

In Search of the Hamat'sa: A Tale of Headhunting.* [DVD.] Aaron Glass, producer and director. Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources, 2004. 33 min.

Reviewed by Alexander D. King

In Search of the Hamat'sa: A Tale of Headhunting is a DVD written, shot, edited, and directed by Aaron Glass during the course of his dissertation research with Kwakwaka'wakw people in British Columbia.[1] It is an impressive testament to the power and low cost of modern computers and digital video cameras. We have reached the era where the only barriers to making great ethnographic videos are intellectual ones, and Glass has surmounted those. Using the famous Kwakwaka'wakw dance of the Hamat'sa, this 33-minute video discusses the historical and on-going relationships among Canadian First Nations, anthropologists, and museums. Glass introduces two leading questions that guide most of the narrative: 1) "How did this once secret and restricted dance become their most visible image?" and 2) "Why, then, did a dance prohibited by the government come to be claimed by the nation a century later?" The Hamat'sa 'cannibal' dance is the most dramatic aspect of Kwakwaka'wakw winter festival performances, especially for white audiences, and was central to the Canadian government's 1884 prohibition of potlatch ceremonies. The dance and associated masks and paraphernalia were also prominently featured in the scientific ethnographic work of Franz Boas, as well as in the commercial, sensationalist work of the photographer Edward Curtis. Both men photographed and filmed dances. Although each had very different intentions and hoped for different effects, both helped to "turn the Hamat'sa into an emblem and a symbol" of Kwakwaka'wakw culture and Kwakwaka'wakw people.

Glass subtly lays out how the image of the Hamat'sa dancer emerging from the screen "has come to suggest the complex relations between scholars, museums, and native people." The American Museum of Natural History in New York and Chicago's Field Museum were central to Boasian anthropological work, and Kwakwaka'wakw people themselves have used museums in British Columbia to represent their culture to the public. Glass's narration at times seems to suggest that men like Boas and Curtis appropriated images of Kwakwaka'wakw people, but the complex story of cooperation and accommodation by Kwakwaka'wakw emerges through the presentation. For example, Boas organized a display of Kwakwaka'wakw culture and performances of the Hamat'sa for spectators at the Chicago World's Fair, and this required the enthusiastic cooperation of several respected elders at the time. Curtis's fictional film *In the Land of the Head Hunters* likewise included the participation of now revered ancestors to produce representations that current elders find deeply problematic. These practices of working with scholars and playing to tourists have continued unabated through the entire 20th century and will persist in the foreseeable future. Dancing the Hamat'sa in public generates continuous discussion among Kwakwaka'wakw people about the appropriateness of public presentation and commercialization of a sacred dance, which Glass artfully captures in conversation.

* Posted to *Museum Anthropology Review* November 13, 2007. See: <http://museumanthropology.wordpress.com/2007/11/13/mar-2007-2-32/>. © 2007 Alexander D. King.

In Search of the Hamat'sa does clearly answer the two questions posed at the outset. The cooperation of Kwakwaka'wakw people in the use of their most sacred dance for public spectacle has been part of the political and economic engagement of Kwakwaka'wakw people with wider society. For example, the chief and carver Mungo Martin worked at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia in the 1940s and the Royal British Columbia Museum in the 1950s (Glass 2006). Martin restored totem poles for the UBC Museum of Anthropology and helped them collect many Hamat'sa masks. At the RBCM in Victoria, he hosted the first legal, public potlatch ceremony across the street from the parliament building.

One might complain that Glass could have presented more clearly the spectacle of wealth and power inherent Kwakwaka'wakw potlatch ceremonials as they developed in the 19th century and beyond. However, this would have made for a longer, overly complicated presentation. I am greatly impressed by the many themes touched upon in what is a fairly short video: history of Americanist anthropology, museums and representations, appropriation of indigenous cultures by whites, colonialism and resistance/accommodation, fieldwork, Kwakwaka'wakw contemporary life in Alert Bay, Northwest Coast potlatches/feasts, hereditary titles and dances, the dynamics between tradition and innovation in art, Christianity and traditional religions, and fieldwork relationships between anthropologist and the people he or she is studying. For example, Glass refers to his lack of a "hereditary right" to dance the Hamat'sa, and in another fascinating scene Wayne Alfred, who has already presented a schematic of the Hamat'sa dance for us, watches and critiques the dancers in Boas's film footage from 1933. Alfred is impressed and states that he will study the film to take some of the men's moves, because "they are both my relatives."

A viewing of *In Search of the Hamat'sa* with several colleagues and graduate students in the anthropology department at the University of Aberdeen was followed by a lively discussion of the issues raised in the video. It is, however, best suited for introductory students. The DVD is divided into 20 chapters, so one can easily jump straight to a short section for an illustration of a single point, or skip a short bit here and there to save time. It is easy to imagine tying in any one out of a dozen books or articles to this video.

The DVD includes many beautiful shots, and Glass is to be commended in his filming, as well as his writing and editing. It is provocative without being pompous, sympathetic but not romantic, and reflexive without being overly self-obsessed. A third question of how an anthropologist carries out field research, is not explicitly posed, but at times dominates the narratives so that the video will strike some anthropologists as overly self-reflexive. I was pleased to see Glass give the final word to the quietly eloquent Wayne Alfred, who shares provocative insights while the credits roll to one side. *In Search of the Hamat'sa* should be in every anthropology department's A/V collection and it will be of value to museums stewarding Kwakwaka'wakw collections.

Note

1. *In Search of the Hamat'sa: A Tale of Headhunting* is distributed in the U.S. through Documentary Educational Resources (<http://www.der.org/films/in-search-of-hamatsa.html>), in

the UK through the Royal Anthropological Institute (www.therai.org.uk), and in Germany through IWF Wissen und Medien gGmbH (www.iwf.de).

Reference Cited

Glass, Aaron

2006 From Cultural Salvage to Brokerage: The Mythologization of Mungo Martin and the Emergence of Northwest Coast Art. *Museum Anthropology* 29(1):20-43.

Alexander D. King is a Lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen. His research focuses on the language and culture of indigenous peoples of the North Pacific, particularly Kamchatka, Russia. He has published articles in Anthropology and Humanism and Focaal, as well as several chapters in edited collections. Much of his research is summarized at <http://www.koryaks.net/>.