

PERSPECTIVES

THE RAVEN'S NEST: SEEKING ANCESTRAL ORIGINS.

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The Raven's Nest Indigenous People that historically inhabited the Crowsnest Pass valley region (now referred to as the Crowsnest Pass of southwestern Alberta and southeastern British Columbia) have been an enigma for historians and scholars since so little is known and understood about this "lost tribe" of Indigenous People. There are no oral histories or stories that were recorded historically about them. In fact, most knowledge about the Raven's Nest People continues to be predominantly speculative. In order to address this situation, this article proposes a hypothesis that although speculative, presents a probable explanation, perhaps even a compelling one, about the ancestral origins of the Raven's Nest Indigenous People. Further research and the gathering of stories including the oral history of the Raven's Nest People will still have to be sought, from Elders of the Crow Nation, and possibly other Indigenous tribes that frequented the region of the Crowsnest Pass, however, it is hoped that this article will provide the necessary foundation for further research.

It is known that an epidemic of disease, possibly small pox, completely decimated the "raven people" in the winter of ca. 1736 (Manyguns [e-mail] September 11, 2018). Manyguns notes that "the Blackfoot also recorded suffering many losses in the 1736 epidemic in their Wintercounts. Losses for all the tribes in the area were severe." (Manyguns. [e-mail] 2018). This pandemic is thought to have been spread from the Crow tribe to other tribes in the Kootenay region adjacent to the Crowsnest Pass, with only a few scattered survivors among the Salish tribes such as the Flathead and Kalispell. (Teit 1930. p. 315) Indeed, "so many people died that they could not be buried and the dogs ate them." as recounted by Michel Revais, a French trapper and hunter. (Teit 1930. p. 316)

Apparently, many of those infected tried sweat baths and bathing in cold water; however, all died. (Teit 1930 p.316) This commonly referred to incident that is an historical account of the demise of the Raven's Nest Indigenous People is one of the only known historical details about this people, and seems to interestingly point to the fact that the Raven's Nest People were a tribe or clan of the Crow Nation, the same people that bore the brunt of the 1736 epidemic and suffered the greatest loss of life.

Other historical accounts muddy the waters though on this point such as Flanagan's that suggests that the Raven's Nest People were "...a band of the Kutenai [that] lived in the Crowsnest Pass region [and] were decimated by smallpox shortly after the introduction of horses." (Flanagan 2001 p.54).

Flanagan seems to imply that possibly horse blankets that were infected with disease may have been the root cause of this epidemic. Furthermore, Flanagan asserts that the name of Raven's Nest is a Blackfoot name for this indigenous people. (Flanagan 2001 p. 34). Despite this though, most scholars have indeed previously assumed that the Raven's Nest People were a tribe of the Interior Salish whose ancestral origins are from what is now interior British Columbia, such as the Fraser Valley region. (Field [conversation] 2018) However, it should be noted that in 1736 the Kutenai had not yet acquired horses, and therefore, Flanagan appears to be in error on this point since Teit notes that in the early 1700's the Blackfoot tribes had started an aggressive war to acquire horses, and that the Shoshoni and Salish had horses but the Kutenai did not. (Teit 1930 p.317) Flanagan's assertion that the Raven's Nest having acquired horses as a tribe of the Kutenai seems to be disputed by Teit's earlier research findings. Furthermore, Teit, an ethnographer, notes that the Salish tribes south of the Kootenay region (known as the "camas people") referred to a local regional tribe of the Crow as "the raven people," and the tribe of the River Crow as "the blue or green people." (Teit 1930 p.301-302) Since the modern contemporary tribes of the Crow are sub-divided into the two principal tribes of the Mountain Crow and the River Crow (Lowie 1912) it seems that quite likely the Raven's Nest People were a sub-tribe or clan of the Mountain Crow. Teit's historical analyses is not as far removed as Flanagan's from the historical era in question, and also Teit provides an extensive analysis of many other tribal affiliations and their common nomenclatures among the various Indigenous Peoples that lived in the Crowsnest and Kootenay regions. It is also interesting to note that the Crow are also known as *apsáruke*, and that this refers to a bird that no longer lives in their country. Could this be a metaphorical reference to the Raven's Nest clan that no longer exists as a people?

