The Living Forest

Personifications of the Plant World in Native North America

Enrico Comba

For the peoples of the North-West Coast of America the forest was regarded as the domain of the non-human, where plants and animals lived and prospered. This distinction is not to be understood, as was customary in anthropology, as an opposition between Nature and Culture. The animals were not regarded as deprived of culture: they were assumed to live in villages, having ceremonies and a social organization of their own. When at home they took off their skins and appeared as human beings. However, it is undeniable that the world of animals and plants was a realm different from the world of humans, it was in some sense an "other world", where things that were uncommon or unthinkable in the human domain could occur at ease.
The forest was also the place where some beings lived, who were intermediate forms between the human and the animal, inhabitants of the borders that separate the human from the animal world.
On the other side of the continent, East of the Great Lakes, in what is now the state of New York, the Iroquois celebrated, in January or February, the Midwinter Ceremony, a sort of New Year's celebration, during which appeared the False Faces masks, among a variety of other Medicine societies, who provided curing and cleansing rituals for the people. The wooden masks of the False Faces depict beings seen in the forest or in dreams. When wearing these masks, members of the society have special powers and can handle hot coals without being burned. During the Winter ceremonial and also once or twice a year the members went through the houses of the community performing rituals to clean them of diseases.
Analogously, in many Carnival festivals all through Europe the figure of the Wild Man makes his appearance, a character that has a long literary and iconographic heritage since the Middle Ages, and which is not always easily distinguishable from a wide array of other figures, all of them showing certain significant analogies. In the Carnival parades are frequently encountered figures with long hair and beard and wearing clothes made from leafs or animal skins. They could be confused with human-animal masquerades, where the most common elements are the sheep-skin clothes, the blackened faces and the shaggy hair, which we have already described for the Amerindian masks, while at other times they have vegetal connotations, like costumes with leaves or branches, holding boughs or sticks in their hands, giving the impression to be personifications of the trees or of the woods.

1. Between the forest and the sea

In 1946 Claude Lévi-Strauss, while he was in the United States as Cultural Adviser at the French Embassy, wrote:

> "There is in New York a magic place where all the dreams of childhood hold a rendezvous, where century old tree trunks sing or speak, where indefinable objects lie in wait for the visitor with an anxious stare; where animals of superhuman gentleness press their uplifted little paws, clasped in prayer for the privilege of constructing for the chosen one the palace of the beaver, of guiding him into the realm of the seals, or teaching him, with a mystic kiss, the language of the frog and kingfisher." Then he added: "This place" [...] "may be seen daily from ten to five o'clock at the American Museum of Natural History" (Lévi-Strauss 1983: 3).

He was referring to the great Hall of Northwest Coast Indians, located on the Museum's ground floor, and containing ethnographic objects and artifacts of the Native peoples of the Pacific Coast of Canada. Most of them had been collected during the campaigns on the field conducted by Franz Boas, one of the founders of American anthropology, who led also the Jesup North Pacific Expedition to the Northwest Coast of Canada and to Eastern Siberia between 1897 and 1902. Boas first met the peoples of the Northwest Coast while he was working in the Museum of Berlin: in January 1886 he had the venture to encounter a group of nine individuals from the Bella Coola (now best known as Nuxalk) people, in British Columbia, who had been brought to Germany by the ethnologist and explorer Johan Adrian Jacobsen (Cole 1999: 97). He remained attracted and fascinated by the elaborated masks and costumes of the peoples of this region which he found in the Museum collections, and began to reflect on what a wealth of thought could be hidden behind these extraordinary artifacts (Id.: 97). In the same year 1886 he undertook his first expedition to British Columbia, which he continued to visit periodically for more or less long periods of research for the rest of his life. Though he conducted field works among many Native communities in the area, his main focus was on the village of Fort Rupert, on the northernmost part of Vancouver Island. The people of this village called themselves Kwakiutl, and Boas extended this term to designate all the villages that shared cultural and linguistic features with them, and this name has become standard in common anthropological usage (Codere 1990: 376). Since the 1980s Native peoples of the area began to prefer the use of the term Kwakwaka'wakw ("Kwakwala speaking people") to refer to the communities that speak a common language, called Kwakwala.

The peoples of the Coast lived (and still live) in a place covered by a luxuriant vegetation. Extended forests of coniferous trees shroud the mountainsides and descend along the slopes until they reach almost the seashore. The most widespread vegetal species is the Sitka spruce (*Picea sitchensis*), accompanied by the western hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*), by the yellow cedar (*Cupressus nootkatensis*) and by the huge red cedar (*Thuja plicata*). All are large evergreen trees, the Sitka spruce reaching an height of almost 100 m. and a trunk diameter exceeding 5 m., while the other two species

can be from 50 to 70 m. tall and with a diameter from 3 to 4 m. The Native peoples of the region used plants for a variety of purposes: as sources of food, as materials used in the construction of houses and other implements, as medicines, fuel, and for making ropes and baskets (Suttles 1990: 20-24).

Fig. 1. Scenery from Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada, showing the vegetation on the North West Coast (photo Enrico Comba)

The typical village on the Coast was a tiny space that humans had cut out from an overwhelming natural world, caught between the sea and the forest. It was generally located in a sheltered location, such as a small bay, offering protection from violent storms. The houses were strung out in a line parallel to the seashore, with the front facing the beach and the sea (Bancroft-Hunt 1979: 11). At the back, a short distance separated the settlement from the trees of the forest, which spread like an embracing robe, surrounding the village from behind. In fact, in the kwakwala language, one of the terms for the forest is *atlen*, which literally means "behind" (Boas 1892: 54), with the implication of "what stands behind the village", the "inland direction".

The main houses of the village were big structures of logs which supported the heavy roof beams. The log framework was covered with a number of smaller poles and cedar bark planks. Sometimes the planking was whitewashed and painted with symbols representing the owner's lineage. Some villages showed the entire front of many houses painted with brilliant colors. Some of them served both for habitation and as ceremonial buildings during the winter ceremonial season (Bancroft-Hunt 1979: 27-28).

