

Ethnohistory Field School Report 2015

“Keep Care of the Baby’s Spirit”: Stó:lō Cultural Teachings about Birthing Practices

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The Ethnohistory Field School is a collaboration of the Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre, Stó:lō Nation & Stó:lō Tribal Council, and the History Departments of the University of Victoria and University of Saskatchewan.



The other thing about children is they're so extremely important because without them, your culture dies. You die as a society. And it gives us purpose. If you had nobody to share our teachings with, we as adults have no purpose. That is our purpose – our purpose is to teach our children as much as we can about who they are, about where they come from and about all those traditions. And if we don't have that, we have nothing. We are nothing.¹

- Helena Paul

When I began this project on Stó:lō cultural birthing practices, I did not expect there to be such a connection to the revitalization of Stó:lō culture in general. This project was initially suggested by several young Stó:lō women who wanted knowledge of cultural birthing practices so they could be observed in the future. As such, I thought I would create a list of practices by gathering material from ethnographies and Elders, rather than spend a large amount of time on *why* practices such as these are important to the community. It became clear that the significance of these practices was a key element in understanding their utility in Stó:lō culture. There was a stark connection between the importance of birth in Stó:lō communities and the loss of culture after aggressive assimilation techniques used by the Canadian government.

Stó:lō cultural teachings around birth are important to the survival of the culture itself. According to the women I interviewed during the course of the Ethnohistory Field School with the Stó:lō First Nations, childbirth marks the beginning of reclaiming culture, revitalizing it, and stabilizing the baby's spirit within the future of the community.² There is therefore a responsibility to "keep care of the baby's spirit."³

¹ Helena Paul, interviewed by Michelle Brandsma. May 21, 2015, Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre, Chilliwack, BC.

² I was a part of this field school in Chilliwack, British Columbia, for May of 2015.

³ Yvette John, interviewed by Michelle Brandsma and Daniel Palmer. May 22, 2015, Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre, Chilliwack, BC.

Acknowledging the power of the spirit is key to understanding these cultural practices. By building the baby's spirit through these traditions, establishing it within Stó:lō heritage and within the community, the spirit will not wander. The child will know their home, and will be able to grow into a healthy adult, becoming a productive member of Stó:lō society. Preserving, learning, and teaching these practices is therefore a foundational step towards maintaining and nurturing Stó:lō culture and community.

This paper will argue that teaching and performing traditional cultural birthing practices is an important step in revitalizing Stó:lō culture in the wake of Canadian colonization. Taking care of the baby's spirit, a theme running throughout the Stó:lō teachings around birth is arguably the most valuable part of this process. It demonstrates how the care of individual spirits can affect an entire community. An immense spiritual connection was evident in both the ethnographies and the stories shared with me. This spiritual nature was linked with the loss of culture, and the need to reclaim it. Stó:lō healer and community member Yvette John stated in an interview:

I think that we tend to be lost. Our spirit has not been taken care of. I'm not just talking about us individually. But I'm thinking about, like, each culture has taken care of things in a proper way. Now that the world has gone rancid everything is not taken care of properly."⁴

Taking care of the spirit through practicing cultural births carries important implications for the continued reclamation of Aboriginal culture in Stó:lō communities.

Ethnohistorical methods, as informed by scholars such as Keith Carlson, make up the bulk of this study. A discipline lying somewhere in between anthropology and

⁴ Interview with Yvette John.

history, ethnohistory requires a large component of oral history.⁵ The interviews I conducted for this project were undertaken as part of an Ethnohistory Field School hosted by the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Victoria, and the Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre (SRRMC) in the Fraser Valley. I had a total of seven informants from the Stó:lō community who shared with me their understandings of the significance of these cultural practices. The interviews included questions not only about specific practices and teachings, but also about the importance of childbirth in the culture. I asked about traditional stories regarding birth, and about specific food, ceremonies, and other practices. I asked why each practice was important to the culture, and why people thought that women and families should observe the teachings.

