

# **Lessons for Community-based Research from the Corporate Appropriation of an Aboriginal World View**

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## Introduction

In the spring of 2005, I took part in a community-based research course that included a class field trip to Clayoquot Sound, British Columbia<sup>1</sup>. En route to our destination at Boat Basin near Stewardson Inlet, we were met by employees of Interfor, an international logging company with operations in Clayoquot Sound, and two members of the local Hesquiaht First Nation, at least one of whom we understood was employed by the company. At our roadside meeting, which was part of Interfor's public relations program, the speakers portrayed the relationship between the Hesquiaht First Nation and Interfor as collaborative and mutually beneficial. The Hesquiaht representatives informed our class that Interfor's forest practices were in line with the Nuuchahnulth worldview of *Heshook-ish tsawalk*<sup>2</sup>. This ancient concept roughly translates as "everything is one," or "everything is interconnected" (Clayoquot Alliance 2003, Atleo 2004).

At the time, I took the application of *Heshook-ish tsawalk* to logging practices of Interfor as a careful assurance that logging operations upriver were not damaging the ecosystems downriver. Later, however, our group met with a Hesquiaht educator and former elected Band council chief who had a more rigorous and seemingly more "traditional" interpretation of *Heshook-ish tsawalk* that contrasted sharply with the account provided during Interfor's public relations presentation.

My initial exposure to these two divergent descriptions of what was presented as a single unified worldview is the inspiration for this paper, in which I consider what could be the appropriation of *Heshook-ish tsawalk* by Interfor in the context of a multinational corporation that may be adopting an Aboriginal worldview for its own purposes. I draw from the history of Western philosophy to consider whether this appropriation is necessary, and what issues arise for Aboriginal people whose worldview is being appropriated.

I begin with a description of the philosophy and contextual basis for *Heshook-ish tsawalk* found in Chief Umeek's<sup>3</sup> book *Tsawalk* (Atleo 2004). I then outline briefly

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<sup>1</sup> ES 481A: Community-based Research in Clayoquot Sound. Summer Session 2005. School of Environmental Studies, University of Victoria.

<sup>2</sup> The written version of this term is relatively new in comparison to the ancient oral tradition from which it comes. For the purposes of this paper I am using Chief Umeek's spelling (Atleo, 2004), but the term is more commonly spelled *Hishuk ish ts'awalk*.

<sup>3</sup> Chief Umeek, also known as Dr. E. Richard Atleo, is a hereditary chief among the Nuuchahnulth people, and was born into the house of his great-grandfather, the last of the Ahousaht whalers (Sosnowiec). He has taught at the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University and Malaspina University College and served as Co-chair of the Scientific Panel on Sustainable Forestry Practices in Clayoquot Sound (Sosnowiec).

Interfor's requirements to meet the Clayoquot Sound Scientific Panel recommendations (Clayoquot Sound Scientific Panel 1995) for community input and discuss some of the issues that arise out of these requirements. Thirdly, I speculate on how the appropriation of *Heshook-ish tsawalk* to further Interfor's corporate objectives might impact on the Hesquiaht and wider Nuu-chah-Nulth communities. Specifically, I explore how compatible are Interfor's objectives and application of *Heshook-ish tsawalk* with those of Nuu-chah-nulth people, and what are the implications of the corporation's dealings within the community in the name of *Heshook-ish tsawalk*? Finally, I draw some parallels and contrasts between issues faced by an outside company and issues faced by an outside university researcher attempting to work in a community context, and examine lessons that emerge for the field of community-based research.

### **Understanding *Heshook-ish tsawalk***

According to Chief *Umeek*, the principle of *Heshook-ish tsawalk* is founded upon the postulation that "everything is one" and is to be taken literally (Atleo 2004). The unity of all existence implies that "everything" (as opposed to "all things") – including the creator and the created, and all levels of human and non-human experience and existence – is interconnected and is what makes up one whole reality. Understood in this way, *Heshook-ish tsawalk* is "one network of relationships" (Atleo 2004: 118). These relationships pervade the human acquisition of knowledge both in the context of identifiable components of existence (such as home, gender, region and age group) and also in the context of "nonphysical and unseen powers" (Atleo 2004:117).

