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Résumé de l'article

La plupart des gens, et particulièrement les anthropologues qui écrivent sur les créatures surnaturelles de la mythologie de la côte du Pacifique Nord Ouest ont, pour certaines raisons, recours à un moyen stylistique des plus singuliers, à mes yeux : la suppression de l'article qui devrait normalement précéder tout nom spécifique. Par exemple : « Corbeau » au lieu de « le corbeau ». Cette pratique m'a toujours paru particulièrement irritante et c'est cela qui m'a poussé à rédiger le texte qui suit. Ce faisant, j'ai pu découvrir que mon propos dépasse de fait le cadre d'une simple question de style et qu'il relève de quelque chose de plus fondamental concernant l'attitude de la société contemporaine à l'égard des peuples tribaux et de leurs cultures.

The Anthropologist and the Article

By Bill Reid

For some reasons, most of the people, particularly anthropologists who write about the supernatural creatures of the Pacific Northwest Coast mythology, employ, to my way of thinking, a most peculiar dictional device: the dropping of the article which should ordinarily precede their specific names: *e.g.* "Raven" instead "the raven".

I have always found this practice most irritating and was eventually driven to write this paper. In doing so, I may have discovered that my argument goes deeper than a mere matter of style and touches on something fundamental regarding the attitude of today's society to tribal peoples and their cultures.

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Of all the subjects involving the relationship between the academic community and the Native people of the Northwest Coast, past and present, this may seem to most the least significant and trivial, a bit of gratuitous nit picking not worth the waste of anybody's time, even mine.

But something that has annoyed me so much for so long must have a significance warranting a few moments investigation. Herewith, then, I will attempt to create a controversy where previously none existed, and if I accomplish nothing else, at least I can scratch a bit at this persistent little itch.

It is an itch caused by the, to me, peculiar custom which has arisen among ethnologists of omitting the article when referring to the heroic creatures who populate the myth world of the Northwest Coast, and capitalizing their English species designations: Raven, Halibut, Bear, etc. instead of the raven, the halibut, the bear, etc.

This strange practice is also followed in nearly all publications of emasculated, hygienized, colorless versions of already bowlderized legends to give the very young their first lesson in misunderstanding the native people and their cultures, usually with bad illustrations to demonstrate that tribal art should look truly primitive and not all neat and complex and disturbing like those strange smouldering things safely locked up in museums.

It is difficult to say where or when the first article dropping occurred. Certainly in west coast anthropological circles it has some distinguished precedents: Swanton and Boas both use the device, and it is probable they were copying older models. So why should I or anybody challenge this time honored usage? Well, I simply do not believe that being around for a long time necessarily gives respectability to a basic error; so, with history effectively disposed of, let us consider my reasons for abandoning the practice today.

First, to be blunt about it, simply as a piece of diction, it sounds silly, as though the writer had spent too much time conversing only with young children.

Secondly, I have heard a lot of old people, native that is, talking about the myth creatures and they either called them by their native names, or used the article. Their speech preferences should, I think, command enough respect to be followed by outsiders. Incidentally, some younger natives have copied the white man in this and in many other ways, copying the reflection in a flawed mirror, instead of trying to find the original source. Soon they will become the old people, and I suppose their misinformation will assume the integrity of Holy Writ.

The third and most important reason is also the most difficult to express. It has to do primarily with the origins of the practice, which lie well within the bounds of speculation. The practice may stem from a too literal translation of languages which do not use the article. This may account for Swanton using it in his strange translation into the kind of pidgin, certainly not English, which he used, hardly changing his initial word by word renderings. In this case, omitting the article neither adds nor detracts from the rest of his quaint translations, but why do writers, when adapting these writings and those of earlier recorders of myths retain this particular error?