Fig. 2. Model of a North West Coast traditional village, exhibited in the Canadian Museum of Civilization, Ottawa. It shows the houses disposed on a single row facing the seashore, with the forest approaching the rear (photo Enrico Comba)

Several houses showed on the front some sculptured poles, usually called "totem poles", a unique creation of Northwest Coast art. Some of them served as an entrance to the house, through an opening in their lower part; others were erected beside or outside the building or on a burial ground. The sculptures along the pole represented a variety of superimposed figures, humans and animals alike, which symbolized the various crests the owner could claim. They were memorials of lineage and family traditions, showing the histories of the ancestors of the group and their encounters with powerful and helpful beings in the shape of animals. Usually the topmost figure represented the ancestor of the principal occupant of the building, while the lower ones represented the wife's ancestry, or other heritages which that particular household could boast of. Crests, associated with family histories and legendary traditions, were showed carved or painted on a variety of decorated objects: house posts, wooden boards, dishes, ladles, hooks, boxes, clothing, blankets, and so forth (Bancroft-Hunt 1979: 38-41). They suggested the family's social rank, wealth, inheritance and privileges. Some of the villages along the coast appeared, in the late XIX or early XX centuries, as a forest of totem poles, which counterbalanced the outstanding forest of large trees. The meaning of the designs on these poles is sometimes obscure and difficult to decipher, and varied with the

different Native communities who made them. But generally they represented the ancestors of the family groups or powerful beings who had given their powers or wealth to these ancestors, as it was recorded in legendary tales transmitted within the group.

Fig.3. View of Fort Rupert village, Vancouver Island, in 1894, showing wooden houses, canoes, and sculptured posts (from Boas 1897: plate 5)

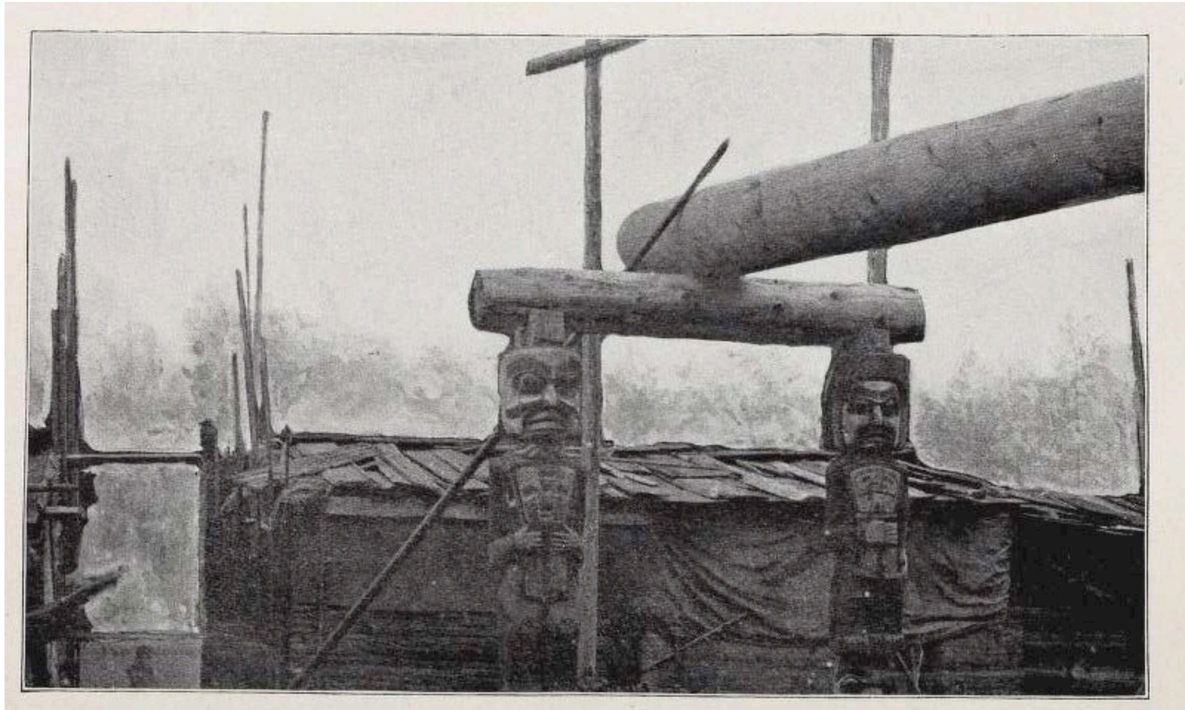

Fig.4. Sculptured house posts showing animals and supporting a large beam, Fort Rupert village (from Boas 1897: plate 14)

Kwakwaka'wakw kinship was based on a bilinear structure and was organized into extended family units called *numaym*, units that Lévi-Strauss proposed to call "houses" (*maisons*) in analogy with the noble houses of medieval Europe (Lévi-Strauss 1983: 170-187).

"Each Kwakiutl tribe was made up of from one to seven numayms, usually three or more. The numaym was a social division that traced its crests back to a supernatural ancestor. Each numaym had claims to real property in a section of house sites in the village, at least one of the large houses there, and a number of other sites that were principally food resource sites. Just as important as this real property were the numaym claims to crests and titles in a multitude of forms ranging from designs on house fronts, poles, posts, and feast dishes to privileges such as the use of a certain kind of betrothal ceremony, and certain songs, house names, and titles, even to the fixed and particular numaym name for the dog and the canoe that belonged to its head" (Codere 1990: 366).

Each of the positions, names and privileges held by a *numaym* was recorded into narratives, which illustrated how these positions had been given to the ancestors or had been acquired or conquered by them. The legends and stories which account for the interactions between humans and spiritual beings formed the basis of Kwakwaka'wakw spiritual and ceremonial life, connecting each family to the ancestral time of the origins. The most characteristic mythical tales, among the Kwakwaka'wakw, are those associated with the origins of the *numayms*. "They tell of a supernatural ancestor who came from the sky, sea, or underground, in the form of a Thunderbird or other fabulous

being, assumed human form, often by removing his mask or costume, and created the human members of the group" (Codere 1990: 373). These supernatural beings are those represented on crests and totem poles symbolizing the property of each family house. These beings were described in the stories traveling through the world and transforming the landscape and the features of the territory. Sometimes they took off their animal masks revealing their interior human selves, and thus transforming themselves into human ancestors of the *numaym* members. The latter could thus claim their descent from specific animal ancestors, such as the wolf, the bear, the raven or the killer whale, showing their ancestor crests and wearing the masks transmitted to them by the mythical ancestors.

