

## **1. Description**

### 1.1 Name of society, language, and language family:

The Comox Indians speak Comox which is a Coast Salish Language.

### 1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com):

639-3: coo

### 1.3 Location (latitude/longitude):

Located on the East coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada. The remaining 100 or so live on the Comox Indian Reserve in Comox Harbor. Located at approximately 49/40N and 124/56W.

### 1.4 Brief history:

The Comox were a transitional group, traditionally, as they were located between the other Coast Salish groups to the south and the Kwakiutl to the North. Their first contact with Europeans was with Spanish explorers in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century. The first sustained contact, however, began in 1843; which was what caused the Comox's depopulation and relocation. The Comox of Vancouver Island were absorbed into the Lekwiltok and are essentially extinct as a culture.

### 1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors:

Around 1800 the Lekwiltok Indians, a rather aggressive tribe, of the Johnstone trait began to expand into Comox territory. By about 1850 the Lekwiltok had run out the Comox and the few Comox who remained began to reside in Comox Harbour.

### 1.6 Ecology:

### 1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density

There were 10 "tribes" of the Comox. The size of these "tribes" varies from as few as three families per group to thirty people to two houses. They occupied Salmon Bay (On Johnston Strait) to Kye Bay

## **2. Economy**

### 2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s):

Fern roots were roasted until the woody cortex was loosened and could be removed. The fern was only good in the winter and was very constipating, so it was only eating with fish eggs or oil. Green shoots were a favorite dish as well.

### 2.2 Main protein-lipid sources:

Their diet consisted Mostly of fish or aquatic animals. Salmon was especially a big deal. The Comox actually had a ceremony for the arrival of the year's first salmon.

Herring and the plentiful yelloweye rockfish better known as the red snapper

### 2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?:

They built Tidal Weirs and traps near the mouths of spawning rivers in order to use the tide to their advantage. In streams and rivers they used gaff hooks, harpoons, and dip nets. In open water they trolled for salmon or caught them in gill nets

### 2.4 Food storage:

There was a special plank house attached to most homes for the purpose of drying food as well as a small storage shed that was raised on posts and joined to the dwelling so that it was accessible from the inside. The stomach sacks of seals were cleaned thoroughly and used to hold the oil from fish blubber. They also used cured kelp bulbs which were filled with fish oil and kept coiled up in chests.

Berries were preserved by boiling and drying

### 2.5 Sexual division of production:

### 2.6 Land tenure:

### 2.7 Ceramics:

### 2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns:

Not necessarily a specified sharing pattern, but the hunter was expected to share almost every kill if made. If a man went out and shot a deer he would bring it home and his wife would skin the deer and prepare the meat and would distribute it to the people leaving a small piece for herself at the end. The normally someone else would get food and this was a great safety net for everyone in the tribe regarding food.

### 2.9 Food taboos:

Sharing was expected with a good haul, say large game, although there was not a common stock of food. There was individual ownership of food, but the pattern of giving was consistent and led to mutual gain. If someone were to have an especially successful hunt and did not share he would be frowned upon and cut out of the next person's large haul until he would share his own successful hunt.

### 2.10 Canoes/watercraft?

Canoes were frequently used.

## **3. Anthropometry**

### 3.1 Mean adult height (m and f):

### 3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f):

## **4. Life History, mating, marriage**

### 4.1 Age at menarche (f):

Unknown. Assumed to be around early teenage years.

### 4.2 Age at first birth (m and f):

At 10 months of age was when the first hereditary family name was given.

### 4.3 Completed family size (m and f):

Would normally included grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and a lot of the extended family.

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f):

4.5 Age first marriage (m and f):

mid to late teenage years it seems

4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce:

4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously:

4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?:

A gift had to be given to the family, specifically the father, for any bride. If the suitor was poor but worthy the father in law might have loaned the man some money privately so that the young man may publicly offer a gift for the daughter. The young man was then expected to work off this debt by supplying meat for feasts and performing other important labors for the father of the bride.

4.9 Inheritance patterns:

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict:

During adolescence a father, or more often a grandfather, of a young man would take charge of shaping the adolescent male into the strong man he would need to be.

In the family, there was often an older male who was considered the "Headman" he wasn't exactly considered the leader, but many would come to him for advice. Although if there was an argument with the headman and a younger family member and an agreement couldn't be met then the younger would leave to find a new village.

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals:

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy):

The Comox always intermarried northward rather than to the south, although village exogamy was never practiced as a principle of kin avoidance.

4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these "other fathers" recognized?

Most women only slept with their husband, so a very simple and basic conception.

4.14 What is the belief of the mother's role in procreation exactly? (e.g., "receptacle in which fetus grows")

She is the mother of a child with the man who protects her and serves as her love.

4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)?

4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape

Seductions outside of marriage were very rare. There are two plausible punishments; In the event the seducer was an aristocrat he/she may be punished but not likely killed. If the seducer wasn't an aristocrat he might have been killed. A more likely solution was marriage with little fuss following all the normal customs of a regular marriage.

4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin)

The woman had little to no say in her spouse, the parents chose the spouse. Informants always said that the brides were asked if they liked a suitor, but it is believed that they were so convinced of parental wisdom or the futility of resisting that there was very little resistance.

