A Snohomish telling of "The Seal Hunters"

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Abstract: Oral-based indigenous cultures have stories that persist over time, though some variation may exist in various details and in overall context. Related cultures in particular have similar stories, and assessing the similarities and differences across their tellings of these stories provides valuable historical and cultural background. In the case of endangered languages and cultures, every telling of every story provides important insight. This article presents a recently discovered archived account of a Snohomish version of "The Seal Hunters", a captivating story that has many variant forms across Salish cultures. The story was written down in the nineteenth century by an intrepid French globetrotting explorer and anthropologist, Alphonse Pinart. This article begins with some background on Pinart, on the Snohomish language and culture, and on the manuscript itself. Then I give a transcription of the Pinart's French account of the story and a translation into English, followed by a comparative analysis.

Keywords: Snohomish, story, seal hunters

1 Introduction

"The Seal Hunters" is a story that is told by indigenous cultures throughout the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. It is an elaborate and lively story of dwarves (or giants), spirit powers, hunting, captivity, and high adventure. Several versions exist that vary considerably in detail, complexity, and focus.

This article presents another version of the story that is located in an archival repository, as recorded in French by the early Pacific-region explorer and ethnographer Alphonse Pinart (no date). In his hand he summarizes the story as it was told to him by an unnamed Snohomish speaker. Though not as lengthy as some other versions, and though not recorded in the original language nor evidently translated by Pinart, it still provides interesting documentation of the story from an external perspective.

Telling this story here is important for several reasons. Snohomish is a highly endangered language and culture. In such situations, when dealing with language endangerment, documentation—even from archival sources—is critical: every word counts. The same is also true for cultures, especially those based on stories and orality: every story counts. In fact, every telling of every story counts.

Furthermore, apparently no English translation of this telling exists. Since most current speakers of the language do not know French, this article provides them access to Pinart's account. Finally, since the French version is also not

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available elsewhere, it brings to light a story that until now has only been accessible to those able to access it from its archival repository.

2 Background

Alphonse Louis Pinart was a French ethnographer, explorer, and linguist who lived from 1852–1911. He is famous for his daring adventures in Alaska, Siberia, the Caribbean, the American southwest desert, Easter Island, and Central and South America. His exploits were legendary, and he contributed thousands of artifacts to museums and collections. Some of these were controversial and remain so: he allegedly pilfered historical Spanish documents from archives in New Mexico, and sold a purported Aztec crystal skull to the Trocadéro museum in Paris (Associated Press, 2008). There is even some evidence that the movie "Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull" was inspired at least in part by Pinart's adventures. Several of Pinart's manuscripts and artifacts can be found today in the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley as well as at a museum in his home town in France.

Crucially for this discussion, Pinart also visited the Pacific Northwest, probably sometime during 1875 to 1876. At the time it is likely that he met with Father Eugène Casimir Chirouse, a French Oblate missionary who was famous for his ministry among the tribes of the area, particularly the Snohomish. Chirouse became intimately acquainted with the Snohomish language and culture, compiling a grammar, wordlist, and translations of liturgical material.

During Pinart's visit he became acquainted with at least some Snohomish stories. One story that he recorded is a summary of a Snohomish version of "The Seal Hunters". As reported in this article, Pinart's version has now been transcribed from the manuscript version and translated into English. I thus discuss here the work involved in rendering the story into English and present the English translation and comparative observations with other versions.

2.1 Snohomish culture and language

The Snohomish tribe had a population of about 350 in 1850, and double that in 1980. They were known as warriors and hunters. They actively participated in the fur trade and interacted closely with Roman Catholic missionaries. Remaining largely neutral in skirmishes during the Indian war (1855–56) and offering some resistance to reservation resettlement policies over the years, the tribe today occupies a somewhat indeterminate status, recognized by the federal government as a political entity but not a tribal one.

Lushootseed (formerly known as Puget Salish) is a Central Coast Salish language whose traditional area ranges from Puget Sound westward to the Cascades. The language has various dialects including:

- Skagit (and Nooksack), Snohomish, Sauk-Suiattle, and Skykomish comprising the northern dialects, and
- Snoqualmie, Suquamish, Duwamish, Muckleshoot comprising the southern dialects

Though Pinart likely came in contact with groups speaking several of these dialects, the story he retells in French is specifically mentioned as coming from the Snohomish, whose language is now grouped with others under the rubric "Lushootseed".