Fig. 5. Red cedar trees (*Thuja plicata*), on Vancouver Island (photo Enrico Comba)

Fig. 6. Totem poles, Alert Bay village (photo Enrico Comba)

2. Transformation in the forest

Masks were a vital part of both Kwakwaka'wakw art and culture, and the production of highly elaborated masks is still a peculiar characteristic of many modern-day Native artists. To wear a mask is a crucial aspect in many dances and ceremonies, not simply to portray the mythical character alluded to, but as a means to make this being actually present. A wide array of masks represent mythological beings, mostly in the shape of animals, and are decorated with feathers and "hair". The last is usually made from strips of animal fur or cedar bark.

One of the Kwakwaka'wakw communities considers Red Cedar Man (Hawelkwelatl) as their ancestor: he saved his family from the great flood that destroyed the first humans, by sheltering them inside a red cedar tree. Then, he acquired the knowledge to perform the red cedar bark ceremony, that is the main winter ritual of the Kwakwaka'wakw people (Mauzé 1998: 236). The central figure in the winter ceremonials is the *hamaća*, or "Cannibal Dancer". He appears with blackened face, wearing a head ring and a neck ring of red cedar bark (Boas 1897: 572). The entire winter ceremonial period, *ćéka*, was known as Red Cedar Bark Ceremony, because it was the principal symbolic material, and it was regarded as sacred still in the late twentieth century (Holm 1990: 378-379).

All the peoples of the Northwest Coast celebrated a great religious festival in winter, involving demonstrations of supernatural power or contact with supernatural beings on the part of some individuals, but most importantly to provide the initiation of new members into the various ceremonial societies. Among the Kwakwaka'wakw, the most prestigious of these societies was that of the *hamaća* (Cannibal Dancer) and of the *həmshəmćəs* (Cannibal of the Ground): the initiates of both

these societies were reported to be kidnapped by the initiating spirit, the Cannibal Spirit, and brought by it into the forest; when they returned they ran wildly and had to be restrained by their attendants (Holm 1990: 379). As Boas stated in his pioneering research on these customs: "The object of the whole winter ceremonial is, first, to bring back the youth who is supposed to stay with the supernatural being who is the protector of his society, and then, when he has returned in a state of ecstasy, to exorcise the spirit which possesses him and to restore him from his holy madness" (Boas 1897: 431). The *hamaća* initiate was possessed by a violent desire of eating men and he was taken away by the Cannibal Spirit (Baxbakwalanuxsiwe) and was supposed to stay at the Spirit's house for a long time, up to three or four months. During this time the novices actually stayed in the woods, probably in some secluded place where they were instructed by the older members of the society. At his return from the forest, the novice showed a wild and aggressive behavior, attacking everyone upon whom he could lay his hands and trying to bite pieces of flesh from their arms. As soon as he appeared, the attendants arrived surrounding him and agitating their rattles in order to prevent him from attacking people (Boas 1897: 438-439). When he first returns from his initiation, the novice wears a head ring, waist ring, bracelets and anklets made of hemlock branches, and generally his face is painted black. At the end of the ceremony, the newly initiated wears a head ring of plated cedar bark, as well as waist bands, anklets and bracelets made of the same material.

Fig. 7. A group of Cannibal Dancers of the Koskimo, with blackened faces and red cedar bark rings (from Boas 1897: plate 46).

Fig. 8. Cannibal Dancer coming out of the secret room, through an opening painted in the image of the Cannibal Spirit's mouth (from Boas 1897: plate 29)

The two vegetal elements used in the ritual of pacification of the Cannibal Dancer show a remarkable symbolic opposition. The hemlock branches stand for the period of seclusion into the forest and represent the wild and ferocious aspect of the initiate. The cedar bark ornaments constitute the proper costume of the dancer and substitute the hemlock branches in the moment in which the wild force of the initiate is vanishing and he is coming back to his human consciousness and self-control. Among some groups, like the Koskimo, such a dichotomous opposition is revealed by the dance of the initiate: at his return from the woods he dances for four nights wearing the hemlock branches, for four nights without any ornaments and for the final four nights wearing the red cedar bark ornaments (Boas 1897: 455).

The hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*) is a large evergreen coniferous tree which belongs to the Pinaceae family, with characteristic needle-like leaves of a dark green color. In Kwakwaka'wakw ritual it was associated with the wild state of the initiate, with the spirits of the forest and the "liminal" period of the initiation ritual, when the novice has not yet been brought back to his human

condition, but is identified with a being of the woods, a wild and fierce cannibal. The hemlock was also related to the seclusion period for girls who reached puberty. Four days after her first menstruation, the girl had to go into the woods, where she spent sixteen days in a little hut made of hemlock branches (Boas 1935: 33). Significantly, one of the terms to designate the forest in Kwakwala language is *quaxolkwala*, whose first element, *quax'*, means "hemlock branches", while *quax'as* is the hemlock-tree (Boas 1921, vol.2: 1429, 1466). Furthermore, *quax'a* is a verb meaning "to grow" and *quaxens* is the Spring, the growing season (Id.: 1429). So it can be said that the hemlock is the material symbol of the forest, as the domain outside human settlements, inhabited by powerful and dangerous beings, who can provoke the transformation of humans into wild beings, dominated by an uncontrollable frenzy. As evidence of this meaning, after the returned initiate has danced into the ceremonial house, the hemlock branches of which he is covered are taken off and thrown into the fire. This gesture is called "smoking the wildness of Baxbakwalanuxsiwe [the Cannibal Spirit] out of the *hamaća*" (Boas 1897: 528). But the association with the menstruating girl and with the growing season shows that the forest is also the place of powerful generative force, of regeneration and transformation.