In addition to conducting interviews, I investigated these cultural practices through several ethnographies of the Coast Salish people. Each ethnographer devoted a section to birth and birthing ceremonies, denoting their significance within Stó:lō culture. H.G. Barnett, for example, discusses “birth and infancy.”⁶ Charles Hill-Tout includes sections throughout his survey and ethnography on birth and its ceremonies.⁷ Wilson Duff discusses birthing techniques in his ethnography as well.⁸ Even Diamond Jenness recorded a few stories regarding children and infancy in his “Coast Salish Mythology.”⁹

While the information in these ethnographies was and is important to gaining a

⁵ Keith Thor Carlson, John Lutz, and David Schaepe, “Turning the Page: Ethnohistory from a New Generation,” *The University of the Fraser Valley Research Review*, 2, no 2, 1.

⁶ H.G. Barnett, *The Coast Salish of British Columbia* (Eugene: University of Oregon, 1955).

⁷ Charles Hill-Tout, and Ralph Maud, *The Salish People: The Local Contribution of Charles Hill-Tout* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1978).

⁸ Wilson Duff, *The Upper Stalo Indians of the Fraser Valley, British Columbia* (Victoria: British Columbia Provincial Museum, 1953).

⁹ Diamond Jenness, *The Faith of a Coast Salish Indian* (Victoria: British Columbia Provincial Museum, 1955).

comprehensive knowledge of cultural birth practices, the ethnographers failed to completely explain the significance of these practices to the culture.

While they gathered up a large amount of material regarding cultural birthing practices, the language used in the ethnographies often did not highlight the spiritual significance of cultural birthing practices, and in some cases used language that reflected the ethnographer's lack of acceptance of Salish people's spiritual worldview. Regarding the customs and prohibitions during pregnancy, for example, H.G. Barnett describes them as having a "magical effect on the life or the physique of the child she carried."¹⁰ This imposes a Western worldview on these practices. To the people who perform them, they are not "magical." There exists an important spiritual reasoning behind every action.

The attempt at explaining this cultural significance came during this field school. It was a turn towards a "new ethnohistory," as outlined by John Lutz, Keith Carlson, and Dave Schaepe in "Turning the Page: Ethnohistory from a New Generation." Here, they identify two major components of ethnohistory: respecting differing world views, and recognizing "that cultural change is as likely to be the outcome of indigenous agency as coercive colonialism, and that continuity should be no more or less valued in an assessment of indigenous society than innovation."¹¹ As a part of the field school, I was immersed into Stó:lō culture and society, and presented with many opportunities to bear witness to different ceremonies and practices. As an outsider, it was an incredible, eye-opening experience to see and be a part of this culture. The identified components of ethnohistory resonated throughout my research with the Stó:lō. Recognizing the different worldview I shared with my informants was a step towards understanding how they

¹⁰ Barnett, 128.

¹¹ Carlson, Lutz, and Schaepe, 2-3.

understood their teachings around birth, and as such opened me up to learning a different way of examining the world, and how to navigate through it. There are clearly elements of both continuity and change in these practices, as the Stó:lō recover and stabilize some of the culture that was lost as a result of attempted assimilation techniques focused on the Aboriginal body.

In her book *Colonizing Bodies*, Mary-Ellen Kelm discusses the control imposed on Aboriginal bodies by the Canadian government as a method of assimilation.¹² In her examination of residential schools, Kelm demonstrates how Aboriginal children were taken away from their supposed “negligent” parents.¹³ I realized when I conducted my interviews with women who had either been a part of the residential school system themselves, or were descended from students that this had deep-seated effects. “The goal of residential schooling was to ‘re-form’ Aboriginal bodies, and this they did,” Kelm writes.¹⁴ Residential schools became a place where traditional cultural teachings around birth had no place, and were subsequently stamped out as actively as possible. While Kelm is primarily examining the first half of the twentieth century, the residential schools continued into the second half, when several of my own informants attended the schools and suffered the same cultural consequences.

Kelm’s book is not entirely bleak, however. She also argues that childbirth became a way for Aboriginal women to renegotiate the worlds in which they lived. Joann Kovacich discusses this renegotiation of culture in her article “The Legal and Social

¹² Mary-Ellen Kelm, *Colonizing Bodies: Aboriginal Health and Healing in British Columbia, 1900-50* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998).

¹³ Kelm, 61.

¹⁴ Kelm, 57.

