

Who is Súnúqaz?: A Salish Quest¹

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0. Introduction. Lillooet traditional cosmology recognizes a supernatural being called Súnúqaz, which manifests itself as a gigantic animal, usually a serpent. A being with an etymologically related name and a similar function is recognized by a number of other Salish communities, viz., Straits, Halkomelem, Squamish and possibly Thompson. This paper serves as a discussion of the various functions of this being in the communities mentioned, as a discussion of the etymological history of the name Súnúqaz, and as an invitation to other Salishists to share with me any further information they may have on this being, including possible information from languages not covered in this paper.

1. Individual languages. In this section we discuss information on the various names and functions of Súnúqaz in the languages mentioned in section 0.

1.1 Lillooet. The being Súnúqaz was first mentioned to me by the late Charles Mack Seymour ("Charlie Mack") of Mount Currie, who described Súnúqaz as a powerful spirit (similar to the type the Lillooet call hi?), which manifests itself as a gigantic animal, usually a serpent. This information was confirmed by other consultants, who also classed it as a kind of hi?, which is generally better known and which mostly inhabits bodies of water. (hi? does not have to manifest itself visibly, but one can still be bothered by it and, for example, vomit after the encounter. However, hi? can also manifest itself as a serpent or as a *čanāz* (bullhead), in which case one has to talk to it. The presence of hi? can be divined when the water turns rough or the loons fly up—for the connection between this type of supernatural being and water fowl see also the section on Straits below.) My information on Súnúqaz was recorded from Mount Currie consultants only. The speakers of the northern dialect (Lillooet, Fountain, Pavilion) seem to have no knowledge of this being.

1.2 Straits. Stern, in his 1934 study of the Lummi, describes a being Sinetlqi in the context of a young man's spiritual training (p. 19):

If the youth sees or hears unusual things he will remain at a lake or stream for days and dive to the very bottom seeking that spirit which will make him a great man in wealth or skill. Deep in the waters is the home of spirits who can transform themselves into diverse shapes. The most important of these spirits is Sinetlqi, the spirit who can adopt varied forms such as that of a serpent, a mallard duck, a short log or a two-headed lizard. He has lizards as slaves on the borders of streams to warn of the coming of intruders and to frighten them away. Cranes also are his slaves, giving alarm to anyone's approach by frightful squawking.

It is necessary for the youth who ventures near the home of Sinetlqi to have observed careful restrictions and to be clean in every way. If he has had sexual intercourse before he makes this visit, he will not survive. As he dives in the water, if he hopes to be successful in reaching the home of the spirit, he must never turn about. For if he sees the spirit and turns in his effort to escape his body twists in

the direction of his turning, breaking his bones and causing his death. If he wishes to leave the place for any reason, he must move backward keeping his eyes set on the spirit until he is out of sight. He then makes further preparations by more rigid training and dives down into the water again at that place, acting as if he feared nothing and were merely going to his own home. When he reaches the home of the spirit, he usually faints from excitement and exhaustion. While he is in the swoon, the spirit speaks to him and grants him the gift he deserves or advises him where to go to seek the spirit suited to his ambitions. He takes whatever instruction, advice or gift the spirit offers and goes forth seeking deeper experience from other spirits. The youth acquiring the friendship of Sinetlqi usually becomes a great medicine man.

On p. 77, Stern adds the following information (using the spelling *sinatlqi*):

One medicine man upon returning to his village after *sinatlqi* had appeared to him as a land otter in a spirit experience, turned some dry clams and fern roots prepared for him by his sister for food, into frogs and snakes, and then restored them.

Suttles (1987:75-76) adds the following description:

Once years ago I was eliciting ethnozoological information from an aged Lummi friend, Julius Charles. I had gone through Dalquest's *Mammals of Washington*, asking about everything from shrews to elk, and when I had finished Julius said something like: "There's another animal you haven't got there. They used to be around here but they've become pretty scarce and the white people have never caught one and put it in a zoo. It had a big body in the middle and two heads, one at each side. It lived in swamps where it swam about. But it could turn into a couple of mallards and fly away. It had three kinds of noises—one was like the laugh of a loon, one like the hoot of a hound, and one like the hissing of a mallard drake. It was a great thing to get so you'd become an Indian doctor."