The association of all aspects of reality to each other suggests that methods of investigation into knowledge can include variables not acceptable to Western science (Atleo 2004). One such method is called *Oosumich*, a spiritual way of exploring spiritual-physical relationships that usually entails isolating oneself from secular matters to focus on the spiritual for a time – a common practice in many cultures (Atleo 2004).

The reality of the spiritual element *Tsawalk* (from which Chief *Umeek* has derived the title of his book) also includes a moral dimension called *Isaak*, which means "respect for all life forms" (Atleo 2004:130). *Isaak* is based on the understanding (or at least, the assumption) of the Nuu-chah-nulth that all life is intrinsically and equally valuable (Atleo 2004:130). The cedar tree, the crab, the bear, the salmon, the earth worm and the human being are all of equal value. In practice, this principle translates into actions that are guided by following protocols that promote harmony and balance (Atleo 2004). For example, both the wolf and traditional Nuu-chah-nulth hunters express respect for a deer by not desecrating its innards after a kill (Atleo 2004). When protocol is broken, disharmony and disunity result (Atleo 2004). Since everything is connected, according to the theory of *Tsawalk*, such a breach in one domain of life has the consequence of affecting other aspects of reality (Atleo 2004). This world view is analogous to the Platonic notion of a Great Chain of Being, deriving from Ideas of the Good discussed in the seventh book of *The Republic* and in the principle of Plenitude of Forms first described by Plato in the *Timaeus*: no manner of being can be begrudged its

existence<sup>4</sup>. This notion was developed by Plotinus in the *Enneads*, in which he stated that all beings contribute to the nature of the Good according to their capacity (Henry and Schwyzer 1983)<sup>5</sup>.

The theory of *Tsawalk* is claimed to have existed since time itself began and has been passed on from one generation to another through stories in a language that has a cultural context (Atleo 2004). These origin stories include explanations for the origin of light and, like Greek myths, describe cultural heroes (Atleo 2004). In this way, the perspective brought about by such a method of knowledge transferal is that of a “theory of beginnings” (Atleo 2004: 131). Chief *Umeeek’s* descriptions, understandings and applications of *Tsawalk* are the product of his own individual perspective (albeit substantiated as a member within his community), but it is one of perhaps many perspectives.

### **Re-interpreting World Views**

As noted in the introduction, Interfor and Hesquiaht representatives explained at the outset of our visit to Boat Basin that the company had adopted the principle of *Heshook-ish tsawalk* in its logging practices in Clayoquot Sound. Later, the class met with a former Band council chief who claimed to uphold the principle of *Isaak*, respect for all life, as a prominent personal value. In his discussions and practical demonstrations with the class, he applied the framework of *Heshook-ish tsawalk* more vigorously and deeply than the Interfor and Hesquiaht representatives had described it. For example, we were told by the former chief that when removing cedar bark (a valuable cultural resource), there are proper protocols to follow, such as prayer, and special care should be given when deciding on an appropriate tree from which to harvest the bark. It is considered disrespectful and damaging if a tree is harvested too young, or if the bark is not removed correctly. This respect and care applied to individual trees was contrasted with the logging practices of Interfor, which require removing large populations of trees to build roads, which then serve the main purpose of enabling more trees to be felled, usually en masse without much thought as to age or character of the trees, despite allusions to selective logging or other sustainable forestry practices. In light of this diversity of community views, direct applications of how *Heshook-ish tsawalk* could be implemented in forest practices is obviously open to interpretation.

According to Interfor’s website<sup>6</sup>, all of the logging activities in Clayoquot Sound must abide by the guidelines set out by the *Clayoquot Sound Scientific Panel on Sustainable Forestry Practices* (Interfor 2001). Chief *Umeeek* served as co-chair (*Sosnowiec* no date) of the Panel and his participation likely influenced the content of Report 3 (*First Nations Perspectives Relating to Forest Practices Standards in Clayoquot Sound*) where it is recommended that “[a]ll decision-making processes relating to ecosystem use and

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<sup>4</sup> The *Republic* and *Timaeus* are dialogues written by the Greek philosopher Plato (427-347B.C.E.) - a student of Socrates and teacher to Aristotle. Plato is well-known and heavily influential in Western philosophy.

