

TRAIT 7: Belief in reincarnation of the individual

Perhaps the greatest point of variance between the White and *Duneza* Pentecostals is their sense of what happens to a soul after death. The *Duneza* are very concerned that the soul get to heaven so it does not have to wander as a potentially dangerous ghost, but even those lost souls that do, they believe, will eventually reincarnate back on earth. Rather than seeing death as a final judgement placing the soul in heaven or hell, the *Duneza* believe the place you go to, or can’t get to, is the spirits’ home only until that individual soul is reborn. They do not go out of their way to advertise this thought to the White ministers,

but it is strongly held. Women who consider themselves good born-again Christians have no compunction against describing the reincarnation-based traits of their children and grandchildren to each other.

Thus, although the outward form of the White and *Duneza* participation in a three-day Christian Rally is similar, it masks very real differences. When the White Pentecostals have some perception of the differences, they tend to reject the *Duneza* as being more pagan than they, in fact, are. The Meaningful Universe of the *Duneza* is not meaningful to the local White community. "Just lies," says Nathan of the White man's globe. "Just superstition," the White men say of the Beaver Indian worldview, or "The work of the devil," say some born-again Christians.

The White community's greatest objection to the *Duneza* is not on their formulation of a meaningful universe, of which they are largely oblivious, but on the economics of being a Beaver Indian. A White R.C.M.P. officer I went to see in Ft. St. John put the local White community's view in a nutshell. He said: "If the kids are taken from the reserves and raised by White families, they amount to something. They develop into bright, intelligent human beings. But if they are left on the reserve they don't amount to anything. They don't contribute a thing to society." What he is saying is that living off the land, living a subsistence living without aspiring to be a part of the upwardly mobile White society is aberrant and cannot be condoned.

Hugh Brody's book *Maps and Dreams* brilliantly portrays the difficulty the Beaver Indians face in maintaining a land base on which to carry out their way of life (1981). As George Manuel says, "For the White man, Might makes Right" (1983). Knowing the Beaver Indian cosmology, the powers that be among Canadian and world society might be even *less* inclined to protect and preserve this way of life.

The best humanitarian and ecological reasons would probably not prevail in stopping the building of the Alaska pipeline through the fragile and fast-diminishing hunting lands of the *Duneza*. What has given them a temporary reprieve from having their land further torn up to place a tube through which the grease of the underworld monsters could flow to all the machines of the White man's world, and another dam built upon the troubled waters of the Peace River, is that it does not appear economically feasible to do so.

Even as the *Duneza* enter into the cash-consumer economy, it does not alter their basic economic premise that the wealth is shared widely among the kin group, much as the meat of the hunt was shared in the past. The sense of responsibility to the kin group remains intense despite decades of exposure to the

competitive, individually-oriented entrepreneurial mentality of the surrounding oil-boom (and sometimes bust) economy. Even if the hunting base should disappear altogether as among the Omaha and other Plains Indians who once hunted the buffalo, I would expect the value system to retain much of its former characteristics.⁴

One of the reasons for the retention of the value system is that this is the value system in which the children are raised. And, as the *Duneza* point out, the new babies born into the new world of White schools, cash economy, plate glass houses, TV and videos, are the reincarnation of *Duneza* who lived many lives before these innovations. This recycling of specific *Duneza* personality has the effect of maintaining a distinct mentality, a distinct identity and culture that is the *Duneza* Meaningful Universe. The subject of Beaver reincarnation is treated more thoroughly elsewhere (Mills: 1985).

The existence of this Meaningful Universe poses a real challenge to the Canadian endorsement of multiculturalism. It is perfectly acceptable to speak another language besides English or French, such as Ukrainian or Greek, as long as you enter into the industrial economy. But to have an indigenous population that is not eager to do so and which wants to preserve a land base on which to live a subsistence level life tries the tolerance of most segments of the larger society.

For many generations now, the White society has assumed that the answer to the Indian problem is really in assimilation of the Indian population into the White man's world. Only now is it becoming apparent that this population wants to preserve some of their unique identity even as some strive for middle-class economic standing. Perhaps eventually the White community will learn that assimilation must be a two-way street and that they themselves could profit from understanding and even assimilating elements of the *Duneza* Meaningful Universe.

NOTES

1. This paper is a revision of a paper originally read to the Faculty Colloquium of the Sociology and Anthropology Department at Simon Fraser University in October, 1983.

2. The corpus of these stories first appeared in *Beaver Tales*, 1966, unpublished collection of tales collected by Toni and Robin Ridington, later published in Robin Ridington's 1976 *The Swan People: A Study of the Dunneza Prophet Dance*. Canadian Ethnology Series, Paper No. 38, National Museum of Man, Mercury Series.

3. Such people often try to steal a child's soul so they can follow it to "heaven." They may indeed capture a soul from someone, and so cause their death, but the *Duneza* say the ghost can never follow the spirit to a happy resting place.

4. The persistence of symbol and thought for the Omaha despite a major economic transformation from buffalo hunters to farmers is described in Robin Ridington's 1986 paper: Omaha Survival: A Vanishing Indian Tribe That Would Not Vanish.

REFERENCES

BRODY, H.

1981 Maps and Dreams, Vancouver & Toronto, Douglas and McIntyre.

MANUEL, G.

1983 Native People and the Constitution, Lecture Delivered to SA 291: The Anthropology of Modern Life, Simon Fraser University, September 26, 1983.

MILLS, A.

1981 The Beaver Indian Prophet Dance and Related Movements Among North American Indians, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Harvard University.

1984 Prophet Dance, Ghost Dance and North American Indian Philosophy: A Fresh Look at the Prophet Dance Among The Beaver and Other North American Indians, Paper Delivered at the Canadian Ethnology Society Meetings, May 12, 1984.

1985 Preliminary Investigation of Cases of the Reincarnation Type Among the Beaver and Gitksan Indians, Paper Delivered at the Canadian Ethnology Society Meetings, May, 1985.

PUGH, J.

1983 Astrological Counselling in Contemporary India, In Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry, 7.

RADIN, P.

1954 Monotheism Among Primitive Peoples, Special Publications of the Bollingen Foundation, 4.

RIDINGTON, A. (MILLS)

1969 Beaver Indian Supernatural Power: The Cosmology of Consciousness, Unpublished "Publishable Paper," Harvard University.

RIDINGTON, R.

1976 The Swan People: A Study of the Dunne-za Prophet Dance, Canadian Ethnology Series, Paper No. 38, National Museum of Man, Mercury Series.

RIDINGTON, R. and T. RIDINGTON

1970 The Inner Eye of Totemism and Shamanism. In History of Religions, 10. No. 1, August. Also in Teachings from the American Earth: Indian Religion and Philosophy, Dennis and Barbara Tedlock, (eds.), 1975, Liverwright, New York: 190-204.

SPIER, L.

1935 The Prophet Dance of the Northwest and Its Derivatives: The Source of the Ghost Dance, General Series in Anthropology.