The red cedar bark ornaments are mainly related to the new condition acquired by the initiate at the completion of the ceremony, and represent his position as a member into the prestigious Cannibal Society. The sense of "passage" of the initiate into a new condition is materially evidenced by the fact that he has to literally "go through" a cedar bark ring, which is put first on his head, then he extends his arms through the ring until it comes down to his feet, when he finally steps outside of it (Boas 1897: 535). An analogous ceremony was performed for a pubescent girl: after her seclusion in a hut in the woods, she was purified and had to pass through a cedar bark ring, symbolizing her newly acquired condition of adult woman (see Comba 1992: 76-92 for a fuller discussion of this interpretation).

Fig. 9. Cedar bark ornaments for the ritual initiation of the Cannibal Dancer. American Museum of Natural History, New York (photo Enrico Comba)

The hemlock branches were worn by the candidates without particular elaboration, they were simply twisted around the waist, the head, the ankles and wrists of the initiate. The cedar bark ornaments were the product of a long process: the bark was taken from the trees and put into fresh water to soften, then beaten upon a plank, in order to separate the hard and woody from the soft and fibrous parts. Then they were dyed and after twisted and threaded in order to produce ornaments, but also clothes, mats, baskets and bags (Stewart 2009: 72-75; Stewart 1984: 113-159). So the hemlock branches and the cedar bark ornaments represent two different ways of human relationship with the forest: in the first case the hemlock tree stands for an autonomous and powerful domain outside the human settlement, dominated by beings that are not controllable through human means; instead, the

red cedar represents that part of the forest that humans can use for their own benefit, in order to produce the objects and implements necessary for the perpetuation of human life. Significantly, the passage from the first to the second, during the performance of the winter ceremony, is signalled by the intervention of fire. Fire is the element that mediates between the human and non-human realities, it symbolized the process of transformation through which the gifts of nature can become the elements of human culture and society (Lévi-Strauss 1964). The initiation journey of the new dancer unfolded between the two poles of the forest realm, inhabited by powerful spirits, and the human world, regulated by the social hierarchy. He had first to leave human society and enter into the frightening domain of the Cannibal Spirit, and then he returned again into the human community, to be pacified, purified from the wild fury which dominated him, and at last brought back into the ranks of society (Comba 1992: 81-82).

This was the usual way in which the shamans acquired their powers. After a period spent into the forest, where he or she entered into direct contact with the spiritual beings, the novice shaman returned into the village wearing only hemlock branches. Here the older shamans, the representatives of the "category" into which the novice aspired to enter, were waiting wearing their red cedar bark ornaments. A woman shaman related that during her initiation period she had to wear hemlock branches and only afterward, when she had got through the condition of "novice" (*osemtsa*), she could wear the red cedar bark ornaments which represented her newly acquired state (Id.: 80 with bibliographical references).

3. The gift of trees

According to the traditions of the Coast Salish, the red cedar tree was made grow by the Great Spirit on the place where a real good man had been buried; this man was always helping others and he gave food and clothing to all those in need. Analogously, the tree was made to be useful to the people, giving its roots for making baskets, its bark for clothing and its wood for shelter (Stewart 1984: 27). The Skokomish, or Twana, a group of the Southern Coast Salish, retain that Cedar was their Grandmother, and that she instructed the first humans in the way they should conduct themselves and how they should behave towards the other beings of the universe:

> "The Great Spirit chose Cedar to guide human beings beyond their infancy, to become the earthly repository for the knowledge humans needed to commune with the corporeal realm and the supernatural world. The Great Spirit bestowed this sacred honor on the Cedar people because they possessed the gift of long memory. Their unwavering

> obedience to the Great Spirit was rewarded with the gift of near eternal life. A spiritual and material relationship was forged between the plant tribes and the first humans when the Great Spirit used Cedar to give human beings fire, medicine, and the notion of harmony to ensure their survival" (Pavel-Miller-Pavel 1993: 57).

An aspect of Amerindian thought, which has been called, by anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998), "perspectivism", is the conception, common to many peoples of the continent, according to which the world is inhabited by different sorts of subjects or persons, human and non-human, which apprehend reality from distinct points of view. This theoretical model is in part a reformulation of the observations made since the 1930s by A. Irwin Hallowell. While he was doing fieldwork among the Great Lake Ojibwa, Hallowell was surprised by the peculiar way in which these people understood the relationship between humans and the other elements of the universe. He described the experience of indigenous peoples in North America regarding the natural world as a relationship with "other-than-human-persons" (Hallowell 1960 [1976]). "Animals are believed to have essentially the same sort of animating agency which man possesses. They have a language of their own, can understand what human beings say and do, have forms of social or tribal organization, and live a life which is parallel in other respects to that of human societies" (Hallowell 1926: 7). According to Viveiros de Castro, numerous ethnographical observations on different cultures of the Americas reveal the different ways in which humans perceive animals and in which other beings perceive humans and themselves. Particularly, animals are regarded as people and see themselves as persons (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 470).

The peoples of the North-West Pacific Coast extended such a notion to the plants as well, or at least to the most significant exemplars of the botanical world, like the red cedar. The Skokomish regard the Cedar beings as living entities "of vast spiritual and material value". "The Cedar people sacrificed their lives so that the first humans could construct homes as well as boxes and baskets in which to store their belongings. This knowledge gave birth to spiritual sanctuaries during the winter and allowed humanity to create domains with a sense of community" (Pave-Miller-Pavel 1993: 58). Though animals play a much greater role in the worldview of Native peoples, plants and trees are viewed almost in the same vein. They too are interpreted as persons or subjects. The main conception is that the manifest form of each species is a mere envelope, a sort of "clothing", which conceals an intentionality or subjectivity formally identical to human consciousness and frequently represented as an internal human form (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 471).