Construction of Culture.”¹⁵ She asserts that: “Cultures and identities are constantly (re)created and (re)negotiated as individuals and collectivities encounter new socio-political, geographical and economic macro and micro environments.”¹⁶ Kelm argues that women were able to take aspects of Aboriginal culture and combine them with Western medicinal techniques in birthing practices. In part, this was because of limited access to medical care on certain reserves.¹⁷ While this “renegotiation” was evident in my discussions with community members, it was also clear that contemporary cultural teachings and practices extended further than this concept. Not only do they demonstrate an attempt to combine popular medicine with cultural practices, these teachings are meant to ground individuals into their heritage and create a stronger future for the Stó:lō people. Stó:lō women are navigating successfully between cultures.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, arguing from a structuralist methodology, states in *Myth and Meaning* that culture is a way of ordering and making sense of the world.¹⁸ The Stó:lō organize their worldview through a spiritual lens, and childbirth in particular demonstrates how deeply spirits affect their daily life. If culture is a social construction that allows individuals to perceive the world in which they live, “tradition,” then, “becomes a means of raising essential questions about the ways in which we pass on the life of cultures – questions that necessarily include issues of authority as well as invention, practice as well as interpretation,” Mark Salber Phillips writes in his

¹⁵ Joann Kovacich, “The Legal and Social Construction of Culture,” *Legal Studies Forum*, 19 (1995): 287-316.

¹⁶ Kovacich, 288.

¹⁷ Kelm, 7.

¹⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 12-13.

introduction to *Questions of Traditions*.¹⁹ There is pressure on pregnant women as they try giving birth traditionally in a “modern” world. Some are becoming successful in having cultural births in hospitals, clearly navigating between cultures.²⁰ Examining the teachings and traditions of childbirth practices demonstrates how the “life” of Stó:lō culture is being passed on through the generations, successfully navigating and recreating itself in Canadian society.

By conducting interviews, I was able to glean information from men and women who have firsthand knowledge of having children in the Stó:lō community. However, it was at times difficult to gather a consensus on some practices. Through the interviews, it became increasingly evident that some cultural memory had been lost as a result of Canadian colonization. This brings into question ideas of rediscovered versus invented traditions. Phillips relates tradition to issues of memory, stating “real memory . . . ‘ceaselessly reinvents tradition,’” leaving it open to interpretation and changes over time.²¹ With the loss of some of these practices over time, the interviews posed a problem in determining what material was actually a “traditional” Stó:lō practice, versus what practices had been borrowed from other cultures, or even “inauthentic” or “invented” traditions based on collective cultural memory.²²

Examining the ethnographies also posed a problem. Many of the specific practices discussed by both anthropologists and community members were similar in content, but

¹⁹ Mark Salber Phillips, “Introduction: What is Tradition When It Is Not “Invented”?” A Historiographical Introduction,” found in *Questions of Tradition*, edited by Gordon J. Schochet and Mark Salber Phillips (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 25.

²⁰ Interview with Helena Paul.

²¹ Phillips, 9.

²² Phillips, 8.

differed in intention. While the Coast Salish ethnographies had comprehensive sections devoted to childbirth, the ethnographers essentially missed the deep spiritual connections made through these cultural practices. All my informants, however, expressed the inherent spirituality of childbirth. Most birthing practices have important spiritual implications, regardless of what it concerns. To try and combat the issues of collective memory in the oral interviews, and the problems present in the ethnographies, I chose to discuss those practices that are corroborated by multiple sources.

Some of these practices, performed both before and after the birth of the child, connect the baby with the ancestral spirits, beginning to strongly place roots in his or her heritage. Food, while a practical element of survival, was an important element of this. Kelm states: “Food is what makes people strong.”²³ Food strengthens the spiritual body, in addition to the physical one. While some foods were prohibited for aesthetic reasons – for example, a pregnant woman should not eat strawberries because they could cause strawberry birthmarks on the child, or eating seafood may cause a child to gain crab-like qualities – traditional foods create a strong foundation on which a Stó:lō child can begin to grow.²⁴

Generally speaking, a common recommendation is that a pregnant woman eats a variety of traditional foods. Practically, eating a variety of foods -including things like salmon, stinging nettle, and wild meat – would provide the baby with nutrients to grow

²³ Kelm, 37.