Lushootseed is a language with few vowels but a complex consonantal system. Its rich morphology is a property it shares with other Coast Salish languages. The orthography involves a (rough) 1-to-1 sound/symbol correspondence, and was standardized by Thom Hess in the 1960's. It is largely based on the Roman, International Phonetic Alphabet and Americanist alphabets. As regards the lexicon and lexical categories, Lushootseed has few prepositions and adverbs; predicates tend to carry this content. Some function words play several roles: determiners are often used as pronouns, for example.

Many loanwords have entered the language from English, French, Chinook Jargon, and surrounding Native American languages. On the other hand, a rich degree of lexical innovation exists in the language due to the high level of semantic, syntactic, morphological and phonological processes available.

Though the language also has other interesting syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic properties, they will not be addressed in this paper.

2.2 Versions of the story

As mentioned earlier, the story of the seal hunters is commonly told throughout the Pacific Northwest. I next sketch some of the most widely known versions of this ancient story.

An early published account was told in the southern area of Puget Sound (Ballard, 1927). Entitled "The Two Brothers' Journey to the North", it was documented in English and bears only fragmentary resemblance to the other tellings. It tells about a powerful canoe-maker who fashions a seal out of cedar, places a magic spell on it, and places it in the ocean. Two seal-hunting brothers see it, and one casts a spear into it. The stricken seal swims away with the two men in tow for five days and nights, under the seal's magic charm. Eventually they arrive in a far-away land populated by giants. One of the brothers is attacked and eaten by mosquitoes that were also condors; the other finds an old giant man the size of a tree. The old man goes to a river with a basket and fills it with king salmon, which he calls minnows. He taught the brother how to cook these fish. This was repeated for several days. Then the fifth and last day the giant caught a hundred-foot long whale that he pulled ashore and put under a magic spell. A large slit was opened in the whale, and the brother was put inside of it along with adequate provisions of dried fish. The whale was then healed and sent on its way with instructions to surface often enough to allow the hunter to breathe. After some time they arrived at the hunter's home, at a place that now has become a great gathering place for seals.

Adamson (1934) records two other tellings. The first, by the Upper Chehalis people, is called "The Seal Hunter". It tells of five brothers, the eldest of whom was a canoe maker and the middle brother a powerful seal hunter. The eldest one makes a seal out of cedar and leaves it floating in the bay where seals were known to congregate. The seal hunter and two of his brothers, on an expedition,

spear the "seal" and with great power it heads westward out to sea with them in tow. Five days and nights later they arrive at a strange land. Two of the brothers went exploring, leaving the youngest of the three behind. They find a giant old man who tells them to return to their brother which they do, only to find him completely devoured by mosquitoes. For five days they watch the giant try to fish rather unsuccessfully due to their interference. The two brothers also become involved in a fishing dispute between this giant and another one. Finally, on the fifth outing the giant succeeds in catching not just a fish but a whale, which they eat. The two brothers are sent to another whale who cut a slit in himself so they could ride inside of him. The whale took them back to their land, and after stopping at several villages they eventually arrived home where the whale died.

The possibly related second version that Adamson (1934) tells is by the Cowlitz and is called "The Wooden Fish". A widower tries to get salmon for his child but the fisherman refuses. So the widower makes a wooden fish and puts it in the river. The fisherman and his younger brother, while fishing, spear the "fish" and it pulls them down the Cowlitz River day and night until they reached the Columbia where the fish landed. They were attacked by a large flock of bear-sized birds. Hiding his brother under the canoe, the fisherman scouts out the country and comes across a giant old man. Told to return to his brother on the river shore immediately, he finds that mosquitoes (the large birds) have split the canoe and devoured his brother. The old man feeds the fisherman salmon. The two fight a neighbouring, competing giant and kill him, largely due to the bows and arrows that the visitor made. To show his gratitude, the giant decides to send the man back home: he gets a whale, hollows it out and fills it with supplies, puts the fisherman in, and sends it off. After an overnight journey the man arrives upriver at home.

The Jacobs version of the tale (1958) is quite different from the previously documented versions. For example, it is about 26 pages long and recorded in the original language (Clackamas Chinook) with an English translation. About a dozen sealers participate in the adventure, the speared seal is large, and the Indians try unsuccessfully to sever the rope towing them. From this point on the story diverges so much that correspondences are difficult to appreciate and in fact may not exist at all.

