

# THE HISTORICAL AND MUSICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF NORTHWEST COAST INDIAN HÁMÁČA SONGS

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## ABSTRACT/RESUME

The author presents a review of *hámáča* songs of the Northwest Coast. He suggests, on the basis of historical evidence of borrowing among different cultural groups, that the 19th century *hámáča* ceremony was a form of revitalization ritual equivalent to that of the ghost dance of the northern plains.

L'auteur présente un examen des chansons d'*hámáča* de la côte Nord-Ouest. Se basant sur l'évidence historique de l'emprunt parmi des groupes culturels différents, il suggère que la cérémonie *hámáča* du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle était une forme de rituel de renforcement de la vitalité qui était équivalent au rituel de la danse de fantôme des plaines du nord.

## Introduction

The diffusion of songs and dances from the Bella Bella-Rivers Inlet territories (see Figure 1) during the nineteenth century constitutes one of the most interesting chapters in the history of Northwest Coast Indian music. Songs from the Bella Bella and Rivers Inlet people, who are speakers of the Heiltsuk and Oowekyala dialects of the upper north Wakashan language family, were diffused as far north as southwestern Alaska and as far south as northwestern Washington. The most prestigious and musically distinctive of these diffused song types was the *hámáča*.<sup>1</sup>

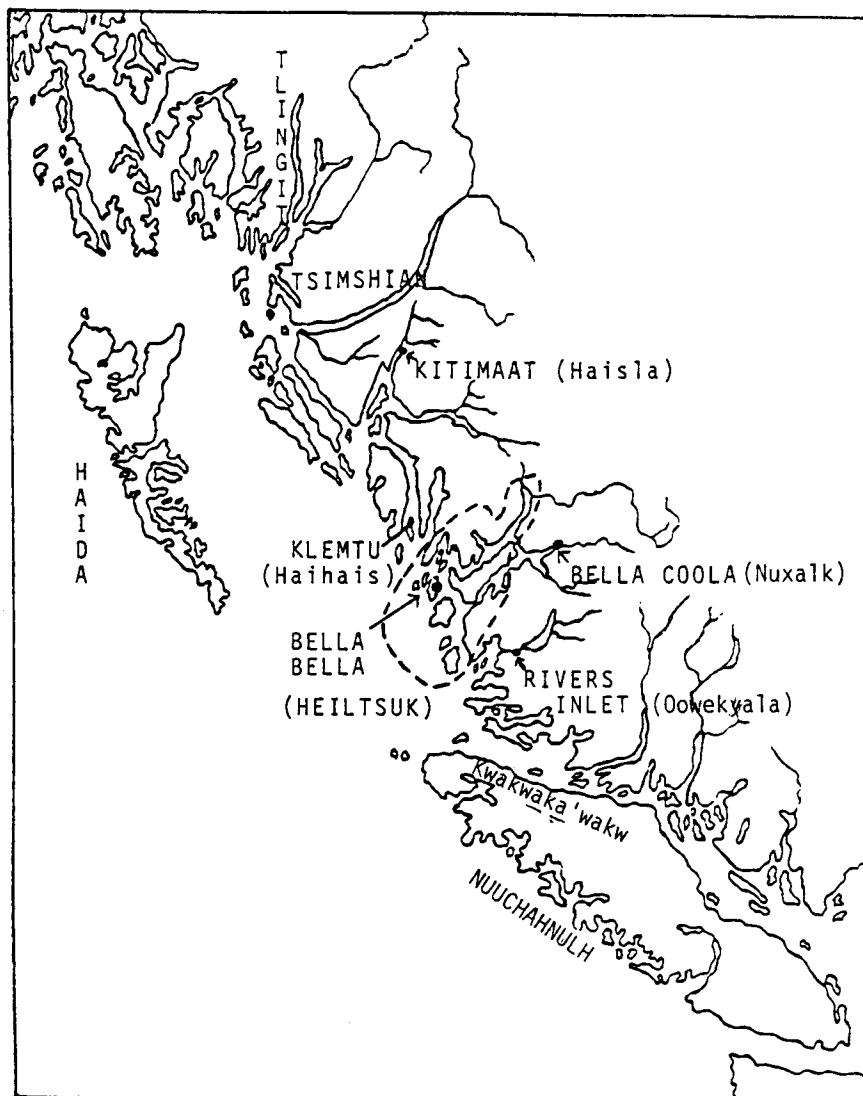
The exact meaning of the word *hámáča* is still a matter of conjecture. The term stems from the Heiltsuk-Oowekyala language where it could mean "trying to eat" or "preparing to eat"; the late Beatrice Brown, from Wágísla (Bella Bella), has also suggested the translation "always biting". Because of the connection to the idea of eating, and because the *hámáča* dancer has the urge to devour human flesh, ethnographers such as Franz Boas and Edward Curtis translated the term as Cannibal. While the latter term may have some heuristic value, it certainly cannot be justified in linguistic terms (see Hilton and Rath, 1982).