4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?

Sex prior to marriage is heavily frowned upon. Young unwed women were kept as secluded as possible so as to avoid connection with men before they were deemed of age.

4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring

4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children?

Because of the family set up, Extended family all living together, aunts and uncles are just as much expected to help in the raising of the children, so it is safe to assume that if the mother was lost the extended family would step in and raise the child.

4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females

4.22 Evidence for couvades

No evidence

4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older)

4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?

Village exogamy wasn't practiced. The prohibitions were solely against mating's between close kin within a demonstrable degree of consanguinity.

4.24 Joking relationships?

4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations

Regarding a young man's spirit journey at puberty: If a shaman was the father and the son was on the road to being a shaman, then a shaman would do a "pushing" of his knowledge/power into the body of his son so that the proper spirits might show themselves to the boy on his journey.

4.26 Incest avoidance rules

First and second cousins could for no reason be married aboriginally. Those who ignored the rule were called seals and dogs and were accused of marrying their brothers and sisters. Third cousins were accepted, but further distance was preferred. Marrying a parent's sibling was looked at with horror. A wife's daughter from another marriage was sometimes considered as an eligible mate. Most felt it was acceptable to marry a spouse's sibling's daughter. Half Brothers and sisters were permitted after the third generation. Any closer union was considered taboo.

4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?

Marriage was an incredibly formal ordeal. There was a very public proclamation that was conveyed as a surprise. But there was an agreement beforehand between a suitor and the family, or at least hints were dropped that he would be accepted, before any public proposal was made.

First a sponsor, a man close to the boy, would take gifts, notable men, and respected speakers to the girl's house. The goal was to persuade the family to let the boy be considered as a suitor. The suitor would not go with this party.

When all was ready the suitor and party would pack their canoes with gifts and take off for the girl's house. Even if they lived in the same village the party would take the longer method of canoeing around to the house. The party would sing their family songs before landing. The girl's door would be "barred" and the goal was to get the family to open the door for the suitor. After much convincing the door would be opened and the boy would be ushered in. But from there the party would rest and leave the boy sitting just inside the door. He would remain there without food for days possibly, he would only stand and leave to relieve himself outdoors. The party would return daily and do more convincing.

Eventually the Girl's father would return with his own speakers and praise the boy's party for their words and would offer the boy a meal in the center of the room and present blankets and gifts to the party. This concluded the business for the day.

The next day consisted of more speeches to the gathered people, the husband and wife, and the families. The speeches were mostly about carrying on their family traditions, speaking about being a good man and wife, and praising of the two families as they were being united. After the wedding the Husband and wife would rush back to the man's home, but not without numerous furnishings and gifts from the wife's father.

4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name?

One would gain a name from the previously mentioned ceremony at 10 months old.

4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?)

It seems to be in the community or just outside of it.

4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)?

The parents arranged the marriage. They would decide who was a suitable suitor.

4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who:

### **Warfare/homicide**

4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare:

4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death:

Clubs and similar were the weapons of choice. War parties would attack under cover of night. They would enter the home from multiple places and in the chaos that ensued heads were decapitated (scalps were not taken) and all in the home were beaten or slaughtered.

4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing:

A state of war was characterized by a series of night raids going back and forth. Many were driven as were revenge attacks. If a man knew who had attacked or killed his family he would gather a group of battle hungry men and set out for the family, normally from another tribe, who had killed his family.

4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations):

History remembers the Comox as one of the most quarrelsome of the area. They also had an alliance with the Kwakiutl and this combination made them very predatory.

4.18 Cannibalism?

The only cannibalism was the severing of heads and the occasional drinking of the blood as it poured from the head.

### **5. Socio-Political organization and interaction**

5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size:

Ranged from as little as three families, to 30 people between two houses.

5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality):

5 of the reported 10 tribes wintered on Cape Mudge (where there is now a reserve). In the summer they scattered: the sasitla people went to salmon river, The yayaqwiLtah stayed at Quathiaski Cove, the saLaLt shifted to near the point, the katkaduL went to Rock Bay, and the komokwe to Menzies bay.

5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes):

There wasn't really a technical chief but different men would have different powers and many men would gain much respect and then be looked at as a sort of village headman.

5.4 Post marital residence:

The couple would live in the Husbands house. The man's house would be heavily furnished by the father of the bride.

5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense):

There didn't seem to be active defense, but the Nootkans were enemies of the Comox and the Nootkans occasionally raided the Comox over the mountain pass near the present town of Courtenay. This leaves me to assume that boundaries may have been loose, but they were established and boundaries weren't to be crossed.

5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex):

As mentioned in 5.13 The shaman seems to hold a very high standing in his tribe. The shaman was almost always male and was usually an older male. But new shamans would of course grow up and take the place of the elder shaman.

5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships:

5.8 Village and house organization:

There were shed houses for the poorer people. The Largest houses were gabled and excavated two steps below ground level.

Some had round doors, they were inconvenient, but considered to be a point of pride for having one.

5.9 Specialized village structures (mens' houses):

5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?

Slept in beds that were often on raised platforms.