²⁴ Nikki LaRock, interviewed by Michelle Brandsma, May 28, 2015, Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre, Chilliwack, BC. Interview with Yvette John. Women should not eat the fin of the fish either, or a child may be born feet-first. Virginia Peters, interview with Michelle Brandsma and Davis Rogers. May 29, 2015, Sts’ailes Band Office, Sts’ailes, BC.

healthy and strong.²⁵ Eating a different combination of these traditional foods would also prevent the baby from becoming fussy.²⁶ By introducing these foods during pregnancy, and when the child is young, it grows to enjoy the taste of traditional foods.²⁷ There is a deeper spiritual connection than nutrition, though. Yvette John discusses being advised by her father to eat plenty of Spring Salmon throughout her pregnancies.²⁸ Eating traditional food strengthens a spiritual connection to the ancestors. The child is then effectively connected to the culture in which it has been born into.

After the birth of the child, the baby should be named. This was another powerful way to connect the child with their heritage. Naming the newborn could prove to be a long process, because the “pet name” chosen by the parents or Elders often came from previous family members.²⁹ It is irrelevant from which gender or side of the family the name is chosen.³⁰ Rather, the child is watched for a period of time to determine what qualities he or she possesses. The child is then named according to the ancestor whose characteristics the he or she most resembles.³¹ This process effectively binds the child to their heritage and connects them to family members preceding them.

²⁵ Interview with Nikki LaRock.

²⁶ Albert “Sonny” McHalsie, interviewed by Michelle Brandsma, May 26, 2015, Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre, Chilliwack BC.

²⁷ Interview with Yvette John.

²⁸ Interview with Yvette John.

²⁹ Yvonne Tumangday, interviewed by Michelle Brandsma, Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre, May 12, 2015. Patricia John, interviewed by Michelle Brandsma and Colin Osmond, May 21, 2015, Chawathil Band Office, Chawathil, BC.

³⁰ Duff, 76. Barnett, 132-133.

³¹ Interview with Patricia John. Interview with Helena Paul.

The resurgence of welcoming ceremonies in Stó:lō communities is becoming vital in connecting the baby to the culture. While some individuals assert that hosting a ceremony or a feast is a choice made by the family, others have demonstrated how the ceremony is becoming more formal in certain communities. Sts'ailes First Nations, for example, has begun to have an annual welcoming ceremony, where children born in that year are taken to meet the Stó:lō Elders³². A drumming ceremony is held, and the child is introduced to everyone attending the welcoming ceremony.³³ This introduces the child to the culture, grounding them within it. Family and community become responsible for raising the child strong in the heritage and culture of the Stó:lō.

The baby's spirit is still connected to the spirit world, and is not entirely stable in our world until it is about seven years old.³⁴ In their chapter "Aboriginal Midwifery in British Columbia," Cecilia Benoit and Dena Carroll describe a newborn as beginning "the cycle of life" and substantiating "the delicate balance between the spiritual and physical planes."³⁵ The spirit is therefore incredibly vulnerable, and it is primarily the mother's responsibility to care for and protect it. When the mother is pregnant, for example, she must maintain a good disposition, staying away from "negativity".³⁶ The father can take a role in this, keeping the mother happy and calm throughout the

³² Interview with Virginia Peters.

³³ Interview with Virginia Peters.

³⁴ Interview with Yvette John.

³⁵ Cecilia Benoit and Dena Carroll, "Aboriginal Midwifery in British Columbia: A Narrative Untold," in *A Persistent Spirit: Towards Understanding Aboriginal Health in British Columbia*, edited by Peter H. Stephenson, et. al (Victoria: University of Victoria, Western Geographical Press, 1995), 231.

³⁶ Yvonne Tumangday, interviewed by Michelle Brandsma, May 12, 2015, Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre, Chilliwack, BC.

pregnancy.³⁷ Several women testified that their children took on the temperaments they themselves had while pregnant. Anger, sadness, even strong spiritual connections can appear in the child, and this is a result of the baby picking up on the mother's "energy" while she was pregnant.³⁸ A child's spirit is an incredibly powerful and yet vulnerable entity.