Among the North West Coast peoples, trees were indeed endowed with many human characteristics: they were reputed to have a sentient life, they had an inner form similar to that of

humans, a “soul”, and were deemed capable of feeling and thought just like people. Furthermore, they had the faculty of speech and could understand human speeches and prayers (Mauzé 1998: 239). When a Kwakwaka'wakw had to fell a tree, for canoe-building or other undertakings, he addressed the chosen tree with this words: “O, supernatural one! Now follow your supernatural power!”, and “O friend! Now you see your leader, who says that you shall turn your head and fall there also” (Boas 1921, vol.1: 617). Even when they took the bark from a cedar, the Kwakwaka'wakw did not take all the bark from the tree, because the old persons said that if they should peel off all the cedar bark of a young tree, the young cedar would die. And then another cedar nearby, having assisted to the scene, could curse the bark peeler causing him to die (Id., vol.1: 616-617). When a woman was going to fell a young cedar, she addressed it saying: “Look at me friend! I come to ask for your dress, for you have come to take pity on us; for there is nothing for which you can not be used, because it is your way that there is nothing for which we can not use you, for you are really willing to give us your dress. I come to beg you for this, long life maker, for I am going to make a basket for lily roots out of you” (Id.: 619). The prayers says that the humans want to take only the dress of the tree, that is its outer material form, its “clothing”, and that it is willing to give it to humans, because it takes pity on them and wants to benefit them with its own offering. In a similar way, Native peoples addressed themselves to the animals they hunted, to ask them to let themselves be killed by the hunters. The bark blanket of the tree was equivalent with the skin of animals, as the outer covering of the “inner form” of the being (Goodman 1975: 192).

The material form of trees was regarded as made of flesh and blood, and was evidenced in particular by the reddish color of the wood and bark of the red cedar (*Thuja plicata*). Thus, the similitude between trees and humans was extended to the material outer form of trees, which was seen as similar to the body of both humans and animals. Humans and non-humans developed relationships based on mutual reciprocity, mutual need and mutual care for each other’s existential and reproductive needs (Mauzé 1998: 240). This cosmology based on relationships and on a fragile balance among all living forms is well expressed by the Skokomish:

> “Skokomish spiritual philosophy focuses not on events but on relationships with entities like the earth, water, air, animals, and plant people. Maintaining this symbolic connection is important to the survival of our traditional culture, because a spiritual relationship with other life forms pervades all aspects of our life. Those trained in the traditional way cannot easily distinguish between how Cedars conduct their affairs and how humans conduct theirs. Therefore, protecting Cedar and other natural resources in the environment has been and will continue to be at the forefront of discussions concerning the tribe’s survival” (Pavel-Miller-Pavel 1993: 55).

The objects made from the wood of the trees, like spoons, boxes, plates and other items, were considered as alive, or as containing a supernatural force. Since trees were regarded as alive and human-like in their inner form, they could not be treated as though they were mere materials or resources to be employed. “They were forms of life that undergo transformations, becoming all other forms. From this point of view, one does not speak of images carved in wood, but of wood transformed” (Goodman 1975: 192).

The distinction between an inner form and an outer “clothing” was emphasized in Kwakwaka'wakw culture by the particular symbolic relevance of the concept of containers, that included not only the body, as the “house of the soul” (Boas 1921, vol.1: 724), but also canoes, boxes, dishes and animal skins. The house had a special function as the residence of the lineage and was both a lineage house and a ceremonial structure, it was strictly associated with the lineage chief and was attributed a name, so in a sense it was the “container” of the lineage group (*numaym*), in the same way that all life forms occupy a clothing, a body or some other container (Goodman 1975: 64-65). One of the main materials used for containers was the red cedar bark and wood. The red cedar ornaments were a major source of supernatural power for shamans and in the Winter ceremonies, because they contained the life force revealed by their red color, equivalent to blood.

4. The cosmic tree

In Kwakwala, vegetal metaphors express the status and greatness of the chief of a *numaym*, employing analogies between the human body and tree parts, like trunk and roots. The chief is called the “post of heaven”, thus expressing metaphorically the chief’s ability to establish relationships with the underworld, the earth and the celestial world (Mauzé 1998: 237). The cedar was regarded as the “tree of life” by the Kwakwaka'wakw and other North West Coast peoples, as evidenced by the button blankets ornamented with the “tree of life” motif that were, and in a certain measure are still, exhibited during ceremonies (Ibid.: 235-236).

During the Winter ceremonies, among the Kwakwaka'wakw, a room was set apart in the rear of the ceremonial house, into which the initiate *hamaća*, or “Cannibal Dancer”, could disappear during the performances. This room was called *mawil*, and was supposed to be the house of the Cannibal Spirit (Baxbakwalanuxsiwe). In the front of the room was painted the face of the Cannibal Spirit, in order that, when the *hamaća* reappeared from the inner room, he came out through the mouth of the Cannibal Spirit (Boas 1897: 440; see above fig. 8). In the middle of the rear of the house was erected a pole, called the “Cannibal Pole” (*hamspeq*). It was a cedar tree that was selected for this purpose in the

forest, was felled ceremoniously and brought into the village in the same day in which was announced the return of the initiates from their seclusion (Comba 1992: 82). The pole was climbed by the *hamaća*, who ascended the roof of the house, ran around once and descended again along the pole (Boas 1897: 528).

The function of cosmic pillar which the Cannibal Pole was regarded to play is revealed by some of the songs of the initiates, which have been recorded and transcribed by Boas:

> "I am at the center of the world;
> For me Baxbakwalanuxsiwe is crying hap.
> I am at the post of the world;
> For me Baxbakwalanuxsiwe is crying hap" (Boas 1897: 457).

> "You went to Baxbakwalanuxsiwe, and there you ate first dried human flesh;
> You were led to his cannibal pole in the place of honor of his house, and his house is our world.
> You were led to his cannibal pole, which is the Milky Way of our world.
> You were led to his cannibal pole at the right-hand side of our world" (Ibid.: 459).

It is explicitly stated that the house of the Cannibal Spirit is a reproduction of the world, and thus a cosmological model. The Milky Way was regarded as the Cannibal Pole of Baxbakwalanuxsiwe, functioning as a pillar of the cosmos. The house of the Cannibal Spirit was located in the North ("at the right-hand side of the world"). The traditional orientation of the Kwakwaka'wakw presupposed that the speaker was facing the ocean, that is facing the West, in the same way in which most of their villages were located, thus having the sea in front and the forest at the back; in this way the North was on the right and the South on the left (Comba 1992: 141). The northern sky is centered on the Pole Star, which is a sort of "pivot" around which all the other stars and constellations seem to circle. Thus it is plausible that the North was seen as the center of the world, and that the Cannibal Pole was identified with a pillar connecting the various planes of the universe. Thus, going up and down along the pole, the *hamaća* was displaying his capacities of travelling between this world and the other dimensions of the cosmos. The idea of a cosmic tree located at the centre of the earth and connecting the different layers of the universe is a widespread phenomenon, which is found practically everywhere (Brosse 1989: 11-36).