Elmendorf (1961) records two Skokomish versions. The first is nine pages long and the second just over two pages. The first tells about two brothers, a canoe maker and a seal hunter. The former makes a seal out of cedar and sets it on a rock. His brother spears it, and it takes off swimming through a fog for four days and nights. The seal changes to a cedar tree, and the hunter and his canoe captain beach the canoe. The next day they see a big canoe with a "little fellow" in it. He dives twice and comes up with a halibut each time. The two stranded hunters decide to steal one of the halibut while the man is diving underwater. Immediately the man gets into his canoe, stretches out his arm, points, and brings his arm around in a circle until he points directly at the shore where the two men are hiding. At this point his arm dips down, he pulls up the anchor, and he canoes directly to the two men. He takes them prisoner and paddles to a large

village full of small people. Several days pass with the two prisoners suffering for want of decent food. A large black cloud arises one day from the south; it turns out to be large swarms of black geese that wage warfare on, and kill, many of the small people. Upon inspection the two prisoners notice pin-feathers sticking in the victims; these were responsible for their deaths. By simply pulling out these deadly pin-feathers the prisoners are able to restore the little people back to perfect health. Everyone cooperated in clubbing the geese, chasing them away and killing and cooking many of them.

The next day an attack of white geese was similarly repelled, as were attacks of swans, mallards, and several kinds of ducks in subsequent days. Since the prisoners were instrumental in saving the people from these birds, they are shown gratitude and released. One summer morning the seal hunter and his captain get into a canoe and head east with their former captors' blessing. Passing several villages of salmon people, they eventually arrive at a steelheads' village. An old man—a whale—takes them aboard and tells them he can take them home to the Skokomish flats. They get inside and travel home inside the whale.

The second, shorter version that Elmendorf records differs slightly from the previous one. There are three brothers: besides the canoe maker and the seal hunter, the youngest is skilled at using the bow and arrow. The eldest brother makes a cedar seal and places it on a rock, his hunter brother spears it and gets towed all day and night until perhaps arriving at Vancouver Island. While hiding all day, they say a small man in a big canoe repeatedly dive for dentalia, some of which they stole. The small man, using the familiar compass-like gesture, found their location and took them to his home village of dwarfs. After a while huge flocks of northbound ducks attacked the village, killing many with their feathers. The two men clubbed several ducks to death. The little people arranged to have them sent home. A big whale swallowed them with their canoe and took them home, ending their eventful year-long adventure.

Martha Lamont's very detailed version of the story as told in the Lushootseed language is transcribed, translated, and extensively analyzed in Bierwert's anthology (1996). Presented line-by-line in the original language with an aligned English translation, it is the longest version, over 40 pages in length. It is, however, embedded in a much larger story. Bierwert prefaces the story with an introduction that situates it in Lushootseed culture and its larger Salishan context; she also presents a schematic analysis of the text including its elaborate discourse and narrative structure.

From this short summary it is obvious that details differ considerably across these various versions of the story. As we will see, though, there is an overall general correspondence with Pinart's telling. Still other versions are told by Chinook, Squamish, Musqueam, and Katzie storytellers, but the ones cited above will suffice for our purposes.

2.3 The manuscript

The manuscript itself is written in French and covers two full pages, comprising 55 lines and 430 words. It has no title, and is found among other assorted papers relating to his interactions with the Snohomish. Figure 1 shows the manuscript.

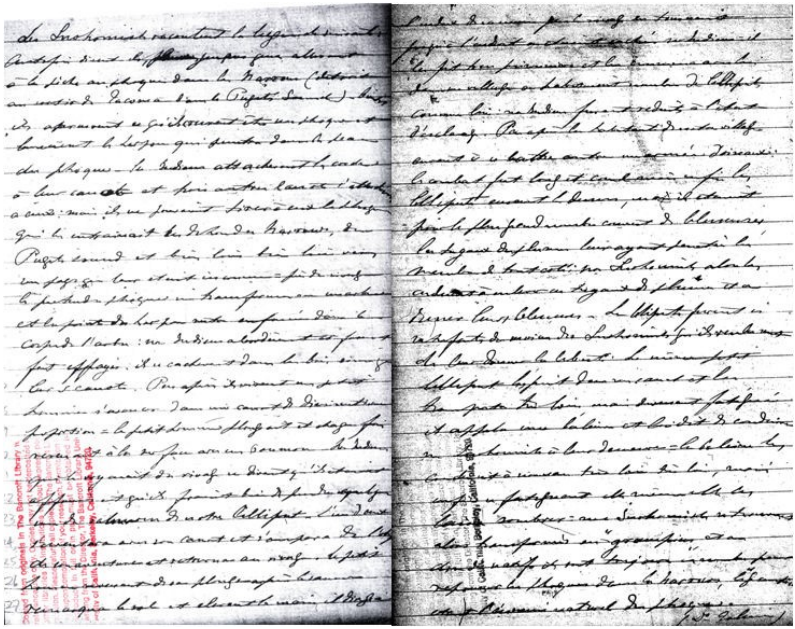

Figure 1 Pinart manuscript.