<sup>5</sup> Plotinus (204/5 -270 C.E) is known as the founder of Neoplatonism, and defender of Platonic Philosophy.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.interfor.com/environment/clayoquotsound.asp>

management in the Clayoquot Sound Decision Area must be undertaken in full consultation with the Nuu-chah-nulth of Clayoquot Sound” (Clayoquot Sound Scientific Panel 1995:50). These decision-making processes apply to many issues: co-management, consultation and planning, recognition of traditional ecological knowledge, foreshore and offshore resources, Nuu-chah-nulth cultural areas and tribal parks, inventory and mapping, operations, education and training, employment, monitoring, evaluation, restoration, and research (Clayoquot Sound Scientific Panel 1995).

While the recommendation to consult applies to many specific elements of ecosystem management, the issues of how and with whom to consult remain unclear. Unfortunately, “consultation” is a malleable and ambiguous term. Methods of consultation range from casual, off-the-record conversations, to strict adherence to company or community protocols. The wording in any process alluded to in a “consultation” affects the outcome, as even with the best of intentions, such communications can be suggestive, unclear, or lacking in important facts. The Scientific Panel’s recommendations elucidate somewhat:

In consultation with the co-chairs of the Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council, ***hahuulhi***, the traditional system for ecosystem management, must be recognized in ecosystem co-management processes of Clayoquot Sound. ***Hahuulhi*** will be used in determining ecosystem management within traditional boundary lines (Clayoquot 1995:51).

*Hahuulhi* refers to a chief’s ownership and responsibility for an area’s land and waters, its resources and people (Clayoquot Alliance 2003). According to this recommendation, consultation with the co-chairs of the Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council is a requirement, not an option, whenever issues of ecosystem management concern foresting territory that falls within traditional Nuu-chah-nulth tribal boundaries.

Clearly, Interfor, as a private logging company, must profit from logging. In order to do so, the company requires approval from the leadership of the Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations. Part of the approval may hinge on employing Nuu-chah-nulth people and creating other economic benefits. But are there implications, for example if Band council members or their immediate family are on the company’s payroll, especially if these are the same individuals with whom the company is required to consult? What if these individuals then become spokespersons for “their” company, promoting perspectives of *Heshook-is tsawalk* and *Isaak* as applied to support industrial forestry? Is it possible that the traditional values and worldview of the Nuu-chah-nulth people, such as *Heshook-is tsawalk* and *Isaak*, are being traded to Interfor in exchange for short-term economic stability and job security? Presumably traditions can only survive over time by evolving and adapting to newer circumstances. Is this particular evolution in traditional thought a necessary adaptation to newer economic realities or more the product of cooption to serve a corporate agenda? If the latter, does job security justify the misappropriation of traditional (and indeed sacred) values and concepts such as *Heshook-is tsawalk* and *Isaak* – and thus the misrepresentation of the world view that they define? Are the

interests of the broader Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations and future generations being considered?

I assert that if *Heshook-ish tsawalk* is being appropriated by Interfor and if the important principle of 'unity of being' is being applied to logging practices, then there are potentially far-reaching implications. If this is the case then, essentially a particular version of this worldview is being used to justify logging practices that are seen as harmful by other members of the same cultural group who adhere to a different interpretation of the same philosophy. Presumably an international company has more resources, capacity, and incentive to promote its version and application of *Heshook-ish tsawalk* than do local community members, as our class experienced. What is the effect when an Aboriginal worldview reaches university students such as me (or other outsiders) out of its original context, applied as justification of modern industrial practices rather than presented through stories whose subtleties are vital to understanding underlying cultural values? If an outsider's only exposure to *Heshook-ish tsawalk* was through Interfor, how would this affect perceptions of the Hesquiaht or other Nuu-chah-nulth Nations? What level of sophistication is lost, what harm to cultural integrity results, and what offenses or insults are felt over the long term within the wider Nuu-chah-nulth community?

