



Kidnapping of Stó:lō Boys Backgrounder

A Quick Introduction to the Stó:lō Community and to Settler Colonialism:



The Stó:lō (pronounced Stah-low) live along the lower Fraser River watershed in southwestern British Columbia. Like other Indigenous communities, the Stó:lō have deep and profound connections to their families, their communities, and their homelands. Archaeologists have determined that there

has been continuous Indigenous occupation of the lower Fraser River watershed in what is now southwestern British Columbia for over 9,000 years (more than 400 generations). Stó:lō oral traditions affirm their ancient presence. Elders explain that the Stó:lō “have always been here,” living where their ancestors lived. The Stó:lō relationship to their homeland, however, goes beyond residency and occupation. In their oral histories Stó:lō Elders explain that at the beginning of time some of their relatives were transformed into the plants, animals, and even mountains of their territory. The living shxweli (spirit or life force) of their ancestors still exists within these and interacts with the current generation of Stó:lō people. This family connection to land and resources continues to be central to the identity of the Stó:lō people.

Stó:lō society is based on the idea of interconnection. Individuals are important for the role they play binding groups together and giving coherence to communities. Every Stó:lō person is a member of more than one overlapping and interconnecting community (eg. family, village settlement, First Nation, tribe, and ultimately the wider Coast Salish culture group). The extended family (grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and in-laws) is the most important group, because extended family connections provide people with access to everything they need. People inherit property (such as fishing sites), access food resource sites, acquire training and education, and secure expert advice or skills through members of their extended family. In this context, for Stó:lō adults, children are the most important and precious things in the world because they represent the continuance of the family and all that implies.

For the past two centuries the Stó:lō have been connected not only to one another through their families and to their homeland, but to global economic and political forces. Some of these global forces are directly linked to what historians call settler colonialism, a process through which newcomers arrive, occupy, and control Indigenous lands. Settler colonialism is not built upon intimate family connections and relationships, but upon a system of privatizing and commodifying land and resources.

In the nineteenth century British and American settler colonialism generally regarded Indigenous people as an impediment or obstacle to the land and resources that settlers wanted for themselves. Indigenous culture was regarded not merely as different, but as inferior. Colonists developed strategies to displace Indigenous people from their ancestral lands so as to make those lands available to settlers. Colonists could rationalize ruthless policies and actions by telling themselves that Indigenous people were incompatible with “modern western society” and doomed to disappear. Seen in this light, even well-intentioned settlers came to consider assimilation as being in Indigenous people’s best interests – when of course it was really in settlers’ best interests. Removing Indigenous people from their parents and families (the central idea of residential schools) was regarded by many settlers as their best way to assimilate Indigenous people.

A Brief Overview of Stó:lō History

Although they share cultural similarities with other Coast Salish groups in the Salish Sea region of the Pacific Northwest, the Stó:lō have a distinct cultural and historical identity. The Stó:lō, whose name means “river people,” have a deep and profound connection to the lands and waters of the lower Fraser River region – their ancestral homelands. The Stó:lō believe that the ancestral spirits that inhabit their territory interact with and guide young people as they grow to be adults. To be removed from one’s territory, especially as a youth, is therefore considered dangerous. Without ancestral

nurturing a person would grow to be an individual who did not know how to behave or to which extended family he/she belonged.

There are more than two dozen Stó:lō First Nations linked together through networks of extended family. The largest of these have just over 1,000 members, and the smallest have just over a dozen. They all share a common language known as Halkomelem, which has three dialects. Their system of governance is based around the “potlatch,” a ceremonial gift giving feast where hereditary property (such as highly productive fishing sites) are transferred from one generation to the next. Up until the late nineteenth century most Stó:lō people lived in communal longhouses and semi-subterranean (underground) pithouses.

The Stó:lō have legendary stories (called *sxwoxwiyam*) which describe the ancient creation and transformations of their world. These stories tell of how an originally chaotic world was made permanent and predictable through the actions of the Transformers (three brothers and a sister who were the children of Red Headed Woodpecker and Black Bear). For example, the Transformers rewarded a particularly generous man by turning him into the cedar tree so that for all time he could continue his generosity. Cedar boughs are used for spiritual cleansing, cedar roots for weaving baskets, cedar bark for clothing, cedar planks for making houses, and the trunks of cedar trees for making canoes.