This "animal" was called a *sʷínəłəy*. Such fierce and powerful things that were seen by men "training" to become "doctors" (in anthropological jargon "questing for shamanistic visions") were *sʷéləqəm*. Grizzly bears and killer whales were also good to get a doctor's power from. But any "animal" might be referred to as a *sʷéləqəm*.

Although the information I recorded from my Lillooet consultants is less complete than the information collected by Stern from the Lummi fifty years earlier, there are remarkable consistencies: aside from the general appearance of the spirit being, there is the notion that it cannot be shied away from once encountered (as my Mount Currie consultants noted, one has "to talk to it"), and there is a connection with water fowl as either manifestations of the spirit or as its guards. The term *sʷéləqəm* used by Suttles is a rather common Coast Salish term for "supernatural being" or "power animal," cf. Halkomelem (Galloway 1980:95) or Squamish (Kuipers 1967:291).

Duff (1952:119) mentions Sinetlqi as "known to at least the Songhees and the Lummi," but he does not mention his source for Songhees.

1.3 Halkomelem. Extensive references to the spirit animal under discussion here are found in a number of treatises on the Halkomelem. For example, Jenness (1955:60) has the following remarks on the "Two-headed Snake" in his description of the faith of Old Pierre, a Katzie Indian.

The man who possessed this guardian spirit could cure a certain form of paralysis, which the Indians attributed to stepping near a two-headed snake. In dancing he smeared his face with charcoal.

Jeness then describes a series of events in which a young man, when duck-hunting, hears an animal quacking like a mallard, shoots it, then finds out that it is a two-headed snake "nearly 20 feet long and as thick as a large log." The man falls into a swoon, twisted in a coil, is found by his people who revive him with the help of certain medicines and a certain bark which they scrape, burn and smear on his face and body, following his semi-conscious instructions which he has received from the snake. Having been cured of his paralysis, the man is now able to help others with the same affliction and he acquires the two-headed snake as his guardian spirit.

Jeness gives the Katzie (Downriver Halkomelem) word for this being as *síʔqəʷ*, obviously a syncopated form of what is *sinetlqi* or *sʔínəʔəy* with the Lummi. The Upriver form, given by Galloway in Wells 1987, is *síʔqəy* or *sí:ʔqəy*, in free variation. Wells 1987:54-55,84-85,156-157 gives various accounts of *síʔqəy*: pp. 54-55 details an encounter between two men and *síʔqəy* (described as "When it comes out of the water, the pond or the lake, just a big round ball. And one head will come out one side of the ball, and the other head will come out the other. And on the back were round, not diamond shape, all round. The body was black, the main body, but this here was red and white, the centre dark."). The appearance of *síʔqəy* is signalled by a big duck rising from a lake where the men are. The duck then goes up in the air followed by a big black ball. The younger of the two men is instructed by the elder not to turn around, lest he will get sick. When the ball has disappeared in the air, the water has risen to where the two men are standing. Both wade back, but feel queasy after they have made it to a higher bank. They chew plugs of smoking tobacco to cure themselves, but to no avail. Both vomit, "And what they threw up was little chunks of stick, what you find in the bottom of a pond. How'd that come in there?" (Consultant: Bob Joe.) Interestingly, the lake is described as being quite shallow and thus normally not suitable for animals to hide themselves.

Dan Milo, another Upriver consultant, recounts a story on pp. 84-85 of a man who encounters a two-headed serpent and is instructed by the latter to chew a certain kind of grass and, when the serpent hollers, to spit it into the serpent's mouth in order to kill it. This the man does (he has to grab the serpent first in order to make it squeal), and he leaves the carcass to rot. When only the bones are left, he burns these and then uses the 'charcoal' that is left of the bones to paint a picture of the serpent over the entrance of his longhouse. When enemies try to enter the building they get the 'fits' and die right there.