The misrepresentation of *Heshook-ish tsawalk* and the possible appropriation and application of the term by Interfor may also affect the recovery and renewal of Aboriginal identity. While it could be argued that modern adaptation and re-interpretation are necessarily a part of maintaining living traditions, it is vital to consider who has done the interpreting and for what reason. The loss of cultural context means the term, if not the worldview itself, is being used differently from the way it was traditionally used, and is being applied to things that did not exist when the worldview came into existence. Rather than standing for the integration of all living things into one web of interconnected relationships, the could be used to describe and justify the opposite notion of dis-integration of the temperate coastal rainforest that inspired and gave birth to the sacred notion of *Heshook-ish tsawalk* in the first place.

Clearly, the worldview implied by more traditional interpretations of *Heshook-ish tsawalk* such as presented to the class by a former Hesquiaht chief and described by *Umeeek* (Atleo 2004) is not always present in the minds or actions of individual members of the Nuu-chah-nulth communities. As such, it is easy to see why there may be difficulties in finding a unified understanding of *Heshook-ish tsawalk* within these communities. It bears reminding that, in modern science as well as modern business, a "unified theory" is not necessarily a simple theory, that single-mindedness can be both a positive and a negative trait, and that unity can imply monopoly as well as the concordance of a multiplicity of diverse views. However, when a modern corporation appears to have adopted and co-opted a culturally and spiritually charged term to apply to its pragmatic business practices, questions of ethics are bound to arise.

In the event that Interfor's interpretation of *Heshook-ish tsawalk* enters the community psyche or linguistic lexicon as the prevailing definition of this term, the company

becomes closer on the social continuum to “insider” rather than outsider, belonging as a member of the community, “so identified on the basis of shared beliefs, desires, memories, and hopes” (Crocker 1999). Those who oppose the actions of this new and powerful corporate community member run the risk of being marginalized, or of becoming more of an outsider, especially if this opposition runs counter to the support of the elected political leadership. This was the experience of the former Hesquiaht chief who spoke to our group about his opposing perspective of *Heshook-ish tsawalk* to that presented by Interfor. He claimed to have been not only “black-listed”, but also “de-listed” which meant removed from community dialogue completely. Yet, as a former elected leader, he had been highly involved in the political matters surrounding logging in the region.

A broader implication of this situation is that a once context-rich, holistic worldview may get watered-down within the communities from which it came. It is possible that if a logging company such as Interfor becomes the dominant economic power in the community, having significant impact on the employment of local residents, then reference to *Heshook-ish tsawalk* will be found predominantly in the context of industrial logging jargon. The result could be a loss of cultural foundations as well as a loss of the temperate coastal rainforest environment from which this foundation came.

Even with the best of intentions, a company like Interfor is faced with the difficult challenge of identifying and working with a worldview in flux. Just as philosophies of European decent have evolved to include the effects on thinking brought about by the industrial and scientific revolutions, so might philosophers, thinkers and cultural proponents of *Heshook-ish tsawalk* decide to re-interpret their worldview to include a context that did not before exist. European philosophies developed in this way over centuries, and in many cases were appropriated by dominant powers, such as the Christian Church, resulting in worldviews that are “dis-encharmed” with nature (Dillon and Gerson 2004). Similarly, the possibility exists that *Heshook-ish tsawalk* is also being misappropriated by dominant economic powers.

An analogy from history exists in the appropriation of Neoplatonism by Christianity, Judaism and Islam (Dillon and Gerson 2004). Neoplatonism, a series of philosophical works beginning with the writings of Plotinus (234-c. 305 C.E.) “...is typically held to end with the “closing” of the Platonic school in Athens by the Byzantine Christian emperor Justinian in 529 C.E.” despite repeated efforts to defend the more “pagan” interpretations of it (Dillon and Gerson 2004:xix).