Because of this vulnerability, and because the baby's spirit is strongly connected to the spirit world, mothers must be especially careful around death and spiritual ceremonies. Women are not allowed to attend funerals, enter graveyards, or even be outside at nighttime, when the spirits are the most active.³⁹ It is a fear that the baby's spirit might follow those who have already passed into the spirit world. Nikki LaRock provided a story of one woman's baby who passed in this way:

You have to be careful – you can't go to funerals. One of my aunts – One of my aunts was pregnant. She went to her friend's – her friend lost her baby. So she went to her funeral. And that baby's spirit was playing with her baby's spirit while it was in her tummy. And then she went back home, and that baby's spirit went with her. And then that baby – her baby ended up passing away.⁴⁰

Extra care must therefore be taken to ensure the baby's safety. Wolfgang Jilek discusses the possibilities of "spiritual illness" and the spiritual side of healing in his book *Indian Healing*.⁴¹ While his discussion is not specific to the spirits of children, he does delve into the vulnerability and powerful nature of spirits. Kelm's book on the physical health

³⁷ Interview with Yvonne Tumangday.

³⁸ Interview with Yvonne Tumangday. Interview with Helena Paul. Interview with Nikki LaRock.

³⁹ Barnett, 128. Interview with Nikki LaRock. Interview with Helena Paul. Interview with Yvette John. Interview with Albert "Sonny" McHalsie.

⁴⁰ Interview with Nikki LaRock.

⁴¹ Wolfgang G. Jilek, *Indian Healing: Shamanic Ceremonialism in the Pacific Northwest* (Surrey, B.C.: Hancock House Publishers Ltd., 1982), 40.

of Aboriginal peoples in Canada also touches on spiritual health: contact with other spirits could cause harm, illness, injury, and even death.⁴²

Stó:lō mothers are physically in contact with the child throughout pregnancy, and it often falls under their responsibility to directly care for their children's spirits. This extends to pregnant women's responsibilities in the longhouse, during spiritual ceremonies. Most women recommend women not even attend the longhouse during their pregnancy. But others assert that if you must attend, you cannot walk on the sacred floor of the longhouse, and you must wrap your belly tightly to protect the baby from the spiritual forces inside. Women are immensely powerful during the course of their pregnancy, which is part of the reason they are not allowed in the longhouse during the winterdance season. "They drain everybody's energy," Nikki LaRock states.⁴³ "During pregnancy, because you have a whole new being inside you, it's not just your energy, it's not just your aura. It's the baby's too. And it's . . . forming a new life."⁴⁴ Women are also, then, responsible for keeping spiritual energy balanced around them while they are spiritually powerful during their pregnancy.

Comparing the interviews with the ethnographies it seems clear that the ways of actually delivering the baby have shifted over time. H.G. Barnett writes in his ethnography *The Coast Salish of British Columbia* that women were once "secluded either in a hut built for that purpose or in a corner of the living house where she was screened by mats or partitions."⁴⁵ They were attended by other experienced or trained

⁴² Kelm, 90.

⁴³ Interview with Nikki LaRock.

⁴⁴ Interview with Nikki LaRock.

⁴⁵ Barnett, 128.

women who helped her deliver the baby. Elder Virginia Peters from Sts' ailes remembers when her grandmother assisted her mother through eleven of her thirteen births, primarily because the hospital was too far away from the reserve, and they could not get there in time to deliver the babies.⁴⁶ Necessity demanded the babies be born at home. This limited access to healthcare could have contributed to a "high death rate among mothers and newborns," if complications plagued the delivery, Kelm writes.⁴⁷ In the second half of the century, however, more women began to give birth in hospitals. Now, most women currently give birth in the hospital.⁴⁸

There is a shift towards more home or natural births in the community. Some women wish they had been able to give birth at home, rather than in a hospital.⁴⁹ Doctors are becoming more open to cultural requests. Helena Paul, for example, describes having family and friends fill her hospital room, and having a drumming and singing ceremony to welcome her son to the world.⁵⁰ Aboriginal midwives, traditionally, helped deliver a baby according to the spiritual code by which the people live.⁵¹ Yvette John, a doula in the community, describes how birthing with a doula can be a calming experience for the mother, making it much more personal. When the doula dims the lights, and the time for

⁴⁶ Interview with Virginia Peters.

⁴⁷ Kelm, 7.

⁴⁸ Interview with Yvonne Tumangday. Interview with Virginia Peters.