I think it is much more than a mere matter of style. It may have to do with what I have come to think of as the "Brer Rabbit" error, or, if you like, the "Winnie the Pooh" fantasy. In these classic stories, which formed an important and, on the whole, I think positive part of my literary childhood, you will find lots of characters called Chicken, Rabbit, Bear, etc. It may well be that the unfortunate habit of confusing true myths with children's fairy tales, usually in order to exploit them for the juvenile book market, is responsible. I find these explanations unsatisfactory, but they may be part of the real reason.

The usual excuse given is that removing the article and capitalizing the species somehow enhances the mythological status of the creature reffered to. It was even been said that it puts such a being in the same class as God, who needs no modifier, indeed who cannot be modified. Of course, the reference is the good old Judeo Christian God, the God of most anthropologists, or at least of their parents. (Notice that as soon as you have to describe even Himself from a position somewhat removed from his special status, you have to use the article, and of course all other gods require it, e.g. the gods of the Aztecs, a god of Olympus, etc.). In any case, whatever He may or may not be, God is not a species of animal.

On the other hand, even classic European monsters seem to deserve the article. For instance, the Minotaur is always the Minotaur, not some mixed-up fellow named Minotaur. Furthermore, the use of the definite article to confer special status has some good precedents, as in "The Stuart" to designate the head of the Stuart clan, and even in regard to animals, as in Kipling's "The Truce of the Bear", where the Bear is treated as an archetype of the species.

Even the use by anthropologists is inconsistent. For instance, in all English versions of the story, Nanatsinget's wife is carried off by a whale. Why then, when referring to the same whale on a totem pole, do they say something like: "The next figure of this pole is Whale"? In the great Northwest Coast epic, the Bear Mother myth, there are many bears, each one having some kind of role analogous to a member of human society: a bear chief, a bear prince, etc., later to become the bear father, bear guards and so on. And by extrapolation, and probably in the older versions of the myth, they had names, even as their human counterparts, and I am sure not one of them was called "Bear".

A well-known Kwagiutl myth begins: "Once there was a Raven named Hemaskyasa". Personally, I believe it shows much more respect and immediately indicates the extraordinary status of the myth creatures to designate them with the definite article and if you like to capitalize the species name. The Raven *must* be the raven of mythology, not just another bird. In myth time, the animals were the equals of humans and the latters are always referred to with the article present: "A man named Nanatsinget", "A woman was picking berries". If "Raven was flying" or "Bear was walking", why not "Man was fishing" or "Woman went to the beach", or "Human lived in a house."?

On the other hand, dropping the article, particularly "the", somehow diminishes the great figures of myth to imagined characters in quaint folk tales

of unsophisticated simple people, if such ever really existed.

And, that is the source of my annoyance with the practice and where this apparently inconsequential omission begins to seem serious. To me, to use this odd dictional device when referring to these particular creatures in the time honored accounts by which people identified themselves and related themselves to their environment and their fellow beings, and explained their origins, is an exercise in condescension. For it is a device used *only* when recording the literature of tribal people, completely unsanctioned by any accepted standards of ordinary English usage, and is therefore discriminatory, and no matter how unconscious its use, ultimately racist.

This is, I realize, pretty strong language to use in reference to the writings of a group of the best intentioned people, many of whom are good friends and allies in the effort to focus attention on the remarkable achievements of the native peoples of the Northwest Coast. I ask only that they spend a few introspective moments in an attempt to find the real reason for this clumsy aberration from the excellent English they are capable of and normally use so well. If it can be demonstrated that there is some merit in dropping the article, I may be convinced enough to adopt the practice myself; if my arguments have some validity, I hope at least that some people who write, now or in the future, on Northwest Coast mythology will mend their ways. Probably what will happen is that everyone will continue to follow his or her prejudice.

But please, rightly or wrongly, the title of the piece in the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia is "THE Raven & the First Men", because I made it and named it.

Indulge me.

The Raven and the First Men by Artist, Bill Reid. Collection of the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia. Photograph by William McLennan, 1982 (cover).