The contents of the manuscript were first discovered by reading and then transcribing the handwritten document. The orthography was interesting in several respects. For example, the script was fairly challenging, with lowercase letters often collapsed in rather than looped. A curious and noteworthy property of this manuscript is that many of the diacritic accents, which are abundant in French, were not used. My translation into French was done keeping as faithful to the original's grammatical constructions as possible while attempting to preserve and render the narrative style and literary figures.

3 Transcription and translation of the story

In this section I present a transcription of the story as it was recorded in French by Pinart. Then I give my English translation version of the story. A few words from the French manuscript required some degree of interpolation given difficulties in deciphering the handwriting; they (and their translations) are represented in the accounts with a suffixed token "??" to indicate their tentative

status. Punctuation and capitalisation have been normalized, and diacritics have been added to the French.

3.1 Transcription of Pinart's French version

Les Snohomish racontent la légende suivante: Autrefois, disent-ils, plusieurs jeunes gens allèrent à la pêche au phoque dans les Narrows (détroit au sortir de Tacoma dans le Puget's Sound). Bientôt ils aperçurent ce qu'ils crurent être un phoque et lancèrent le harpon qui pénétra dans la peau du phoque. Les Indiens attachèrent la corde à leur canot et trois autres canots s'attachèrent à eux. Mais ils ne pouvaient tirer à eux le phoque qui les entraînait au dehors des Narrows du Puget's Sound et bien loin bien loin vers un pays qui leur était inconnu. Près du rivage le prétendu phoque se transforma en un arbre et la pointe du harpon resta enfoncée dans le corps de l'arbre. Nos Indiens abordèrent et furent fort effrayés. Ils se cachèrent dans les bois avec leurs 5 canots. Peu après ils virent un petit homme s'avancer dans un canot de diminutive proportion. Le petit homme plongeait et chaque fois revenait à la surface avec un saumon. Les Indiens qui le voyaient d'un rivage se disaient qu'ils feraient bien de prendre quelques uns des saumons de notre lilliput. L'un d'eux s'aventura avec son canot et s'empara de l'objet de son aventure et retourna au rivage. Le petit home revenant de sa plongée après le saumon remarqua le vol et élevant la main il dirigea l'index de sa main vers le rivage en tournant jusqu'à l'endroit où étaient cachés nos Indiens. Il les fit tous prisonniers et les emmena avec lui dans un village où habitent nombre de lilliputs comme lui. Nos Indiens furent réduits à l'état d'esclavage. Peu après les habitants de notre village eurent à se battre contre une armée d'oiseaux. Le combat fut long et cruel mais enfin les lilliputs eurent le dessus, mais ils étaient pour le plus grand nombre couvert de blessures, les tuyaux de plumes leur ayant pénétré les membres de tout côté. Nos Snohomish alors les aident à enlever ces tuyaux de plumes et à dresser leurs blessures. Les lilliputs furent si satisfaits des services des Snohomishs qu'ils résolurent de leur donner la liberté. Le moins petit lilliput les prit dans son canot et les transporta très loin mais devenant fatigué il appela une baleine et lui dit de conduire nos Snohomish à leur demeure. La baleine les conduisit à unison très loin très loin, mais enfin se fatiguant elle-même elle les laissa sombrer. Nos Snohomish se trouvent alors transformés en “grampius” et aux abords?? natifs ils sont toujours en évidence?? pour repousser les phoques dans les Narrows, le “grampius” étant l'ennemi naturel des phoques.

3.2 English translation of Pinart's version

The Snohomish tell the following legend: Long ago, they say, several young men went seal hunting in the Narrows (a strait at the edge of Tacoma in Puget Sound). Soon they noticed what they thought was a seal and threw a harpoon that sank into the seal's skin. The Indians attached the rope to their canoe and three other canoes were attached to them. But they couldn't pull the seal aboard and it towed them beyond the Narrows of Puget Sound and very far, very far away towards a land that was unknown to them. Near the seashore the supposed