Sxwoxwiyam also tell of the original leaders and founders of the Stó:lō tribes – people who either fell from the sky or who were born of the earth and who came to be the genealogical founders of contemporary tribal communities. Many of these ancestors worked together across tribal divisions to achieve common goals and prosper. Family and community are central concepts to Stó:lō collective identity. Arranged marriages linked the Stó:lō communities and facilitated the sharing of resources across different geographies and ecosystems and between tribes. For instance, families with shell fish from the ocean regions sought connections with families who owned cranberries from the central valley region and with those who owned salmon fishing camps and wind-drying racks in the Fraser Canyon region, and vice versa. One of the most frightening of the Stó:lō *sxwoxwiyam* tells of a wicked cannibal woman who tries to steal away young children from their families and homes. To this day this story is used to teach Stó:lō children to be cautious around strangers and to stay close to home for safety.

The Age of “Discovery”

1492 marks the year that the European Christopher Columbus “discovered” the Americas. While the “discovery” made by Christopher Columbus in the late fifteenth century was nowhere near the Pacific Northwest Coast (it was in the Caribbean), this event ignited the exploration and colonization of North and South America by Europeans.

In 1579 the British explorer Sir Francis Drake may have entered the Gulf of Georgia. If he did it would have represented the first encounter between Coast Salish peoples and Europeans. However, it was not until the late eighteenth century, 1792 to be exact, that European explorers began to make their presence felt in the Salish Sea region. At this point, both the Spanish and the English claimed ownership over the space. The explorer Dionisio Alcalá-Galiano represented Spanish interests and George Vancouver represented English interests in the area. Independently they mapped and renamed geographical places on the coast that they “discovered,” and as a result began the process of erasing features of Indigenous knowledge and presence in the territory. It should be noted that many

of the names assigned by explorers are still used rather than traditional names given by the Stó:lō and other Coast Salish peoples.

Because European prejudice prevented the explorers and early settlers from understanding the complexities of Indigenous society, they regarded Indigenous people as “uncivilized” and therefore without strong claims to the land. Europeans convinced themselves, therefore, that North America was open to exploration and colonization.

Many ideas were used to further the agenda of colonization, including the concept of “Manifest Destiny” – which was coined in 1845. While this term was predominately used by Americans with reference to the territorial expansion by the United States, the beliefs crossed over into Canada (lands that were at that point British controlled territory). Manifest Destiny is a belief that settler society is destined by God to displace Indigenous people across the North American continent.

The process of displacing Indigenous people was also facilitated by disease. When Europeans arrived they brought with them sickness that had previously been unknown in North America. Among the most devastating were smallpox (an infectious disease) and alcohol (a depressant and addictive substance). Smallpox swept across the continent through inter-tribal trade networks numerous times in the centuries following contact with Europeans. When Cpt. George Vancouver sailed into the Salish Sea in 1792 he witnessed evidence of a recent smallpox epidemic – human skeletons scattered about abandoned villages sites and survivors with terrible pox scars. This epidemic, historians have determined, arrived in Stó:lō territory via complex trade networks from a Spanish fort in Mexico. Steady Indigenous population decline in the nineteenth century due to invasive diseases reinforced for settlers the idea that First Nations were a vanishing people. Seen in this light, many settlers found it convenient to ignore Indigenous rights. Alcohol abuse, by way of contrast, was not contagious, but it was destructive and contributed to social problems and Indigenous population decline. First introduced to the Stó:lō during the gold rush by whiskey pedlars and bootleggers who realized they could make more money selling whiskey than digging for gold, alcohol hit the Stó:lō people hard, tearing families apart and increasing the population’s vulnerability to colonists bent on displacing Indigenous people from their lands and resources.

Californian Connection

A good example of the power of the belief in Manifest Destiny in American society is found in the history of California. After Mexico’s break with Spain in 1821 California was a part of the new Mexican Empire. Meanwhile, throughout the early nineteenth century a series of wars with Indigenous nations as well as with the British and the Spanish had seen the United States expand westward from its original toehold on the eastern seaboard. Conflicts between American settlers and the Mexican government led to the outbreak of the Mexican American War in 1846 which culminated in the American annexation of Texas, Arizona, and California. Similarly, the arrival of large numbers of American settlers into the Oregon Territory (a joint US-British territory) resulted in America displacing the British fur traders and securing control of what are now Oregon and Washington and the establishment of the international border with British territory along the 49th parallel.

