CuJections to Fmz Boas' Referring to Eating People in the Translation of the Kwakwala Terms of bax"bakwālanux"siwē and humatsla

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Recently the present writers had the pleasure of completing their editorial work on a collection of texts from Rivers Inlet, B.C. The texts, in Gwek'yaia Wakašan, were taped recorded from the late Chief Simon Walkus Sr. and transcribed and translated by his daughter, Evelyn Windsor nee Walkus. Under the title of Oowekeeno Oral Traditions, they are currently in press at the National Museum of Man, Ottawa. One of the texts relates the encounter of the sons of /nuuwaqawa/ with a being called /bax"bakwālanux/. The latter is attributed the human characteristic of being male (it has a wife and children) and the non-human characteristic of anthropophagy. Searching for more details on /bax"bakwālanux/, we turned, among other things, to the literature in the related Kwakwala language collected and translated by Franz Boas and/or his Indian assistant George Hunt. In it, frequent mention is made of a being called /bax"bakwālanux"siwē/, /bax"bakwālanux"siwē/, which is glossed as "having the quality of eating human flesh at mouth of river (Cannibal-at-North-End-of-the-World)."
"downriver" to "at the north end of the world", but why so is not obvious. "At the river mouth" is just not the same as "downriver". Further, maybe Boas relies on the fact that in some (not all) North Wakashan languages, words referring to "down the river or inlet" and "up the river or inlet" can in fact also be used to refer to "north" and "south", respectively. Nevertheless, the words in question cannot be used to refer specifically to "at the north end of the world" and "at the south end of the world".

2. But let us give Boas the benefit of the doubt and assume that a thorough study of Kwakwala literature would reveal the rationale of interpreting "at the river mouth" as "at the north end of the world". Then one has the problem that the study of Oowekyala Wakashan word structure gives no ground to believe that the literal meaning of Oowekyala /bakwalaluiswa/ is as stated by Boas for the Kwakwala cognate /bakwalalansiwə/ (to summarize the spelling variants in this way). Boas no doubt "subtracted" the word form of /bakwalalansiwə/ from that of /bakwalaluiswa/ and held over a suffix "siw" and a suffix "u". The former suffix indeed means "at the river mouth" in Kwakwala, whereas the latter is a frequently occurring formative of the meaning of which is not definable beyond "to be a ..." in some cases, "to do" in others. But Oowekyala words referring to "at the river mouth" feature a suffix allomorph /səkə/. And although Oowekyala words, like Kwakwala words, can contain an allomorph /siw/, the latter means "through a passage, opening, surface, or obstruction" in Oowekyala.

3. Boas assumes that "nuk" in the Kwakwala word /nak'ulwə/ is the derivate from /nak'ulwə/ "manifestation/materialization of devilfish", and "nuk" in the derivate /nak'ulwə/ "manifestation/materialization of the essence (or the spirit) of devilfish". If its meaning is not "having devilfish", but "manifestation/materialization of devilfish", or perhaps more precisely "manifestation/materialization of the essence (or the spirit) of devilfish", we get an inkling of why people avoided the place called /nak'ulwə/ in the old days, and why it is called Superstition Point on maps. Also take the Oowekyala original of the river name Wannock; according to some it is /waanuk/ and according to others /waanuk/ in initial /wa/ or /waa/ means "river", and rather than "having a river", the whole of the Oowekyala name seems to mean "manifestation/materialization of a river" or perhaps "manifestation/materialization of the essence (or the spirit) of a river". A terse but appropriate gloss could also be "River Spirit".

4. There are more Oowekyala words ending in /siwə/...
5. Finally, Boas appears convinced that initial "bax(u)baw" of the Kwakwala names means "to eat people" or "to eat human flesh". In other words, he assumes that (a) the root "baw", of which "bax(u)baw" no doubt represents the complete reduplication, means "human", and (b) that the complete reduplication more particularly serves to express the eating of the matter denoted by the root "baw". Now, as for the second assumption, it is true that in North Wakashan languages the concept of eating a particular food is expressed by the complete reduplication of the root (or polymorphemic stem) denoting this food. But the problem is that complete reduplication can mean other things as well. At least as far as Oowekyala and Heiltsuk Wakashan are concerned, complete reduplication is in fact primarily a device to indicate that something happens repeatedly or intermittently, in various instances with the additional connotation of "progressively effectively". An example is Oowekyala /bax‘baw’alanusiwa/.