⁴⁹ Interview with Helena Paul.

⁵⁰ Interview with Helena Paul.

⁵¹ Benoit and Carroll, 231.

delivery is near, Yvette says: “they say you can see the spirit come down into your baby, the spirit that’s going to be your baby’s spirit.”⁵²

One of the most important ways the baby’s spirit is both protected and connected to its heritage is through the burial of the placenta and the bellybutton. Yvette John compares the placenta to a missing limb – something that should be buried, because it was a part of the baby, rather than something that should be discarded.⁵³ After childbirth, the father, or the family, takes the afterbirth and, through a ceremonial process, buries it under a young cedar tree. The bellybutton is also saved after birth, and kept in a pouch either around the neck of the mother, grandmother, or the child. At about seven years old, the child takes his or her bellybutton and buries it at the base of the cedar tree, where the afterbirth was buried.⁵⁴ After each burial, a meal takes place with the family – “Everything seems to have to have a meal,” Albert “Sonny” McHalsie, Stó:lō cultural advisor and historian, states.

These burials are vitally important for the health of the baby’s spirit. Women find that their children tend to wander, but burying the placenta gives them a place to return to. Yvette John asserts that:

They say that babies that are looking and searching, they’re searching because a part of them is missing, that they had grown with their mother, a part of them they’re trying to find, because they’re looking and looking and looking, like there’s something missing here. So . . . after a seven-year period, the mother would go and – well, during the time the parents would always take the child to the tree. Or to the area where they buried the placenta, so the baby knows this is where it is – they don’t have to go looking anywhere. And if it’s on mom’s neck they don’t feel like they’re missing something.⁵⁵

⁵² Interview with Yvette John.

⁵³ Interview with Yvette John.

⁵⁴ Interview with Albert “Sonny” McHalsie.

⁵⁵ Interview with Yvette John.

By burying the placenta after birth, and the bellybutton seven years later, the child has become a part of the earth. They are effectively connected to their Stó:lō heritage, and their spirit has a home.

Grounding the spirit through these practices, and literally making the child a part of Stó:lō heritage through the burial of the placenta, creates a strong foundation on which a child can grow. For women who did not bury the placenta, and are afraid that their baby's spirit is searching and wandering looking for it, Yvette John has this advice:

“Nothing can ever condemn you about that . . . You didn't have the teachings at the time. But one thing you can do is talk to your baby. Let the baby know that they don't have to look for anything anymore. You are here with them . . . You have to console the baby's spirit.”⁵⁶

Like the cedar tree under which the placenta is buried and the child can continually return to, the child can plant his or her roots in Stó:lō culture and heritage, and can grow through the cultural teachings.

Children are seen as “gifts” from the Creator, and as such their spirit is to be taken care of from the time of conception.⁵⁷ Yvette John states:

“The baby would have gifts as well. The gifts were given to that baby from birth to seven years old already. And keeping care of that baby's spirit . . . This beginning of life is just as important as death. You keep care of the baby's placenta, you keep care of the baby's spirit because that's a part of you and the baby.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Interview with Yvette John.

⁵⁷ Interview with Helena Paul.

⁵⁸ Interview with Yvette John.

Should a baby die, before or after birth, a family could hold a spiritual “burning,” for the child.⁵⁹ This is another way to care for a child’s spirit even after death. A burning would allow a mother to provide clothes and food for her child every four years, ensuring that her child’s spirit is rested in the spirit world.⁶⁰ Diamond Jenness states in his collection of Coast Salish stories: “If the first baby of a couple died it should be buried without ceremony, as quickly and quietly as possible. If it is given an elaborate funeral all future babies of the couple will die.”⁶¹ In life and in death, spiritual health is incredibly important to Stó:lō motherhood.

Helena Paul asserts that the role women play as the proponents of Stó:lō culture gives them an important and respected role within society.