5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc:

5.12 Trade:

Mostly for desirable goods because everything that was necessary could be found all around. So most trading was for things that couldn't be found in one tribe's own area.

5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?

The Shaman was a man of many hats and was looked upon very highly. The shaman was in general just a man of much spiritual power due to his search for spirit encounters when he hit puberty.

## **6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)**

6 Time allocation to RCR:

6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine):

6.2 Stimulants:

For a time in early puberty boys would sit in a steam house before bathing in a special manner. The steam house was said to burn a special plant but no name of the plant seemed to be found, it doesn't seem to be of much importance for the steam was only a relaxing place to prepare the boy for what was ahead.

6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal):

The Birth ritual took place at 10 months. There was a gathering of friends and relatives, those who were and would be important in the child's life, where the mother and father would perform a basic ceremony. The mother would paint the baby's face and put skin bands around neck, waist, calves, wrists, and ankles. The idea behind the bindings was to make the child strong. The baby was then seated before the gathering and the father announced the baby's name then he would sing the baby's hair. This was followed by a feast where song masters (Junal) would play songs they had composed on themes that had been suggested by patrons.

Puberty was a time of sexual division in ceremonies and growth. By the time a boy was growing body and facial hair he was expected and encouraged to survive alone in the wilderness until he "saw". Most often times a spirit animal is what was expected but none could really tell what he would see. The boy was to model his time like a story of a boy who had gone in the wilderness so long his family and villagers had thought he was dead. The boy would be told to sleep on beaches and bathe in the water until he was given his vision.

6.4 Other rituals:

The winter dances were rather untraditional. They weren't as big of a deal for the Comox as other tribes. The Spirit dancers would prepare and the only ceremony to their beginning was a "teaser" would splash them with water or some other shock and that would be enough to bring out their spirit dance.

In essence the Comox would wear masks and act out stories through pantomime, many were stories of vastly successful hunts. Shamans or other people with strong spirit connections would also perform at these events.

6.5 Myths (Creation):

Many stories are told such as the tales of Mink. Mink was a man who was looking for a wife but could never find one that could last long for one reason or another and his stories tell of why barnacles cut, how often clouds move, and how restlessness can lead to a shorter life.

There are also the tales of Raven. Raven was responsible for why the wind blows and Raven was also a man who had issues with promising more than he could actually do.

6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games):

6.7 Sex differences in RCR:

6.8 Missionary effect:

6.9 RCR revival:

The elderly with some connection to the Siammon still know some of the stories and customs, but the RCR and way of life in general is dying out, the Comox specifically are almost entirely gone.

6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs:

It was believed that the afterlife was actually a rebirthing moment, souls would come back as animals. Owls were common folk, women, and children; Wolves were hunters and shamans; killer whales were sea hunters; and salmon were twins. It is unknown if all these animals (with the exception of Salmon) weren't eaten because they were believed to be human souls.

6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?

6.12 Is there teknonymy?

There were no examples I could find.

6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.)

Tradition religion had them focusing on the acquisition and help of individual guardian spirits and curing powers of the shaman. Today most Comox are Roman Catholic.

## **7. Adornment**

7.1 Body paint:

Sometimes used red ocher as a cosmetic. In the event of an cosmetics.

7.2 Piercings:

Septum and earlobes were pierced. Ceremonial bones were placed in them later in life for special events.

7.3 Haircut:

Men: Hair was kept at about shoulder length normally worn straight and disheveled. It was also parted down the middle and caught with wood pins in a knot at the back of the head.

Women: Wore hair in two braids on either side of the head.

7.4 Scarification:

Tattoos were expensive, so most were only on wealthy Comox. There were no tattoos on the face, there was word of animal figures being tattooed on the chest, thighs, and arms.

7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.):

Shamans would mark themselves with red paint on their chin and A woodpecker feather in their hair.

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment:

Bones were put into piercing holes for ceremonies.

7.7 Sex differences in adornment:

Women did not get tattoos, those were strictly for men.

7.8 Missionary effect:

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment:

## 8. Kinship systems

8.1 Sibling classification system:

Very similar to our modern classifications: Brother, Sister, Cousin, 2<sup>nd</sup> cousin, etc. However, cousins are seen as being the same as brothers and sisters due to the build of the traditional families there.

8.2 Sororate, levirate:

There is no evidence of levirate being a necessity or expected. Based On What is known I would assume the woman would be cared for by the extended family.

8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.):

None that I noticed in research

## 9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

Weddings were such a big deal that fake weddings were often held just to practice and make sure everything was being done properly. Everything was the same and acted out exactly as it normally would be, there was just no bride around for it.

Spirit dances in the winter ceremonies were a simple thing and very easy to be a part of. A person would seclude oneself until he or she started to sing because of a spiritual sickness. The family would then gather around this person and would sing a chant that was focusing on the release of what the spirit wants to say, which would cause the person to rise and dance to relieve him or herself from the spiritual sickness.

## Numbered references

1. *The Coast Salish of British Columbia* By Homer G. Barnett. Printed in 1955
2. *Sliammon Life, Sliammon Lands* By Dorothy Kennedy and Randy Bouchard