Furthermore, could this reference to "a bird" that no longer lives in their (i.e. Crow) territorial or ancestral lands refer to a clan that lived at the periphery of these ancestral lands? (i.e. the Crowsnest Pass), a region that no longer lies within the contemporary territorial lands of the Crow Peoples. A further name that denotes the Crow, and one that the Crow often call themselves is: "Children of the large-Beaked Bird" (*Apsaalooke*) (Lowie 1922 p.268), with the apparent suggestion that this implies a large-beaked bird such as the crow, and quite likely also the raven as well. Both of these birds are of the same family of birds

and seem to have been used interchangeably by the Crow tribes themselves, but also historically by other tribes to refer to the Crow Peoples.

There is a somewhat amusing story that further illustrates these historical ambiguities. Presumably, when the French were the first to arrive in the region now known as the Crowsnest Pass, prior to the Seven Years War (1756–63), before French influence began to wane and the English were to become increasingly predominant in the eventual exploration and settlement of this region; early French trappers and explorers referred to this region of the West as The Raven's Nest, probably in accordance with the prevailing indigenous naming of this mountain region. However, after the English arrived, they apparently mistranslated the French word for "raven" (*corbeau*) and instead used the English word "crow." It seems probable that the Crowsnest Pass region was historically called instead: the Raven's Nest Pass.

There is yet another story that may provide a better explanation for the subsequent naming of the Crowsnest Pass, a name that is thought to have originated from a legendary battle in the shadow of Crowsnest Mountain. It should be noted also that "the Blackfoot people have significant ancient stories of the Crow's Nest pass, namely the story of Scar Face and when he was given the sweat lodge to bring to the people. The Crow in the Crow's Nest mountains showed him where the Creator's Lodge was to be found. These are ancient stories that predate the sweat lodge use by the Blackfoot people." (Manyguns [e-mail] 2018). According to the Blackfoot Record of the Warriors this battle occurred in 1853 though, more than 100 years after the Raven's Nest People had ceased to exist as a people. The battle is said to have taken place after a war party of Crow warriors had stolen several horses from the Blackfoot further towards the open plains to the east, and afterwards had attempted to make their escape towards the west through the Crowsnest river valley, arriving at the base of a mountain. The Blackfoot were able to pursue the Crow war party that then took defensive positions in a "nest" or natural hollow. The Blackfoot eventually defeated the Crow warriors with none of the Crow living to recount their battle. The Blackfoot then named the site Maisto Kowa or Crow's Nest, to commemorate their victory over the Crow. This battle is often described as the legendary "last stand" of the Crow, no doubt because this battle represented the last attempt by the Crow to exert any presence in this region. An alternative explanation could be that this war party of Crows was attempting to flee to the territorial lands of their allies the Kutenai where they could find a safe haven from the Blackfoot. Nevertheless, it appears that many Crow may have been living in the area of the Crowsnest Pass although of a different clan than that of the Raven People, since it is recorded that many Crow died in 1805; as recorded in a "winter count" by Bull

Plume (northern Pikanni). (Manyguns 2018 p.7).

Monica Field has referred to this epic conflict as being the Crow's Masada, and was indicative of their willingness to fight to the last man. Field's comment raises an intriguing question; why did the Crow flee to the west when their present territorial lands were towards the east and south along the Little Bighorn River and mountains? One plausible explanation may be that this Crow war party may have been intending an attempt to advance and re-establish a presence in a territorial region where their ancestral relatives, the Raven's Nest People formerly lived in the recent past. This affinity to the land in the region of the Crowsnest as an ancestral land would also explain their resolve to collectively fight to the death with no survivors. Linda Manyguns (Siksika/T'su Tina) has also noted that, "many nations were moving west [at this time sic] due to the loss of animals. [These animals sic] were hunted and eaten without any concern for sustainability for the animal populations by settlers [and this] further forced the people to move to find food, which also impacted decisions about where to find a place to live." It is therefore quite probable that some clans of the Crow Indigenous Peoples may have been moving westward to find a more suitable place to live when they were forcibly confronted by the Blackfoot. This may also suggest that the presence of Crow Indigenous Peoples in the Crowsnest Pass in the mid 19th century may have been due to an economic necessity of survival, and not necessarily due to an ancestral sense of attachment to the land of this region.