Adding further complexity to the nomenclature surrounding the *hámáča* ritual is the fact that among the Bella Bella, Rivers Inlet, Haihais, and Haisla, the term *hámáča* was secondary in importance to the term *tanis*. The latter term, the meaning of which is still unclear, was used to refer to the active or possessed *hámáča* dances. Because most of the *hámáča* complex is today found among the Kwakwaka'wakw (see Figure 1), the term *hámáča* is the most widely employed.

## The Ceremonial Context Of *Hámáča* Song Style

Speaking of pre-contact practices in the ethnographic present, the *hámáča* song style may be said to dominate one of two series of ranked dance performances undertaken by the Bella Bella or Heiltsuk (a term meaning "those who speak sensibly") Indians during their winter ceremonial season. It is used to accompany the highest ranking dances of the '*Cáiqá* series. The term '*Cáiqá*, translated by Drucker as shaman (1940:208), may be understood as meaning "to impersonate the supernatural". '*Cáiqá* dances were performed from approximately the autumnal equinox to mid-winter; associated with dark costuming and masks, these dances were in binary opposition to the dances held from mid-winter to spring, the *Dhúláxa* dances. The latter were associated with light coloured costuming and white eagle down. Performed only by the highest ranking chiefs of each Heiltsuk tribal subdivision, the *hámáča* involves the abduction of an initiate

FIGURE 1



by a supernatural being. In the origin myths of the ritual, initiates are taken away to the abode of a man-eating supernatural entity known as *Báxvbakválánusiwa*. Franz Boas, guided by his Kwakwaka-speaking consultants, translated the name of this supernatural being as "Cannibal-at-the-north-end-of-the-world". In this translation we encounter the same kinds of problems that surround the terms *hámáča* and *tanis*. Clearly there were exoteric and esoteric levels of understanding in connection with these ritual terms. When the term *Báxvbakválánusiwa* is analyzed by contemporary linguistic consultants who understand the esoteric tradition, for example, we receive the meaning "ever more perfect manifestations of the essence of humanity", or, "the culmination of mankind through wisdom". These translations give some ideas of the philosophical complexity that has often been overlooked in examining the winter ceremonies of the coastal peoples.

After returning from his sojourn in the realm of the supernatural being known as *Báxvbakválánusiwa*, the *hámáča* initiate must be ritually purified as he has the desire to bite those near him and eat dirt. Songs are sung to lure the *hámáča*, to tame him, and to accompany his subsequent dancing. The dancer dances on four consecutive days inside the big house.<sup>2</sup> When he dances he makes four circuits of the central fire and stops in each of the four corners of the big house to acknowledge the four directions or four corners of the world. He has two handlers or baby-sitters with him and six men shake rattles for him.

When he is first lured from the woods, the initiate is naked and crawls. Gradually, as he is pacified and tamed, he begins to dance in an upright manner and he is given vestments. During the final stages of his dancing, the initiate dances upright and wears masks, to show what he has been given in the other world. These masks have moveable beaks that are opened and closed in time to ostinato patterns sounded by the percussion.

Additional orchestration is provided by whistles, which are sounded outside of the big house. *Hámáča* whistles, capable of producing as many as five discrete pitches, produce effects that are imitative of the many open mouths on *Báxvbakválánusiwa*'s body that sound as he flies through the air. These whistles do not duplicate the song's melodies.

### *Hámáča* Songs

*Hámáča* songs are not sung by the dancers but by a chorus that sits adjacent to the dance area. The chorus sits beside a log drum that is often carved in the shape of an overturned canoe. Each singer has a wooden baton for keeping time. A rectangular-shaped box drum, which may be

suspended from the ceiling of the big house, is beaten in time to the songs with the fist. The ensemble may also include a frame drum.

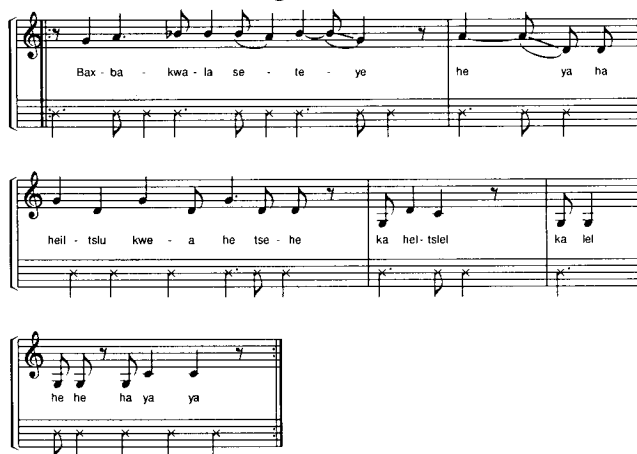
*Hámáča* songs are strophic in terms of overall formal organization. Strophes are made up of verses and choruses. Heiltsuk *hámáča* songs tend to begin with verses that are next followed by choruses of vocables based ostensibly on the word *hámáča*. The presence of these distinctive vocables, usually *ha*, *ma*, and *mai* (sometimes pronounced *ho*, *mo*, *moi*), is a hallmark of *hámáča* song style.