5. Dwellers of the forest

The forest was for the peoples of the Coast the domain of the non-human, where plants and animals lived and prospered. This distinction is not to be understood, as was customary in anthropology, as an opposition between Nature and Culture (Descola 2005). The animals were not regarded as deprived of culture: they were assumed to live in villages, having ceremonies and a social organization of their own. When at home they took off their skins and appeared as human beings (Boas 1935: 133). However, it is undeniable that the world of animals and plants was a realm different from the world of humans, it was in some sense an "other world", where things that were uncommon or unthinkable in the human domain could occur at ease.

Humans entered the forest domain for the exercise of their economic activities, for the hunt, fishing, gathering fruits or vegetables, procuring wood or bark from the trees. But they went into the forest also for spiritual reasons, for fasting and meditating and seeking for a vision. A tribal elder of the Skokomish community has said that the wooded areas are "sacred places [where] we take the new initiates of our ancient secret society for purposes of isolation, meditation, spiritual cleansing, ritual bathing and schooling. [These sites are] our church, our school, our drug store, and our monastery. The things that dwell in these sites are the teachers of our people" (Pavel-Miller-Pavel 1993: 77-78). Going into the forest signifies to isolate oneself from the ordinary world of human affairs, to distance oneself from everyday life and from social relationships, to suspend the contact with other fellow human beings, in order to prepare oneself to enter into communication with another dimension. The vision seeker tries to put himself or herself in relation with the inhabitants of the forest not in the usual way of the hunter, but in a way that permits to see this beings as they see themselves, in their interiority, that is as human persons or subjects.

But the forest is also the place where some beings live, who are intermediate forms between the human and the animal, inhabitants of the borders that separate the human from the animal world.

One of them was the Dzonoqwa, a strange people who lived in the forest and on mountains, whose houses are far in the woods. Generally, the Dzonoqwa is described as female, and is represented with large hanging breasts. She has many characteristics of a "wild woman": she has a black body, hairy face and hands. Her eyes are set so deep in the head that they cannot see well. She is described as a giant, twice the size of a man, with a prodigious strength, so that she is able to tear down large trees (Boas 1935: 144-145). The Dzonoqwa speak in a strange way, which is thus described by Boas: "When speaking they pronounce the words in such a way that every syllable of ordinary speech is repeated with initial "h", substituted for the consonantal beginning of the syllable" (Id.: 145). This is related to the masks representing this being, which are characterized by pursed lips,

showing her in the act of giving his guttural call. In the traditional stories, the Dzonoqwa tries to capture children from the human village, putting them in a basket and carrying them to her house in the forest. When young girls or boys walk about in the woods, they are carried away by her, or she entices away children from their home assuming the voice of their grandmothers. That is why Kwakwaka'wakw used to frighten children into obedience by telling them that the Dzonoqwa will come and carry them away (Id.: 145). She is regarded as a cannibal, who roasts and eats the children whom she has stolen.

Fig. 10. Totem pole representing Dzonoqwa, the wild woman. Alert Bay village (photo Enrico Comba)

But with all her strength and voraciousness, the Dzonoqwa is rather stupid, and the children of the stories are easily able to cheat her and escape. For example, in a story she admires the ear ornaments of a boy whom she has captured, and is induced to allow herself to be killed by having sticks driven into her ears (Boas 1910: 119). Furthermore, the Dzonoqwa is also regarded as the bringer of wealth, and those who are able to escape from her capture bring with them the rich objects that they have subtracted to the wild woman. Families in Alert Bay (Nimpkish group of the

Kwakwaka'wakw) regard the Dzonoqwa as their ancestor and several images of this being are represented in sculptured totem poles on this island.

Another being who lives in the inland wooded areas is the Wild Man of the Woods (Bekus), whose body is cold as ice and who takes away drowned people. He shows a more frightful and dangerous aspect than the Dzonoqwa. He lives in a house which is invisible by day, and whoever accepts the food offered by him, which can appear as cooked salmon but which in reality consists in rotten wood, toads and lizards, cannot come back from the forest world (Boas 1935: 146). He is associated with the world of the dead, and his mask reproduces the features of a withered corpse. He is sometimes regarded as the chief of the dead. This is understandable since in ancient times, after death the body was wrapped in a mat, placed in a box and put high up on a tree, preferably a cedar tree (Id.: 35). So, the forest was regarded also as the world of the dead, and this reinforces the idea that it was through the forest that it was possible to reach an “other world”, beyond the visible appearances of material things.

Fig. 11. Mask of the Wild Man of the Woods, Kwakwaka'wakw (from Curtis 1915)

Fig. 12. Tree burial in Fort Rupert, 1894 (from Boas 1897: plate 27)

6. From the American False Faces to the European Green-Man

On the other side of the continent, East of the Great Lakes, in what is now the state of New York, the Iroquois present a number of customs having several similarities with those of the North West Coast. The groups that gave rise to the Iroquois Confederacy celebrated, in January or February, with

reference to the new moon after the winter solstice, the Midwinter Ceremony, a sort of New Year's celebration, during which appeared the False Faces masks, among a variety of other Medicine societies, who provided curing and cleansing rituals for the people. Sometimes they were also worn by small boys who went from house to house begging for tobacco and cookies (Fenton 1978: 305; Fenton 1991).

The wooden masks of the False Faces depict beings seen in the forest or in dreams. When wearing these masks, members of the society have special powers and can handle hot coals without being burned. During the Winter ceremonial and also once or twice a year the members went through the houses of the community performing rituals to clean them of diseases (Tooker 1978: 460). The masks are generally black or red, with long hair, crooked noses and deep-set eyes. The mouth is sometimes pursed as in whistling or with funnel-shape lips, as in blowing on the ashes in curing rites, a mood that reminds of the characteristics of the Dzonoqwa. The most interesting aspect of these masks is that they were carved from a living tree, usually a basswood tree, in order to transfer the healing power of the living tree to the mask (Fenton 1978: 306, fig.6). The masks themselves were regarded as living beings and were served food and tobacco as offerings.