Admittedly, most of this hypothesis was based upon the ethnographic study of James Teit and his claim that the "raven people" lived among the Northern Kutenai People in the Elk Valley near present day Fernie and Sparwood, British Columbia in Teit's study entitled: *The Salishan Tribes of the Western Plateaus* (1930). Further recent research has revealed additional insights into the probable origins of the Raven Indigenous Peoples. Recall that my assertion is that the "raven people" were a clan or sub-tribal group of the Crow Nation (Apsaalooké). I will now further elaborate upon this idea.

The traditional territory of the two major tribal divisions or groups of the Crow Nation were: the Mountain Crow (Ashalaho) that lived near the Bighorn Mountains (including the Bighorn, Rosebud, Tongue and Wind Rivers); and River Crow along the Yellowstone (Yellowstone Basin including the Milk and Missouri Rivers) (Bolen 2012 p.15). The River Crow eventually migrated further west to include territorial lands along the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains of Montana. (Bergon, Ed. by 1989 journal entry August 23, 1805) In 1804, Meriwether Lewis of the Lewis and Clark expedition referred to the River Crow as "the Raven Indians," and recorded this Peoples population. Lewis also noted that The Ravens was also the name of a militant society, most likely of the Crow. This would seem to indicate

that the Crow Nation historically was also often referred to as Ravens. In fact, the tribal names of Crow and Raven were seemingly used interchangeably. The Index of the Journals recording the expeditions of Lewis and Clark has a citation for "Raven Indians" and directs the reader to "see Crow." In addition, the Crow Elder, Medicine Crow has stated that in Crow legends, and oral creation stories, that "The character of Raven was sometimes interchanged with Crow." (Bolen 2012 p.185) It is therefore apparent that the Crow Nation was known historically by several names, and that these tribal names were used to refer to the same Indigenous Peoples, most notably among these was Raven and Crow. Finally, many names of Crow Elders such as Medicine Crow (also known as Sacred Raven) (Bolen 2012 p.85) bear reference to both the raven and the crow, and therefore the Crow had many tribal and personal names in their lexicon for their Peoples that included the raven and the crow. (Bergon Vol. III p.236)

Although it now seems more certain that the Crow Nation were also called "Raven Indians," the question still remains as to whether the "raven people" mentioned by Teit in his study were indeed a clan of the Crow Nation? Once more the journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition shed some light on this proposition. According to the oral history of a Crow Elder named Cold Wind conveyed to Lewis during his travels, a Crow Chief of the No Vitals band settled in the early 17th century near present day Cardston, AB, and along the White Bear River (I.e. Milk River) in southern Alberta with approximately 400 people from this band. (Medicine Crow 1992 p.20-21). It is unknown "...how many moons or winters..." that this band inhabited this region before travelling further south to the Great Salt Lake. Chief No Vitals was succeeded by his protégé Running Coyote. (Medicine Crow 1992 p.21).

Herman Viola of the Smithsonian Institute notes that Running Coyote led a "seceding faction of the ancestral tribe out west about 1600 - 1625" and was the first Crow to drive buffalo over an embankment. The chronology of this story is interesting since it is the same historical era when the "raven people" were thought to have lived among the Northern Kutenai. Recall that Teit notes that the "raven people" were decimated entirely by disease in 1736. (Teit 1930 p.316). Was this small clan, the so-called "seceding faction" led further westward by Running Coyote indeed the "raven people" that dwelled among the Kutenai? Historical records do not provide definitive answers to this question, although it does seem to be a compelling possibility, especially since the Chief No Vitals band lived near the Crowsnest in the southern Alberta region at Cardston. It is conceivable that the clan led by Running Coyote journeyed westward to the Kootenays of British Columbia and frequented the Crowsnest Pass. Was the Running Coyote clan also the "raven people" clan?

I hope to answer this question through discussions with con-

temporary Elders of the Crow Nation, and then finally determine the mystery of the ancestral origins of this Indigenous People of the Crowsnest.

Field's comments therefore provide another interesting and compelling reason for further research on this subject, and necessitates that interviews be conducted with Crow and Blackfoot Elders regarding their oral histories with the hope that these discussions may reveal additional insights and explanations for a lost people: the Raven's Nest or "raven people"; as well as additional information on the territorial Indigenous place-names of the Crowsnest Pass and the origins of these names.