When America annexed California the majority of the region’s population was Indigenous, many of whom lived under the exploitative control of the roughly 500 non-Indigenous men who owned the territory’s giant rancheros (cattle ranches). Laws from the Mexican era were adopted by the

Americans to enable them to continue denying basic rights to California's Indigenous people. American ranchers and farmers were empowered by law to compel Indigenous people to work for them. One law permitted American settlers to abduct Indigenous children and exploit their labour, and another made it impossible for a "white man" to be convicted on the testimony of an "Indian." In California, the exploitation of Indigenous children was indistinguishable from the treatment of African-American slaves in certain other parts of the United States.

When in 1848 word spread around the globe that gold could be found in California, the treatment of Indigenous people only got worse. Forced servitude continued, but it was compounded by a well-documented genocidal war by which groups of organized American militia were paid to take whatever means they felt justified to remove Indigenous people from the lands where gold was plentiful. In 1851 California's first governor, Peter Burnett, infamously stated "That a war of extermination will continue to be waged between the two races until the Indian race becomes extinct."¹

The Fraser River Gold Rush of 1858 and the Kidnapping of Stó:lō Boys

Economic gain through resource extraction was the major motivation for exploration and colonization in North America. Prior to the discovery of gold in the Fraser Valley, only a few dozen non-Indigenous people lived in the territory (mostly huddled in Hudson's Bay Company forts at Langley and Hope). These non-Indigenous people were mainly there to trade. They did not make serious attempts to control Stó:lō people or to change Stó:lō society.

In the early summer of 1858, relationships changed drastically in the Fraser Valley. Over thirty thousand miners, mainly veterans of the California Gold Rush, entered Stó:lō territory. Among them George W. Crum, an American miner who would kidnap the son of Sokolowicz, a Stó:lō man. The miners were desperate not to let Indigenous people block their access to gold. Stó:lō people were just as determined to protect themselves and their lands. Replicating what they had done in California, in the summer of 1858 several thousand American miners organized themselves into a military unit and waged what they explained at the time would be a "war of extermination" against Stó:lō peoples and their Nlakapamux neighbours. Several villages were attacked, men were killed, and women raped.

It should be noted, even with these tense and often violent encounters, the Stó:lō did get along with some of the miners. They were in need of food, equipment, and guides, and many Stó:lō were quick to offer their services in exchange for new forms of wealth, and there were instances of cross-cultural generosity and compassion. Those American miners who stayed through the fall and winter of 1858 suffered from malnutrition and would not have survived if the Stó:lō had not traded and/or gifted with them for food. The Stó:lō referred to these newcomers as Xwelítem, which in their Halkomelem language means "hungry people." This term is still used today when referencing non-Indigenous inhabitants in Stó:lō territory.

The gold rush also shaped the borders of British Columbia. In November 1858, the British government proclaimed the creation of the colony of British Columbia under the leadership of

¹ Peter Burnett, Governor of California, State of the State Address, January 6, 1851.
http://governors.library.ca.gov/addresses/s_01-Burnett2.html [accessed November 3, 2018].

Governor James Douglas (a former HBC trader). A joint British-American Boundary Commission began formally to survey the 49th parallel in the summer of 1858. The boundary between Oregon and British territory had been established in treaty at the 49th parallel in 1846, but up till 1858 no one was exactly sure where the 49th parallel was. The British were concerned that continued ambiguity over the precise location of the international border might cause the American government to use the clash between American miners and Indigenous people as an excuse to annex British Columbia. Control of this territory meant control of the resources and people within it.

Some of the earliest miners to arrive did strike it rich, but within a few months the major gold and gravel bars along the Fraser River were firmly in the control of large (mostly American-owned) corporations. The majority of the individual miners who came to the Fraser River in 1858 searching for gold left with little to show for their efforts. By 1863 the easy-to-access gold had been removed and the miners were either moving on to new gold fields deeper in the British Columbia interior (at places like Barkerville in the Cariboo) or they were “packing up stakes” and heading home. Home for many of these men, of course, was California, which still had a labour shortage and was still governed by draconian rules that denied Indigenous people basic civil liberties, let alone Aboriginal rights. According to a contemporary observer, “a great many” of the miners decided that if they could not return home with pockets filled with gold they could instead return with Indigenous boys, presumably to work their farms and ranches. The exact number of boys who were kidnapped by returning Californian miners will likely never be known, but the few records that have survived suggest the action of George Crum, who stopped at the HBC fort at Hope and kidnapped a young Stó:lō boy from the Pilalt tribe, was not an isolated incident.