*Hámáča* songs primarily feature conjunct melodic motion and they tend to be restricted in range. Heiltsuk *hámáča* songs, for example, have an average range of 8 semitones.<sup>3</sup> Although often pentatonic in terms of scale, these songs are rarely anhemitonic pentatonic. Like Cry (or mourning songs), *hámáča* songs make frequent use of the interval of a semitone.

The most distinctive musical feature of *hámáča* song style is the ostinato patterning sounded by the instrumental accompaniment and, as mentioned above, at times by the masks. These ostinato patterns are so fundamental to the style that they also serve to integrate the song's melodic rhythms.

The basic *hámáča* ostinato pattern is additive, with the following pattern of eight notes: 1 + 2 + 3; the pattern may also be grouped as 3 + 1 + 2. This basic pattern, found in the majority of *hámáča* songs, is often associated with a longer form that often serves as a closing pattern. This longer pattern takes the form: 1 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 3 or 3 + 1 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2.

Figure 2



Both forms of the ostinato pattern are evident in Figure 2, a fragment of one of the late Mungo Martin's Heiltsuk-derived *hámáča* songs. This section of the song includes both meaningful text, the first part of *Báxvbakválánusiwa* and perhaps the word Heiltsuk, as well as vocables. The syncopation found between the song's melodic rhythms and the longer form of the ostinato pattern is typical of *hámáča* style.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 3 illustrates how the two most important diagnostic features of *hámáča* song style, namely the ostinato patterns and the *hámáča* vocables, may be found in association. This example is the chorus of a Kwakwaka'wakw Woman's dance song sung by Tom Willie. Only the short form of the ostinato pattern is employed in this chorus; the final measure of the chorus illustrates how the ostinato pattern is often used to articulate structural boundaries.

**Figure 3**

Ha ma mai ha mai ha mai ho moi

ho moi moi ho moi ho moi

In order to fully appreciate the uniqueness of *hámáča* song style, one must understand it in relation to other ceremonial song style. As a thorough account of these differences is available for scrutiny (Kolstee, 1988) I will not detail all of them in this paper. However, considering only vocables and rhythm, it is clear that *hámáča* style stands apart from ceremonial song style as a whole. While the vocable *ha* is the most commonly used vocable in the ceremonial repertoire, it is only used in association with the syllable *ma* or *mai* within the *hámáča* repertoire. Outside of the latter, the syllable *ha* occurs with the syllables *ya*, *la*, *hi*, *yu*, and *ki*. Furthermore, these syllables are found in association across song type boundaries within the remainder of the ceremonial song repertoire.

But it is primarily in the area of rhythm that the *hámáča* style is truly innovative and original. Most ceremonial song types have what I have termed a continuous type drum accompaniment; that is, one made up of evenly spaced beats. Other kinds of accompaniments include tremolo, triple time

ostinato patterns such as  $\downarrow \downarrow \downarrow$ , and accompaniments that may be synchronized with a song's melodic rhythms. While these accompaniment patterns are at times in a syncopated relationship with a song's melodic rhythms, none of them feature the complexity of the contrapuntal relationships found between the *hámáca* ostinato patterns and their melody lines. Clearly, because they symbolized the highest ranking chiefs and the highest ranking supernatural being, these songs were given exclusive stylistic characteristics.

### Historical Considerations

While much of the paraphernalia and other aspects of the *hámáca* ritual, including origin myths, are essentially modifications of pre-existing ritual, this is not necessarily the case with regard to *hámáca* musical style. As a result of its musical originality, the song style was often sought out for its intrinsic musicality. Drucker, for example, notes that the Nuuchahnulh were only interested in acquiring *hámáca* songs and not other aspects of the ritual (1940:187).

During a search for possible musical antecedents of *hámáca* song style within the Heiltsuk song repertoire, I was able to show some tentative relationships between *hámáca* style and the style of 'Wúlála Raven songs. In terms of vocables, there are interesting similarities between *hámáca* vocables and the vocables once used in the Dog-Eater ritual, namely, *homa* and *hom* (Garfield, 1939:307-308).