The other thing about coming back from that residential school and from that colonization and – there was a lot of abuse and a lot of dysfunction that came about from that – and resurging, and re – I guess bringing those traditions and those roles and responsibilities back – it brings back that respect for women. So that balance board that’s been tipped, that comes back and we start to recognize and respect each other and we can no longer treat each other in a way that’s disrespectful and abusive and harmful, because now we’re seeing how much we need to respect women and their roles and men in their roles, and when you can see that then you can start coming back to that harmony within a community. And it takes the women to do it! . . . By doing that, we’re only making our community stronger.⁶²

Steven Acheson, in his opening chapter in the collection *A Persistent Spirit*, argues that “in spite of the scale and severity of the impact from introduced diseases, there is a remarkable degree of cultural continuity and strength in the way the native community

⁵⁹ Interview with Helena Paul.

⁶⁰ Interview with Helena Paul.

⁶¹ Jenness, 42.

⁶² Interview with Helena Paul.

has and continues to deal with these changes.”⁶³ Women are navigating having children in a complicated world. They are bringing back these cultural practices, keeping them together with Western medicine. They are successfully taking care of their physical health while caring for their spirits and the spirits of their people as well.

While initially I had, naively, not thought that residential school experiences would play such an important role in my project, this was not the case. The effects of this traumatic period were deeply ingrained. At the beginning of several of my interviews, my informants immediately imparted to me that they had been a part of the residential school system, and as such had lost a lot of their culture. They feared that they would be unable to share cultural knowledge with me. These women, while also providing me with different cultural practices and teachings, were able to provide an important background into the loss of culture in Aboriginal communities as a result of government intervention and attempts to assimilate. Kelm argues that the first half of the twentieth century: “was a period during which the cultural hegemony imposed by the colonizing force of residential schooling shaped Aboriginal bodily health and representation in profound ways.”⁶⁴ This continued into the second half of the century, when the women I interviewed were still growing up in the residential schools.

Virginia Peters stated in her interview that after being taught in the residential schools, “it almost became shameful, you know, if you became pregnant,” because sex was taught as unhealthy, and “almost a sin.”⁶⁵ Virginia remembers that her own

⁶³ Steven Acheson, “Culture Contact, Demography and Health Among the Aboriginal Peoples of British Columbia,” in *A Persistent Spirit: Towards Understanding Aboriginal Health in British Columbia*, edited by Peter H. Stephenson, et. al (Victoria: University of Victoria, Western Geographical Press, 1995), 1.

⁶⁴ Kelm, 57.

⁶⁵ Interview with Virginia Peters.

pregnancies in the 1960s were a very solitary experience, as the nurse from Health Canada only came to her reserve once a month.⁶⁶ She, like other women I interviewed, felt as though they were left on their own during their pregnancies, with little support or cultural knowledge to guide them through the process. But, these women are finding hope for the future in the wake of the loss of their cultural heritage.

“It’s really coming to life again, you know, in the past, I would say 10 to 15 years. You know when our language became alive again. Because we weren’t taught our language, we weren’t taught any of our ways. Because of the residential school and how they were punished . . . We just couldn’t carry on.”⁶⁷

By trusting the authorities during the residential school era, “Their voice became quiet.”⁶⁸

Albert “Sonny” McHalsie’s article “We Have To Take Care Of Everything That Belongs To Us,” argues that it is time for the Aboriginal people to take back their culture.⁶⁹ Learning, preserving, and teaching is the only way the Stó:lō can begin to reclaim and assert their culture in Canada. He concludes that: “All those things, those are all ours, and we have to take care of them because nobody else can take care of them but us. So to me, that’s our Aboriginal right and title.” Childbirth and the practices that go along with it are the beginning of this reclamation. The new life of a child, its spiritual health and wellness, and its solid foundation within Stó:lō culture and identity mirrors the new life of the Stó:lō as they reclaim and stabilize their culture.

We have those spiritual things, you know, that are coming to life . . . And I think that’s really our strength . . . And having that belief brings belief in us . . . So I see

⁶⁶ Interview with Virginia Peters.

⁶⁷ Interview with Virginia Peters.

⁶⁸ Interview with Virginia Peters.

⁶⁹ Albert “Sonny” McHalsie, “We Have To Take Care Of Everything That Belongs To Us,” from *Be Of Good Mind: Essays on the Coast Salish*, edited by Bruce Miller (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007).

it as the groundwork, or the foundation, you know, to our growth and our development.⁷⁰

By beginning to practice these cultural teachings at the start of life, the future of Stó:lō culture has a solid framework in which it can grow.

⁷⁰ Interview with Virginia Peters.

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