

Reviving an Ancient Whaling Tradition in the Face of Discrimination: Cultural Courage by the Makah Tribe

“Who are the Makah? Whalers. That’s the first word out of the mouth.” — Greig Arnold, Makah Carver

On May 17th, 1999, a thirty-foot gray whale, a *sih-xwah-wiX*, gave its life to feed the Makah people of Neah Bay, Washington. Whaling has been important to Makah culture for a long time. The Makah honor whales and believe that during a hunt the whale gives itself up if the people have done the proper prayers, rituals, and come with respect. Whaling has long been an inspiration for tribal songs as well as art designs used on basketry and other objects. Excavations from Ozette, a village that was occupied by Makah people until 1750, revealed whale bones and harpoon barbs and archaeologically confirmed that Makah ancestors hunted whales. However, in 1999, the Makah had not hunted a whale for over 70 years. Many people supported the revitalization of this ancient act. However, others strongly opposed the hunt. The whale hunt of 1999 was an act of great civic courage by the whalers and the entire Makah community and it did not come without risks.

In the 1855 treaty in which the Makah ceded thousands of acres of land to the U.S. government, the tribe explicitly kept its right to whale. However, the Makah could not hunt gray whales when gray whales went on the endangered species list as a result of commercial whaling practices. When the gray whales' numbers rebounded and they were taken off the list, the Makah wanted to resume whaling. The tribe sent a proposal to the federal government, stating that “reestablishing a ceremonial and subsistence hunt would be a catalyst which would allow us to instill in our young people the traditional values that have held our people together over the centuries. In addition, whale oil, meat, and blubber would be a welcome addition to our diet”

(Makah Indian Tribe Whaling Proposal). This was approved and the Makah moved to gain consent from the International Whaling Commission. They won this as well, making hunting whales legal under both domestic and international law. The only change from past hunting practices would be the use of a rifle in addition to the traditional hunting harpoon. In the past, when a whale was harpooned it would often swim for days, pulling the whalers along with it, until it died. However, it was decided that if and when a whale was harpooned, a rifle would be used to kill the whale as quickly and humanely as possible.

The revitalization of the whale hunt was a choice made by the entire Makah community. However, there were many people who were key to this revitalization, such as the eight whalers. Among the eight men chosen was Theron Parker, who was chosen to be the harpooner. The whalers underwent months of training, rituals, and prayer to spiritually and physically prepare for the hunt. The rituals they followed are sacred and include isolation, bathing in cold waters and spiritual cleansing. This is necessary as the hunting of a whale is not just a physical, but also a spiritual act. During this time period the president of the Makah Whaling Commission, Keith Johnson, said, "We are undergoing a process of mental and physical toughening now. I feel the cultural connection of whaling in my blood... We are willing to risk our lives..." (Coté, pp. 136).

The whale hunt of 1999 came with risks that Makah ancestors never faced. While many people were in support of the decision to revive whaling practices, others were highly disrespectful to the Makah people and culture. The whalers received death threats and obscene phone calls. Many animal rights activists were against the decision, and tried to stop the whalers from hunting by steering their boats around the whalers' boat during the hunt, yelling obscenities. There was a candlelight vigil outside the Seattle Federal Building on the day that the whale was killed--in which people held protest signs reading "Save the whales, kill a Makah." The Makah

tribe tried to make people understand that this was an important cultural act for their community, but ultimately were forced to accept that some people didn't want to recognize their culture and therefore disagreed with the hunt. At the end of the day the community chose to take the risks involved with whaling in order to exercise their rights.

After months of preparation, the whalers set out to hunt on May 10th, 1999. They were joined on the water by protest boats, making it harder and more dangerous for them to complete their task. They were unsuccessful that day and again on May 15th. On May 17th, the whalers knew the day had come. The whalers were as spiritually ready as they could be. They were going to catch a whale. Early in the morning, before any protest boats appeared, the whalers paddled out in their canoe, the *Hummingbird*, carved from a single cedar log. While the whaling crew was on the hunt, a group of young girls from Neah Bay laid still, were silent, and prayed, following the traditional roles of young women during a whale hunt. Out on the water, the whalers crossed paths with a whale. Theron Parker went to the front of the canoe and stood there, bracing himself and watching, harpoon in hand. When the gray whale swam in front of the boat he threw the harpoon, hitting the whale. The crew then paddled backwards right away. The whale lifted her tail and then slapped it on the surface of the ocean, creating large, rolling waves. Then she began to sink. A motorized boat full of Makah people tried to get close enough to shoot the whale to end its suffering, but a protestor boat blocked its path. It finally got close enough and someone on board was able to shoot the whale. Right after this, when they understood that the whale was dead, the whalers set down their paddles and began to pray. They were extremely happy but also had sadness in their hearts. Theron said, "You feel sad. You have to. You've taken a pretty big life out there." A female gray whale, a *sih-xwah-wiX*, had responded to the prayers and spiritual request of the Makah people, and had given her life to feed the tribe. With

pride and respect in their hearts, the whalers headed back to the community with the whale in tow.