The rationale of the False Face Society is provided by an encounter between the culture hero and the mask spirit, who is more or less patron of winds and diseases, gamekeeper and protector of mankind. This spirit had to be honoured with offerings of tobacco and corn mush (Id.: 319).

Fig. 13. Iroquois False Face Mask, Ethnological Museum Berlin (from commons.wikimedia.org.)

Alongside the False Faces often were another kind of masks, the so called Husk Faces, because they were twined from corn husks. Their wearers could handle hot coals and participated in ceremonies in conjunction with the Midwinter celebration. The tutelaries of the Husk Faces were agricultural spirits, associated with the corn harvest or with growing grains, not the spirits of the forest associated with the False Faces, although in many occasions they appeared together (Tooker 1978: 461). They corresponded to the two dimensions of the Iroquois natural world: the forest and the clearing. The forest was the domain of the men and of the tree spirits: the men cut the clearing out of the forest and constructed the village using materials taken from the forest. Once this was

done, the clearing and the village became the domain of the women, who did all the agricultural work and presided over the cure and growth of the food plants (Tooker 1978: 461). The cultivated plants included mainly corn, beans and squash, which were themselves represented in female form and were called by the Iroquois the Three Sisters. Sibling terms were extended from the women to the crops they cultivated. The women and the life sustainers, the personified representations of the plants, were regarded as sisters (Fenton 1978: 299-300).

However, the nearness and association in many performances of the False Faces and the Husk Faces reveal that there was a link between the realm of the forest and the fertility and growth of crops, a relationship that is observable in many celebrations and beliefs all around the world, including many folk traditions still observable in several European countries, particularly in the Alpine region.

In many Carnival festivals all through Europe the figure of the Wild Man makes his appearance, a character that has a long literary and iconographic heritage since the Middle Ages, and which is not always easily distinguishable from a wide array of other figures, all of them showing certain significant analogies. In the Carnival parades are frequently encountered figures with long hair and beard and wearing clothes made from leafs or animal skins. They could be confused with human-animal masquerades, where the most common elements are the sheep-skin clothes, the blackened faces and the shaggy hair, which we have already described for the Amerindian masks, while at other times they have vegetal connotations, like costumes with leaves or branches, holding boughs or sticks in their hands, giving the impression to be personifications of the trees or of the woods. All these various characters which burst into the village at certain moments of the year, generally from January to March, share characteristics that associate them with the world of the wilderness, blending human traits with elements of animal, vegetal or fantastic origin. Animal-skin costumes, black faces, high conical headdresses, coloured ribbons, leaves and flowers, are the recurring elements of these masquerades, that often show in these personages an aggressive and uncontrolled, "fool" behaviour (see Caro Baroja 1979; Kezich 2015).

Fig. 14. An Iroquois dancer with costume and mask of the False Faces Society (from *Popular Science Monthly* 1892)

Fig. 15. The Masquerade of Valentine and Orson, woodcut by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, 1566 (from commons.wikimedia.org.)

The conception of a contiguity between humankind and the world of plants seems extremely remote from contemporary sensibility and perception, but in several Carnival performances it is still possible to recover the presence of hybrid figures, showing anthropomorphic traits together with vegetal elements. In this case, too, it is difficult to draw a sharp line between the different figures: the Wild Man often shows a costume made of branches, boughs or leaves, as he was already described in Brueghel the Elder's woodcut (1556) illustrating a popular performance inspired to the legend of Valentine and Orson. In fact, the Bear, a very common character in Carnival masquerades all through Europe, sometimes appears as a "Straw bear" (at Whittlesey, England), as a "Rey bear" (at Valdieri, Cuneo, Italy) or as a "Husk bear" (at Cunico, Asti, Italy).

In some cases, a real tree, cut and felled in the woods, is hauled in the center of the village, erected, often adorned with ribbons and flowers, and at last burnt at the end of the celebration, like it occurs in the Carnival of Grauno (Trento, Italy) or in the Kinderblochziehen in the Austrian Alps, where a big log is drug in the town by a masked parade, while some figures, masked as devils, attempt to slow its advancement. The tradition of the Maypole or May tree or of the Greasy pole, which exists in various forms all over Europe, and are still practised in Great Britain and Germany, is strictly associated with these customs.

In other places, we can find what are really instances of “tree-men” or personifications of the vegetal world, which are called Jack-in-the green in England (mainly associated with Mayday festivals), Om Selvarech in the region of Belluno, Italy, Silvesterklaus in Appenzell, Switzerland (where they appear generally during the Christmas period or on Saint Sylvester night). Similar costumes are found in the Burry Man at South Queensferry, near Edinburgh, and in the parade of the Garland King in the month of May at Castleton, Derbyshire, England.

The recurrent theme in all these performances and festivals is the idea of the reappearance of fertility and generative force after the winter respite, even if it is not always explicitly shown. The widespread employ of coloured ribbons, flower decorations, leafy boughs and branches, is an implicit recall to the generative power of the earth, which in the spring season manifests itself in the blooming of vegetation. The fertility of the earth is put into relationship with the fertility of humans, of the animals and of crops, sometimes in allusive and indirect ways, other times in a more explicit symbolism. The power and strength of nature has been since time immemorial seen by mankind as incarnated in the great trees and obscure woods, regarded as passages for an “other world”. Periodically, in the calendar cycle, particularly after the winter solstice, when the nature seems to regain its strength and warmth, mankind attempted to obtain an increase of fertility power and an omen of abundance for the coming season through an intimate contact with the world of trees. It was at this time that the forest appeared to be alive, to be made of “walking trees” which moved toward the human world, like those that put Macbeth in anguish:

> “I looked toward Birnam, and anon, methought,
> The wood began to move
> [...]
> Within this three mile may you see it coming;
> I say, a moving grove”
> (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V, scene V)

References

Bancroft-Hunt, Norman. 1979. *People of the Totem: The Indians of the Pacific Northwest.* London: Orbis.