The impact the kidnappings had on Stó:lō families is difficult to imagine. Sokolowicz, the father of the boy kidnapped by George Crum, went to remarkable ends to try to bring his son home. He and his family jumped into their canoes and chased the steamboat that Crum had boarded to facilitate his escape. Sokolowicz repeatedly approached Hudson’s Bay Company and British Columbia colonial officials seeking their assistance in having his son returned, and he even sought to repatriate his son’s body after learning that his child – renamed ‘Charlie Crum’ by his kidnapper – had died and was buried in California. Other families reacted with similar despair. One kidnapped boy’s father is recorded as having searched the woods for days in the hope that his missing son had merely wandered off. But when it became apparent that his son had been abducted by a Californian miner the father simply gave up living and soon after died of despair.

The gold rush was a tragically key moment in Stó:lō history. While Gov. Douglas worked with the Stó:lō and some other Indigenous people to try to protect certain Aboriginal rights (and certain members of his office tried to help with the repatriation of Sokolowicz’s son) for the most part these efforts failed. And what few policies had been put in place to protect Indigenous rights were largely reversed by Douglas’ successors within three years of his retirement in 1864.

In sum, despite the helpful efforts and good intentions of certain citizens and government officials, the rights of Stó:lō peoples were largely disregarded in favour of settler economic gain. This resulted in Stó:lō villages being attacked, Stó:lō women being raped, Stó:lō boys being kidnapped, and Stó:lō lands being taken. By the time British Columbia joined Canada in confederation in 1871 Stó:lō people were living impoverished lives on tiny Indian reserves. This alienation continues today and represents an example of how nation building and the extraction of resources were prioritized by the early settlers over Indigenous interests and concerns. To this day the Stó:lō struggle to have their

rights recognized. The original, relatively large reserves that were created for some Stó:lō communities in 1864 were reduced by over 90% just three years later. In the absence of a treaty with Canada, the Stó:lō are still unable to prosper from the rich resources of s'olh téméxw, their traditional territory.

Government Policies In Canada and the United States

During the second half the nineteenth century and continuing throughout much of the twentieth century, the effort to assimilate Indigenous peoples across North America intensified. The racist assumption that European culture was superior to Indigenous cultures like that of the Stó:lō people, resulted in devaluing Indigenous knowledge and their distinctive ways of life. For example, Indigenous peoples were prevented from fishing and hunting and gathering as they had previously. They were told they needed to become western-style farmers – but at the same time they were denied access to sufficient lands to succeed at farming. As previously mentioned, the Stó:lō's connection to the land was broad and encompassed far more than the Fraser River. However, the Indian Act and the subsequent creation of reserves undermined the traditional understanding of land and space for Indigenous peoples across Canada. A major effort of assimilation involved the education of Indigenous children in residential schools. Western Canada's first residential school, St. Mary's Catholic school, opened in Stó:lō territory in 1862. Federal legislation made residential school attendance mandatory in the late 19th century for First Nations children between the ages of 7 and 15. Starting in 1920 this policy was rigorously enforced by government agents. St. Mary's residential school continued to operate until 1986.

Connecting the Kidnapping of Stó:lō Boys to Other Narratives

The story of the kidnapping of Stó:lō boys during the Fraser River gold rush is significant in and of itself and historians have noted that this history is intertwined with, and influenced by, many factors. Some of these include the development of the Canadian and American nation states. It should also be noted that there is a connection between the kidnapped boys and the continued contemporary vulnerability of Indigenous youth as reflected in the ongoing crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls across Canada. The 2015 report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) recognized the injustices faced by Indigenous youth, who were forced to attend residential schools. While the full scope of these connections are not examined in the lesson plans provided, teachers and students are encouraged to consider, discuss, and investigate them as they learn about the kidnapping of the Stó:lō boys during the 1858 gold rush.