

## Súnulqaz': The quest continues

Jan P. van Eijk  
First Nations University of Canada

This paper provides some information on the two-headed serpent in Salish and other Northwest cultures. As such, it adds to the information given in two earlier studies.

### 1 Introduction

In van Eijk (1992) and (2001) I explore the cultural and linguistic range of the two-headed serpent (*súnulqaz'* in Lillooet) throughout Salish territory, with some additional references to the two-headed serpent in Wakashan cosmology. In the present paper, I present some further information on this being, resulting from more or less accidental encounters with descriptions in a variety of sources. As these sources show, and as was to be expected, due to the rather intensive convergence of various cultures on the northwest coast, the two-headed serpent is also found in cosmologies other than Salish or Wakashan, but within the general northwest coast cultural area.

My findings are presented in section 2. Conclusions are given in section 3.

### 2 Recent findings

Compton et al. (1993) contains references to the two-headed serpent in Shuswap (Secwépemc) ethnoherpetology. As I have not been able to obtain a copy of this article so far, I cannot comment on its contents, although I can only expect the contents to be informative, judging by the authors' expertise in Salish ethnolinguistics.

Johnson (1961:75-86) consists of a text named "The Sea-Serpent," which is purportedly a Squamish legend told to Johnson by Chief Joe Capilano. This story centers around an extremely greedy individual who is turned into a two-headed snake by Sagalie Tyee (God) as punishment for his unwillingness to share his wealth. He is then killed by a young brave named Tenas Tyee (Little Chief). Certain elements of the story, such as the young man's instruction to his mother to keep his bed clean in his absence, so he may be clean while on his killing expedition, are traditional, but the transformation of the greedy individual does not mesh with other accounts of the two-headed serpent, and on the whole this story makes the impression of being some kind of pastiche.

Barker's (1963) Klamath dictionary lists *may* for 'two-headed snake' (p. 235) and comments: "This serpent is said to have a head on either end and to be capable of moving in either direction. Also called *biblant n'os gitk* "having-

a-head-on-both-ends” and *laban'os gitk* “having-two-heads.”<sup>1</sup> The author also mentions that *may* is homophonous with the word for ‘tule’ (*Scirpus validus*), but gives no information as to whether the most prominent aspect of the two-headed serpent in Salish cosmology, viz., its ability to “twist” people, also applies to *may*.

Powell and Jensen (1976:24), in their description of the Quileute, have a picture of a wood carving of a two-headed lizard or salamander, named *t'abale*, equipped with an ear-like appendage to each head, a set of small feet behind each head, and described as a “vicious guardian spirit.” No further details of its function within traditional Quileute religion and culture are given.

A Google search for any combination of ‘two-headed,’ ‘double-headed,’ ‘snake’ and ‘serpent’ mainly yields references to non-cryptozoological snakes with two heads at one side of their body, which is of course not what we are interested in here. Of more interest is a depiction of a true double-headed snake (with a head on the opposite sides of its body), apparently Aztec, executed in wood, with a mosaic of turquoise and shell, and now in the British Museum, on <http://www.civilization.ca/civil/mmp15engl.html>. Without further information on its religious significance (especially whether or not it would “twist” people) we can not say anything about its possible relevance for the study of the two-headed snake in the northwest cultural area. The same holds for a bronze two-headed serpent symbolizing the Bamum kingdom of Cameroon, and featured on <http://www.nhm.org/africa/tour/cameroon/014.htm>. True aficionados of the two-headed serpent may want to buy the two-headed serpent pool toy that is offered for \$19.99 on <http://www.saveonpoolsupplies.com>, although not everyone may be amused by this unintentional trivialization of what is a very important spirit animal within traditional Northwest cosmology.

A search of wikipedia did not yield any useful results.

## 2 Conclusions

As the preceding section makes clear, I have only been able to find a few additions to my original observations on the two-headed serpent. I am certain that there is more information available, and I am looking forward to receiving comments of this article that may add to the existing knowledge on this fascinating creature.

## References

- Barker, Muhammad A. R. 1963. *Klamath Dictionary*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Compton, Brian D., Dwight Gardiner, William A. Arnouse, and Joe Michel. 1993. ‘Black Lizards and Double-Headed Snakes: Some Aspects of

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<sup>1</sup> In Barker’s transcription, the glottalization mark appears directly above the /n/, rather than slightly to the right of it.

Secwépemc Ethnoherpetology.' MS.

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- Powell, Jay, and Vicky Jensen. 1976. *Quileute: An Introduction to the Indians of La Push*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.
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jvaneijk@firstnationsuniversity.ca