Boas, Franz. 1892. “Vocabulary of the Kwakiutl Language.” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 31:34-82.

Boas, Franz. 1897. “The Social Organization and the Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians.” *Report of the U.S. National Museum for 1895:* 311-738.

Boas, Franz. 1910. *Kwakiutl Tales* (“Columbia University Contributions to Anthropology 2”). New York: Columbia University Press.

Boas, Franz. 1921. “Ethnology of the Kwakiutl, 2 vols.” *35th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology for 1913-1914:* 43-1481.

Boas, Franz. 1935. *Kwakiutl Culture as Reflected in Mythology* (“Memoirs of the American Folklore Society 2”). New York: Stechert.

Brosse, Jacques. 1989. *Mythologie des arbres.* Paris: Plon.

Caro Baroja, Julio. 1979. *Le Carnaval.* Paris: Gallimard.

Codere, Helen. 1990. “Kwakiutl: Traditional Culture.” In: *Handbook of North American Indians. Vol.7: Northwest Coast,* edited by Wayne Suttles, 359-377. Washington: Smithsonian Institution.

Cole, Douglas. 1999. *Franz Boas: The Early Years 1858-1906.* Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Comba, Enrico. 1992. *Cannibali e uomini-lupo: metamorfosi rituali dall’America indigena all’Europa antica.* Torino: Il Segnalibro.

Curtis, Edward S. 1915. *The North American Indian, vol. 10.* Cambridge, Mass.: The University Press.

Descola, Philippe. 2005. *Par-delà nature et culture.* Paris: Gallimard.

Fenton, William N. 1978. “Northern Iroquoian Culture Patterns.” In: *Handbook of North American Indians. Vol.15: Northeast*, edited by Bruce G. Trigger, 296-321. Washington: Smithsonian Institution.

Fenton, William N. 1991. *The False Faces of the Iroquois.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Goldman, Irving. 1975. *The Mouth of Heaven: An Introduction to Kwakiutl Religious Thought.* New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Hallowell, A. Irving. 1926. “Bear Ceremonialism in the Northern Hemisphere.” *American Anthropologist* 28.1:1-175.

Hallowell, A. Irving. 1960. “Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View.” In: *Culture in History: Essays in Honor of Paul Radin,* edited by Stanley Diamond, 19-52. New York: Columbia University Press [repr. in *Contributions to Ojibwe Studies. Essays, 1934-1972.* Lincoln-London: University of Nebraska Press, 2010: 535-568].

Holm, Bill. 1990. “Kwakiutl: Winter Ceremonies.” In: *Handbook of North American Indians. Vol.7: Northwest Coast,* edited by Wayne Suttles, 378-386. Washington: Smithsonian Institution.

Kezich, Giovanni. 2015. *Carnevale Re d’Europa: viaggio antropologico nelle mascherate d’inverno.* Scarmagno: Priuli & Verlucca.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1964. *Le cru et le cuit (Mythologiques 1).* Paris : Plon.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1983. *The Way of the Masks.* London: Jonathan Cape.

Mauzé, Marie. 1998. “Northwest Coast Trees: From Metaphors in Culture to Symbols for Culture.” In *The Social Life of Trees: Anthropological Perspectives on Tree Symbolism,* edited by Laura Rival, 233-251. Oxford: Berg.

Pavel, D. Michael. Gerald B. Miller and Mary J. Pavel. 1993. “Too Long, Too Silent: The Threat to Cedar and the Sacred Ways of the Skokomish.” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 17.3:53-80.

Stewart, Hilary. 1984. *Cedar: Tree of Life to the Northwest Coast Indians.* Vancouver-Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre.

Stewart, Hilary (ed.). 2009. *Adventures and Sufferings of John R. Hewitt, Captive of Chief Maquinna.* Vancouver-Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre.

Suttles, Wayne. 1990. "Environment." In: *Handbook of North American Indians. Vol.7: Northwest Coast,* edited by Wayne Suttles, 16-29. Washington: Smithsonian Institution.

Tooker, Elisabeth. 1978. "Iroquois Since 1820." In: *Handbook of North American Indians. Vol.15: Northeast*, edited by Bruce G. Trigger, 449-465. Washington: Smithsonian Institution.

Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 1998. "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4.3:469-488.

Enrico Comba è docente di Antropologia Culturale e Antropologia delle Religioni presso l'Università di Torino. Si occupa soprattutto di ricerche sulle tradizioni mitiche e religiose dei nativi del Nord America, in particolare nelle regioni delle Pianure e del Nord-Est. Ha condotto ricerche sul terreno in Stati Uniti (Wisconsin, Michigan, South Dakota e Montana), in Canada e nella Siberia meridionale (Khakassia). Tra le sue pubblicazioni: *Il cerchio della vita* (Il Segnalibro 2005); *Introduzione a Lévi-Strauss* (Laterza 2000); *Testi religiosi degli Indiani del Nord America* (Utet 2001); *Antropologia delle religioni* (Laterza 2008), *La Danza del Sole: Miti e cosmologia tra gli Indiani delle Pianure* (Novalogos 2012).

Enrico Comba is assistant professor of Cultural Anthropology and of Anthropology of Religions in the University of Turin. His scientific interests are devoted mainly to the study of the mythical and religious traditions of North American Native cultures, particularly in the areas of the Plains and of the North-East. He has done field researches in the United States (Wisconsin, Michigan, South Dakota e Montana), in Canada and in Southern Siberia (Khakassia). Among his publications: *Il cerchio della vita: Uomini e animali nell'universo simbolico degli Indiani delle Pianure*. [The Circle of Life: Humans and Animals in the Symbolic Universe of the Plains Indians](Il Segnalibro 2005); *Introduzione a Lévi-Strauss* [Introduction to Lévi-Strauss] (Laterza 2000); *Testi religiosi degli Indiani del Nord America* [Religious Texts of the North American Indians] (Utet 2001); *Antropologia delle religioni* [Anthropology of religions] (Laterza 2008), *La Danza del Sole: Miti e cosmologia tra gli Indiani delle Pianure* [The Sun Dance: Myths and Cosmology among the Indians of the Plains] (Novalogos 2012).