A third account of the two-headed serpent is provided by Albert Louie (pp. 156-157), as part of a set of instructions he received from his grandfather on how to behave around ponds and lakes:

And he told me another little pond, "Don't go there—there's a big snake there, a snake there with two heads on." He says, "Don't go there. If you ever see it," he says, "you just twist around like that and you die from it."

WELLS: Yeah, I think Dan Milo told me about this one.

LOUIE: They call it *sí:ʔqəy*. It's got a head on him like that; long mouth; and it got—I see'd a picture. It's got long ears like a

horse, like a horse's ears. It's got a nose, and it's got teeth in it like an alligator, you know.

WELLS: Do you know the story?

LOUIE: Well, I seen it once, but it was not so big, about that size. I was hunting, and I seen the thing way in the deep water. My god, his eyes just like fire. My god, I see that thing. I was shooting ducks, you know, and I passed by. About two hours after, I came back in the same way, and the thing was going about as far as where you are. I could see it went so fast. I seen it. I seen it with my own eyes. It didn't bother me. I didn't get crazy from it. I wasn't looking for the thing, you know. I guess he knows I wasn't.

The above information is of particular interest in that it provides a rare eye-witness account, from a man who is described as "one of Oliver Wells's most valuable informants" (p. 155).

P. 157 of Wells 1987 contains a facsimile of two pages from Wells's *Myths and Legends of the Stawloh Indians* (Wells 1970, not available to me) while p. 158 is a facsimile of Wells's transcription of the tape recording that contains the information repeated in the two pages reprinted on p. 157. These two pages basically confirm details about the appearance and behaviour of *síʔqəy* as recounted above, but add the detail that one can also kill it by pulling out one's hair and blowing the hair at the creature (a variant of the chewed grass method as mentioned in Dan Milo's account above).

Duff 1952:118,119 briefly mentions the two-headed serpent in his account of the Upper Stalo. The description on p. 118 runs as follows:

It comes to the surface of small lakes and shoots a head out each end. Its body is a black sphere about 4 feet in diameter. The heads are round, about 6 inches in diameter, with round ears and red circles on the top. The farther out it sticks its heads, the smaller the central body part gets. It makes a noise like a duck, but much louder. One was seen in *latic*, a little lake on Lihumitson Creek (a tributary of Chilliwack River). If you saw that animal in the water, you daren't turn around, because if you did you'd keep twisting until you were dead.

(Information recorded from Robert Joe, almost certainly the same person as Wells's consultant Bob Joe.) On p. 119, Duff relates the two-headed serpent to the Lummi and Songhees *Sinetlqi* (see also section 1.2), and also to the Nootka Lightning-snake, *Haetitlik*, and the Kwakiutl *Sisiutl* (for the latter see also section 2.3). Duff transcribes the name of the serpent as *síxqi* on p. 118, and as *síxqi* on p. 119, both probable misrecordings of *síʔqəy*. (At the beginning of his career, Duff's ear was apparently not yet attuned to the phonetics of Salish: on p. 117 he writes *sʔéləkəm* with a *k* where more reliable sources have *q*, see section 1.2.)

The Cowichan dialect of Halkomelem has *sínəʔəy*? for the two-headed serpent, as quoted in Kuipers 1967:305 from Elmendorf and Suttles 1960. This form is almost identical to the Squamish form (see next section) and meshes with Kuipers's remark (p. 246) that of the three Halkomelem dialects treated by Elmendorf and Suttles, viz., Cowichan, Musquam and Chilliwack, the first is phonetically closest to Squamish.