seal changed into a tree and the tip of the harpoon stayed stuck inside the body of the tree. These Indians climbed ashore and were very frightened. They hid themselves in the woods with their 5 canoes. Soon afterwards they saw a small man coming towards them in a tiny canoe. The tiny man dived repeatedly into the water and each time he came to the surface he had a salmon. The Indians who saw him from the shore decided among themselves that it would be good if they could take some of the salmon from our dwarf. One of them set forth in his canoe and stole what he was after and returned to the shore. The tiny man, returning from his diving for salmon, noticed the theft. Lifting up his hand he pointed towards the shore and followed it in a circle until he was pointing at the place where our Indians were hiding. He took them all prisoners and brought them with him to a village where many dwarves like him were living. Our Indians were reduced to slavery. Soon after, the inhabitants of our village had to fight against an army of birds. The combat was long and cruel but finally the dwarves prevailed, but most of them were covered with wounds, the quills having penetrated their limbs from every direction. Our Snohomish helped them to remove these quills and to dress their wounds. The dwarves were so satisfied with the services of the Snohomish that they resolved to set them free. The least small dwarf took them in his canoe and transported them very far away but becoming tired, he called a whale and told it to take our Snohomish to their home. The whale took them very far very far but finally becoming tired herself they left her to flounder and sink. Our Snohomish then turned into orcas and in their native coasts?? they are always seen?? driving away seals from the Narrows, since the orcas are the natural enemy of seals.

4 Brief analysis

Clearly this Snohomish recounting shares many elements with the versions mentioned earlier. As can be expected, though, there are noteworthy differences between this telling of the story and other tellings. For example, the motivation for the hunt is different, the pertinent family relationships not playing a role here. The number of canoes and the number of fishermen/hunters is also unique to this version.

The description of the supernatural human in the canoe is likewise different and interesting here. Pinart describes him, and the rest of his tribe, as “Lilliputs”, a term not used in the other versions. This is clearly a literary allusion that is salient for Pinart and that presumably he assumes will also be salient for his intended audience.

Various details conflict across these tellings. For example, consider the species of marine life that the dwarf dives for: here he dives for salmon, whereas in other versions he dives for halibut or dentalia.

Granularity of description varies across these stories. In all of the other accounts the forces attacking the dwarves’ village are specifically named, as mosquitoes and/or specific species of birds. In this story, though Pinart only refers generically to “birds”.

The return voyage to Snohomish territory is also different in this version. Unique to this telling is the eventual transformation of the hunter protagonists into killer whales; in the other versions they return to their village to resume their daily livelihood.

In terms of lexical selection, Pinart exhibits interesting choices. The word he uses for "orca" or "killer whale" is "grampius", a slight misspelling of the word "grampus", also used in French, which has fallen into disuse but which in the nineteenth century meant "orca" and was the Latin genus name for a kind of dolphin.

From a pragmatic perspective Pinart's narrative involves considerable engagement. Whereas at the beginning of the story he refers to "the Snohomish" several times, by the end they are referred to several times as "our Snohomish" and "our Indians". Even reference to the dwarves' village evolves to "our village". His stance is therefore far from neutral: he views the Snohomish as protagonists.

On the other hand, the story is meant to be construed as describing events taking place long ago. It is told using the simple past and related tenses, which in French indicates remote time and is largely used for written narrative.

An issue that remains unresolved is how exactly Pinart received this story. He almost certainly did not speak Snohomish, so the story was not recounted directly to him by a Snohomish speaker in that language. As mentioned earlier, though, he must have met with Father Chirouse in his travels, and Chirouse was an expert of the language. Did Chirouse recount the story to Pinart? Or did Chirouse interpret into French for Pinart, either simultaneously or consecutively, the recounting of the story by a Snohomish speaker? Was it told to him in English? The lack of strikeouts and other corrections shows that this manuscript was not a real-time transcription, but beyond that the exact means of transmission remains indeterminate.

5 Conclusion

In this article I have presented a new, second-hand account of a Snohomish telling of "The Seal Hunters". It reunites many aspects of previous versions: seal hunters undertake a dangerous, enchanted journey initiated by a charmed cedar seal; they come into contact with and are made captive by dwarves; alongside their captives they combat aerial forces of nature; finally they return to their home territory thanks to the assistance of a whale.

There has been recent discussion among linguists engaged in language preservation and revitalization about the value of archival work. On the one hand, with speakers of endangered languages in ever shorter supply, and with a paucity of speakers skilled in collecting and analyzing data for these languages, some stakeholders maintain that the allocation of time, effort, energy, and resources should exclusively focus on fieldwork. While this is undoubtedly an important and timely work to undertake, this article presents the results of a modest (and even serendipitous) research effort that likewise brings to light valuable and interesting cultural information from archival sources.

6 Acknowledgements

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