To the transcriber and translator of Oowekyala Oral Traditions, the component /bax‘baw’ala/ is reminiscent of "to assume human form intermittently and progressively effectively". Clearly, in itself this meaning has nothing to do with anthropophagy. But it does confirm Boas' first assumption, namely that we are dealing with derivatives from a root meaning "human". Thus, the literal meaning of Oowekyala /bax‘baw’alanusiwa/, and its Kwakwala counterparts, would seem to be "ever more perfect manifestation of the essence of humanity" or "...of the essence of a person". Similarly, the literal meaning of the Oowekyala name /bax‘baw’aq’alanusiwa/ would be "ever more perfect manifestation of the essence of a raven"; this name derives from a root meaning "to croak" and "raven". Boas, for his part, is committed to connecting this latter name with the eating of ravens. The implausibility of such a connection is an additional argument against Boas' translation for KVlakwala b‘x(u)baw’alanusk’ul and b‘x(u)baw’alanusk’slw’e’. This is not to deny that there is a connection between the names and anthropophagy, but we want to point out that the connection is a cultural one, and not a linguistic one. Thus, the eating of humans could have been the means of a /bax‘baw’alanusiwa/ to the end of reaching ever fuller human form. Ritual enactments of the entity of /bax‘baw’alanusiwa/ may therefore have involved the real or symbolic eating of human flesh. As for the latter, the theme of consuming a particular food to achieve or express union with a supernatural being, is also known in e.g. Christianity.

Another problem we should like to raise, in this connection, is Boas' translation of the Kwakwala term hamsatla (his transcription type; the Oowekyala corinate is otherwise
identical; /hamača/, and will be used henceforth). The
translation "Cannibal dancer" or "Cannibal dance" at best
reflects the cultural datum that a /hamača/ dancer bites
people or eats human flesh really or symbolically, and that
no/she embodies /taxwakalałumuna/. But linguistically
there does not seem to be a clear justification for this
translation. Surely, the word form of /hamača/ fits into
the following paradigm,

/hama/ "to shoot with bow and arrow"
/hamača/ "to try or tend to shoot with bow and arrow; to
be about to shoot with bow and arrow, to prepare
for shooting with bow and arrow"
/huta/ "to leave someone or something, to
divorce"
/hamača/ "to try or tend to...
"hamača/ (?

Thus, logically speaking the literal meaning of /hamača/
could be "to try or tend to eat", "to prepare for eating",
"to be about to eat". But knowledgeable consultants do
not themselves give this meaning for /hamača/. Also, this
meaning has no specific connection with anthropophagy.
Such a connection is needed to justify the translation
"Cannibal dance(r)" linguistically. One can, in fact, only
guess at the literal meaning of /hamača/. Possibly, the
word derives from a root with the same form as the root of
/amača/ "to eat" but a different meaning. The root in point
is /hama/. Which meaning this root could have in the case
of /hamača/ is again a matter of speculation. For instance,
in the light of the /hama/-/hamača/ alternation exhibited by
Coweyala /hunumu/ and Weleltuk /híči/ (both meaning "butter
fly"), the root /hamača/ in /hamača/ could be related, his-
torically, to the root /hí- which occurs in all North
Wakashan languages and has the meanings "weak, hesitant,
insure, reluctant, wavering, precarious". Also, /hí/
in /hamača/ could result from dissimilation of the redu-
plicate of root-initial /hí/, a morphophonemic phenomenon
occurring relatively frequently in Kwakwala and Haisla
Wakashan, and occasionally in Coweyala and Weleltuk
Wakashan. Then, if /hamača/ stems from */hamača/, the
root would be /hama- or /hama- , formally speaking.4 The latter
possibility is the more interesting, as the meaning of /hama-
is "to crave, desire, long for something". Interestingly
also, there is a Kwakwala word /mzìn/ glossed as "Cannibal's
whistle", which could derive from this root /hama>.5 However
this may be, these considerations show that one should be
careful with translations of cosmological and religious
terms by Franz Boas.

Notes:
1 For details on phonemic transcriptions in this article,
see the introduction of Lincoln-Rath 1981.
2 See Lincoln-Rath 1980, p. 132 root no. 575, and p. 380
root no. 2424.
4 This possibility was first suggested by Neville Lincoln.
5 See Lincoln-Rath 1980, p. 72 root no. 147.

References:
Boas, Franz
1935 Kwakiutl Culture as Reflected in Mythology.
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Conjunctive /so?/ in Cowichan

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