1.4 Squamish. Kuipers 1967:230-236 contains an extremely interesting account of the two-headed serpent—called *Sínútaq*ʷ in Squamish—in the form of an original Squamish text followed by an exemplary English translation. A brief summary of the text runs as follows: a man by the name of *Xʷəčtál*, who is given to sloth and squalor, sets out to pursue *Sínútaq*ʷ. The quest takes several years, and finally, after much ritual cleansing, he receives a vision in which *Sínútaq*ʷ instructs him to take four pieces of pitch [probably four pieces of pitchwood - JvE] and pierce each head of the serpent with two pieces. This he does, then he faints, falls into the water, and when he comes to he finds himself on higher ground because the water has risen [cf. Bob Joe's account in 1.3 for the rising of the water]. *Xʷəčtál* waits until *Sínútaq*ʷ has decayed, then picks out a bone that the serpent has told him about and which he could use against enemies and for finding food. When returning to his village he brandishes the bone at those who inhabit the villages he passes through, striking them all with convulsions, only to revive them again by touching them with the same bone. He does the same when he has reached his own village and revives all the people, except for his wife, who has remarried in his absence, and her husband.

Interestingly, the name *Sínútaq*ʷ combines with feminine articles in the Squamish text, except for sentence (7), where the 'plain' (non-feminine) article *ta* is used, rather than expected *ta*, the feminine article. Possibly we have a printing error here, or a slip of the tongue by Kuipers's consultant, Louis Miranda (which would be unusual for this excellent speaker and teacher of Squamish). Kuipers correctly refers to *Sínútaq*ʷ as "she" and "her" throughout his translation.

As Kuipers remarks on p. 219, there is a fuller English version of this story in Hill-Tout 1900 (reprinted in Maud 1978[II]:73-76). Similar accounts are given in Wells 1987:144-145, 183-184 (in the latter case as a brief appendix, omitting many details, to another story). Variants of these last two accounts, from the same consultants, are also given in Wells 1966 (unpaginated).

1.5 Thompson. The Thompson (*Ntākápmx*) do not seem to have a place for the two-headed serpent in their mythology, although Teit 1912:269 has a story in which a young man has a vision in which he is instructed to go to Spuzzum Creek and fire arrows across the stream. Each arrow gets stuck on the last one he has shot, thus forming a line. When he collects the arrows, he finds that the first one has killed a large snake by striking it between the eyes. Although he had been a poor marksman before, he now becomes an excellent hunter, never missing a shot. This story has the now familiar motif of obtaining 'power' from a giant snake, but I doubt whether a connection between this being and the two-headed serpent is valid. Also, this story incorporates an element usually connected with ascension into the sky-world, namely the forming of a bridge of arrows.

2. Conclusions. In this section we draw a number of conclusions about the spirit-serpent in Salish mythology with regard to its function and appearance (2.1), the etymology of its names in various languages (2.2), and its distribution in and possibly beyond Salish (2.3).

2.1 Function and appearance. Although the details in the various accounts of the spirit-serpent vary, there are some recurring themes. These include: (1) the general appearance in the form of a large animal, usually a snake and in that case quite often a two-headed snake; (2) association with water fowl; (3) injunction against shying away from the serpent once encountered (this is

of course a general instruction to those who seek encounters with supernatural beings); (4) rising of water after the encounter; (5) the power to 'twist' people into deadly convulsions: the serpent will either do this to those who shy away from it, as in the Lummi account in 1.2, or—with non-lethal consequences—to those who seek its power, as in Jenness's account in 1.3; the same power can be acquired by those who successfully seek the serpent's help, together with the power to undo the twisting, as in the Squamish account.