Because the Haida and Tsimshian acknowledge having borrowed their Dog-Eater ceremonies from the Heiltsuk, and as Dog-Eater ritual was being replaced by the *hámáca* ritual during the nineteenth century, it is possible that the *hámáca* represents an intensified form of the older Dog-Eater ritual. In contrast to Dog-Eater initiates, who ate dogs as a result of their being inspired by the Wolf Spirit, *hámáca* initiates attempted to eat human beings because of their having been inspired by *Báxvbakválánusiwa*.

Why would such a dramatic transformation of the Dog-Eater ritual take place? I would submit that it may have been due to the dramatic consequences of contact with Europeans. The epidemics of the early nineteenth century had disastrous effects on the population levels of all Northwest Coast Indian groups, eventually reducing them to at least one-third of their pre-contact levels. It is within this historical context that I believe we might begin to understand the significance of *Báxvbakválánusiwa* as a man-eating supernatural.

When understood in the manner I have suggested, the *hámáca* ritual is a ghost-dance type movement. In fact it preceded the American ghost-dance movement by 70 or 80 years at least, as we know it was first borrowed

by the Tsimshian, from the Heiltsuk, sometime during the 1820's or 1830's. It was during the late 1820's and early 1830's that the first explorers and first epidemics reached the Tsimshian (Garfield and Wingert, 1966:7).

For a host of reasons, including their central location and their political and economic strength, the Heiltsuk were important cultural brokers on the Northwest Coast. Moreover, their chiefs were highly respected for their shamanistic abilities. As a result, the Bella Bella/Heiltsuk territories may be regarded as the artistic and shamanistic core of the central coast during the nineteenth century. One sign of their originality has to do with their having borrowed very little culturally in comparison to their neighbours.

I make these points in connection with the Heiltsuk in order to show that the borrowing of *hámáča* songs by the Tlingit, Tsimshian, Haida, Bella Coola, Kwakwaka'wakw, and Nuuchahnulh, may be interpreted as a borrowing of shamanistic power. This point of view understands the *hámáča* and its diffusion as a shamanistic response to the dramatic and destructive changes brought about by the arrival of Europeans.

### Concluding Remarks

Today the *hámáča* continues to maintain the status that it held in the nineteenth century. However it is now only performed among the northern Wakashan speakers, the Kwakwaka, Oowekyala, Heiltsuk, and Haisla. Because it was still a relatively recent borrowing among the non-Wakashan speaking groups that adopted it in the nineteenth century, the *hámáča* disappeared among these groups entirely after missionary activity and settlement had exacted their toll on the traditional cultures.

Within the contemporary north Wakashan potlatch among the Kwakwaka and Heiltsuk, *hámáča* song style is featured in the second stage of what is essentially a four-part ceremony designed to renew life. The first part of this ritual is made manifest musically through the singing of Cry (or mourning) songs. These are often sung *parlando-rubato* and at times are sung unaccompanied. The singing of Cry songs marks a rupture of plane as contact is established with the world of the ancestors and supernatural beings.

The second stage of the ritual presents the first direct encounter with the supernatural. This first encounter is the privilege of chiefs only and it may be said to symbolize the disorientation of the after-death experience. It is during this phase that the asymmetrical rhythms of the *hámáča* ostinato patterns symbolize contact with the dangerous and potentially destructive power of the supernatural.

In the third stage of the ritual, known as the *Dhúláxa* among the Heiltsuk and *Klasila* among the Kwakwaka, initiates are also abducted by supernatural beings. However these are neither as varied nor as prestigious as



*Báxvbakválánusiwa*, who dominates the second stage, known as 'Cáíqa. The rhythms of the songs found in this third stage for the most part feature a continuous drum accompaniment. In contrast to the relatively homogeneous style of 'Cáíqa songs, *Dhùláǎ/Klasila* songs are heterogeneous stylistically.

Finally, the potlatch closes with social dance and play songs sharing musical attributes with *Dhùláǎ/Klasila* and nonceremonial songs. These songs are not associated with masked dances or with supernatural power. Instead they appear to symbolize a celebration of the powers obtained from the supernatural realm through the first three stages. To further make manifest the wealth obtained from the supernatural, gifts are given out at the close of the potlatch.

The *hámáča* thus continues to play an important role in contemporary ritual. By making manifest one of the four archetypal stages of a ritual designed to renew life in a musically sophisticated way, *hámáča* songs have transcended their context to become the most readily identifiable Northwest Coast Indian song type.

## NOTES

1. With the exception of the texts in Figures two and three, and any terms in italics that are underlined, linguistic transcriptions are in the orthography used in Bella Bella at the Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre.
2. Ceremonial houses on the Northwest Coast, at least on the central coast, are termed big houses.
3. The Heiltsuk sample was small (four songs) and there are exceptions to the generalization of narrow range in the pan-coastal repertoire.
4. This song was recorded by the late Ida Halpern.

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