The beach was filled with people as the whalers came into view. When those on shore saw the whale, everyone began to cheer. The Makah people played drums and sang songs to show the whale respect. When the whalers arrived and the whale was settled on the sand, Theron raised his hand above him and sprinkled the whale with eagle feathers. The whale was then cut up and shared among tribal members. There was magic and celebration in the air. Many people ate the prized food of whale blubber for the first time. A child was quoted in the Seattle Times, saying, "I've heard so many stories about this from my grandpa. Now I finally know what he meant." Some of the whale was saved for the potlatch which was held the following the weekend and had over 3,000 people in attendance. The potlatch was filled with celebration and stories about whaling culture. One Makah member said, "the whale's spirit is with us, among us....it is happy" (Coté pp. 140).

Courage is defined as "the quality of mind or spirit that enables a person to face difficulty, danger, pain, without fear" (Dictionary.com). Civic courage, then, is this "quality of spirit" displayed by a group or community. The whale hunt of 1999 was an act of civic courage because the Makah tribe took the strength to stand up for and revitalize its culture. It takes an enormous amount of time and energy for the whalers and the entire community to properly prepare for a whale hunt. Additionally, the very hunting of the whale is an act that requires a great amount of bravery by the whalers. Whale hunting is not one without its risks, and whalers have died in the past. This time, the community also courageously stood up to protestors and attempted to explain their culture and reasons for reviving the whaling tradition. The whalers showed an incredible amount of bravery and skill in order to catch a whale while avoiding

protest boats and ignoring obscene comments meant to break their concentration.

I spent two weeks on the Makah Reservation during a year-long project with the University of Washington's "The Neah Bay Project." Myself and five other UW students worked with Neah Bay Elementary's 5th grade classroom during these two weeks, which culminated in a documentary about the students' lives and culture. During my time in Neah Bay, I heard stories of the whale hunt of 1999. It was clear what a wonderful impact this event had on the people of Neah Bay. When people spoke of it their faces were full of joy. The stories of the whale hunt touched my heart in a way that is difficult to explain. It fills me with happiness that I got to understand this event directly from the mouths of people living in Neah Bay. I find it incredibly beautiful that so much honor and preparation went into the hunt, so much so that a gray whale gave itself to sustain the people and ancient culture of Neah Bay.

The whale hunt of 1999 was an important step for indigenous people across the U.S. There are many tribes in the U.S. whose treaty rights are being violated. Therefore, any act of cultural revitalization such as the whale hunt is important not just for the Makah, but for indigenous groups all over the U.S. The Makah tribe took a stand and courageously exercised their legal rights despite the many risks involved. For the first time in 70 years, the Makah were able to practice ancient cultural rituals that were passed down from their ancestors. As predicted, the whale hunt resulted in enormous benefits for the Makah community. For example, after the hunt attendance at Makah language classes grew enormously, and young children especially began speaking their language more frequently. The whale hunt was an important act for many and will be remembered for a long time to come. However, today the Makah are struggling with their right to whale. Although the hunt of 1999 was legal, the laws were changed and the Makah have not been legally allowed to hunt gray whales despite what is stated in their treaty. Many

people in the tribe are currently attempting to fight, once again, for the right to whale.

The revitalization of the whale hunt by the Makah community inspires me to follow the knowledge of my own culture. The people of Neah Bay have demonstrated to everyone in Washington State that even when opposition is present, and acting in ways that may be offensive and inappropriate, people can still persevere and follow the sacred knowledge of their ancestors. I think of how proud the young men in the whaling boat felt to be chosen, how proud each member of Neah Bay was to finally be able to sing whaling songs, and my heart fills with a powerful joy. In addition to practicing an ancient whaling tradition, this was an act fighting the colonialism that indigenous people across the U.S. have endured since European contact. This same culture has oppressed women, people of color, and many others in our country. By standing in solidarity with each other we can rise up and overcome this oppression together. The Makah community has taken important steps for indigenous rights in our country and around the world. The whale hunt of 1999 inspires me to follow my heart and stand up against oppressive forces that exist in our society today.

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