2.2 Etymology. It is obvious that the various terms for the spirit-serpent are closely related. As we have seen above, the Mainland Halkomelem form (*sítkəw* with variants) is a syncopated form of what can be tentatively reconstructed as *sinútaq* (with a problematic second vowel, cf. the Squamish and Cowichan forms). The Lillooet form, *Sínútaq*ʷ, has *ʷ* developed out of *ʷ* as part of a well-known sound-shift that affected both Lillooet and Thompson (Thompson 1979:705). Our current state of knowledge of historical-comparative Salish does not allow us to state whether *Sínútaq*ʷ represents an old borrowing from Coast Salish into Lillooet, or whether it was always part of a shared Coast Salish/Lillooet lexical inheritance.² The glottalization status of the final consonant is somewhat problematic, since the various transcriptions and dialects disagree on this point, but it has no bearing on the over-all analysis of the word. (For the doubtful status of glottalized sonorants as members of the Proto-Salish stock of phonemes see Thompson 1979:715.) The sequence *-utqəw* or *-ətkəw* is obviously related to a rather common Coast Salish word for snake: *ʷstqəw* in Squamish (Kuipers 1967:305, 388), *ʷstqəw* in Cowichan (Kuipers 1967:388), *ʷstqəw* in Upriver Halkomelem (Galloway 1980:72), *sʷstqəw*, *sʷstqəw* in Samish (Galloway 1990:69), and *ʷstqəw* in Sechelt (Timms 1977:9).³ The first part of our reconstructed form, *sin-* (sun- in Lillooet, *sʷin-* in Suttles's Lummi form) is more problematic. A connection with the Proto-Salish root for 'to turn, spin,' reconstructed as *sal* in Kuipers 1970:60, is not impossible, especially if one thinks of the 'twisting' effect that the serpent or its power can have, but one is still stuck with a troublesome vocalism and a rather unusual change *l* → *n* (while *n* → *l* is more common, see Thompson 1979:706). A connection with the Proto-Salish root for 'two,' *ʷəsál(-aʔ)* in Kuipers 1970:70, is not a priori excluded either, but still contains its own complications (aside from the fact that *sal* and *ʷəsál(-aʔ)* are probably related, cf. English 'twine' and 'two'). Further research is needed in this area.

2.3 Distribution. Since most information on the two-headed serpent is found in literature on the contiguous Squamish-Halkomelem-Straits area, and since the word is at least partially analyzable in these languages through a connection with the term for "snake," it is probable that both the belief and the term (tentatively reconstructed as *sinútaq*) originated in this area, and then spread to the Lower Lillooet area, i.e., Mount Currie and more southern settlements. (For old contacts between the Lower Lillooet and the Coast Salish, see Teit 1906:200, 231.) The status of the serpent-complex in the Thompson culture is dubious, as we have seen in 1.5, but if the Thompson did have beliefs about the serpent, a coastal origin seems likely.⁴

I have no information on the serpent in other Salish cultures. A belief in this creature may exist in these cultures, although Thom Hess for one informs me that he has collected no information on this being from the Lushootseed. Kinkade (1991:291) lists *ʷactánud*ʷa as a "mythological snake" for Upper Chehalis, a compound of *ʷúd*ʷa "snake (Garter snake spp.);" and *Vtan* "to go, pass by," but he gives no further information on the function of this be-

ing in the Upper Chehalis belief system.⁵

Outside Salish, but adjacent to it, there is the Wakashan cultural and linguistic area. As we have seen above (section 1.3), Duff 1952:119 relates the Halkomelem two-headed serpent to the Nootka lightning snake, Haeitlik, and the Kwakiutl Sisiutl.⁶ The latter shows a striking resemblance to the Salish seroent, as evinced in the following description: "The Sisiutl had the power to assume many shapes; to see it or to touch it meant death, except to those who had its help" (Inverarity 1950, ill. nr. 14; see this illustration and nr. 78 for useful examples of traditional Kwakiutl depictions of Sisiutl). Rath (p.c.) suggests a possible connection between Sisiutl (Kwakwala *sisyuʔ*, *sisyuʔ*, and *sisyuʔt*, cf. Kwakwala *svt-* "snake, to snake along") and Kwakwala *syt-* "to split lengthwise (e.g. a falling tree):" the connection with splitting would reflect the depiction of Sisiutl in traditional art (see references to Inverarity above; for the Kwakwala lexical items see Lincoln and Rath 1980:170). It seems tempting to interpret *Sinuʔqay* as an introduction from Wakashan mythology into Coast Salish mythology, considering the strong cultural influence of Wakashan on the Coast Salish. However, the fact that the Coast Salish languages have a partly analyzable term for the spirit-serpent, rather than a Wakashan loan, argues against this interpretation. It seems more likely to me that *Sinuʔqay* is originally Salish, but possibly adapted some characteristics from Sisiutl. Interestingly, the Bella Coola (Nuxalk) recognize Sisiutl, but obviously as a different being from *Sinuʔqay* which does not seem to occur in their mythology (for an account of Bella Coola Sisiutl see Davis and Saunders 1980:94).

3. The wider perspective. Like all Native cosmologies, Salish cosmology is rich and complex, encompassing a large set of Creation stories and religious instruction on how to function well within one's natural environment. So-called supernatural beings are an integral part of this cosmology, although one should add immediately that from a Native point of view "natural" and "supernatural" cannot be strictly separated in that "natural" phenomena (animals, humans, geographical features, weather, etc.) have their "supernatural" side as well. (They may function in vision quests, be endowed with special powers and subject to special injunctions). Also, beings that from a non-Native point of view would be classed as wholly mythical are from a Native point of view often seen as just as tangible as (although more difficult to encounter than) humans or such commonly known animals as bear, trout, beaver, etc. Julius Charles's observations in Suttles 1987 (see section 1.2) are particularly instructive in this respect. No treatise of Salish cosmology can be complete without a description of those beings that defy Western Linnaean classifications but are wholly accounted for within the Native world view, such as *Sinuʔqay*. Suttles's 1987 treatise on the Sasquatch is an excellent start. The present paper aims at making a further contribution in this area.

NOTES

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2. However, as is mentioned in 2.3, borrowing seems more likely.

3. A quick glance at some Salish languages reveals that there is a lot of inconsistency in names for "snake" outside the *ʔšʔqay* area: Lillooet has *naʔʔit*, Shuswap *paʔʔse* (Kuipers 1974:145), Spokane *titiš-úleʔxʔ* (Carlson and Flett 1989:266), Colville-Okanagan *xm-xmn-aws-an*, *kʔxʔ-kʔxʔap* (Mattina 1987:340), Coeur d'Alene *atdícenc* (Reichard 1939:104, spelling adjusted). Outside Interior Salish we have Lushootseed *báčac* (northern) and *báčac* (southern, Hess 1976:22) and Upper Chehalis *ʔúʔa* (Kinkade 1991:291, see also main text, 2.3). Kuipers (1967:388) refers under *ʔšʔqay* also to *ʔlaʔv* (p. 336) which is described as "(mythological ?) animal which moved along by rolling itself sideways along the hills" (according to one consultant, "If one crossed its path, one got sick with crippled, swollen feet. They are said to have been eaten by pigs when these were brought in by the white man"). Similarly, Galloway 1979:25 lists Upper Halkomelem *ʔeləqé:v*, described as "slow-worm ('a slow-moving foot-long snake') (actually a blind, legless lizard, *Anguis fragilis*)," with the added information "Someone related or close to you will die soon after you see it unless you throw it over your shoulder and tell it to go to someone else and you name them."

4. Those to whom *Sinuʔqay* is not merely an object of anthropological interest, but part of their traditional belief system, may want to state that it is not so much the belief, but *Sinuʔqay* itself who manifested itself first on the Coast, and that the knowledge of how to pursue this being then spread from a central area.

5. Kinkade (p.c.) reminded me that there is also Opopogo (in Okanagan Lake), who probably has its origin in the Okanagan cosmology, but nowadays functions more predominantly in the tourist-attraction strategies of the local Chamber of Commerce.

6. The labels "Nootka" and "Kwakiutl" are now rejected by the Native groups formerly designated with these names. They are used here solely because the reference quoted uses these labels.

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