On the surface at least, Neoplatonism is remarkably similar to Chief *Umeek's* description of *Heshook-ish tsawalk*. The first principle to which Neoplatonists adhere is the idea that everything is One and that everything with a soul desires to return to a state of wholeness (Dillon and Gerson 2004). According to the Neoplatonic worldview, the emmattered complexity of all that is intelligible to us and anything else with intelligence, is a reflection of the complexity of the higher, eternal complexity of the Primary Intellect (Dillon and Gerson 2004). Similarly, according to the theory of *Tsawalk*, the physical world is a reflection of the higher form of cognition found in the

“realm of the creator’s spiritual source” (Atleo 2004:xvi). Chief *Umeeek* himself compares *Tsawalk* to Platonism: “In the same way that Plato assumed the primacy of perfect forms over the physical world, the theory of *Tsawalk* discussed in this book assumes a spiritual primacy to existence” (Atleo 2004:xvi).

The similarities of the worldviews evoked by Neoplatonism and *Heshook-ish tsawalk* demonstrate that a contemporary western company whose origins lie outside the cultural traditions and geographic territories of the Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations, still has rich cultural resources from which to draw its operational philosophy. Drawing upon these cultural resources, specifically Neoplatonism, may raise fewer ethical issues linked to appropriation. At least in theory, Interfor and the Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations could come to a new negotiated understanding of how to work together, each drawing from commonalities within their own historical or cultural traditions. Can both entities do so with their eyes wide open? This requires that all concerned know who they are and where they come from.

### **Lessons for Community-Based Research**

Community-based research has been described as an approach to research that falls along a continuum of participation and power-sharing for research involving communities of various composition, e.g., based on geographical location, circumstance or interest (Bannister 2005). At one end could be tokenism, where only a few chosen people represent the community (Green *et al.* 1997).<sup>7</sup> The other end represents initiation and responsibility for carry-through on the part of the community. In the middle, where most community-based research lies, are degrees of more equal participation and decision-making on the part of community members and researchers from the outside, often with the goal of having all parties benefit from outcomes (Green *et al.* 1997). As can be imagined, both researchers and community members are faced with challenges in meeting this goal. In this section, I consider whether there are lessons for community-based researchers that can be learned from examining the Interfor-Hesquiaht experience described in the previous sections.

As with outside corporations, the effects that a researcher can have on a community can be larger in scope than what might have been intended. Thus, there may be lessons for academics from considering Interfor’s influence on the Hesquiaht community in terms of the context in which *Heshook-ish tsawalk* is understood, i.e., in its application to logging operations. Interfor, as a dominant and powerful economic influence on the local community is in a position of power, wittingly or not, to appropriate and change the community’s worldview. Likewise, community-based researchers should be wary of the conventional power relationships with those who are “researched” (Green *et al.* 1997). Regardless of whether academic researchers are funded by their university or by government, non-profit or corporate sponsors, they must reconcile power dynamics and realize that a place of power is the place from which community members may see them. Indeed there is reason for being wary, as historically, research has been used as a means for those in positions of authority to control “the lives of those at the bottom” (Hall 2005). This was the perception of some scholars in England

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<sup>7</sup> ES481A class notes, May 26, 2005.

who noticed biases in approaches, such as objectifying those being researched within working class peoples in England as well as in Tanzania during colonial times (Hall 2005). However unintentional, the effects of being objectified as a people can potentially further the discordance rather than ameliorate the reconciliation of power dynamics. A researcher who is seen as an expert authority may contribute findings and knowledge in the process of doing community-based research, but to the avail of “planting ideas which then become the sole basis for future action” (Harris and Clover forthcoming). As was learned through the experiences of Harris and Clover in their workshops with community members in Newfoundland, there was need to place an emphasis on the community taking control of the new information and to construct its own future plans (Harris and Clover forthcoming).

A parallel can also be drawn between issues that arise in community-based research and Interfor’s requirement to consult with the Nuu-chah-nulth about logging operations. As mentioned before, the Nuu-chah-nulth worldview of *Heshook-ish tsawalk* can be interpreted in a number of ways, depending on the person who is explaining it. Our class was presented with Hesquiaht leaders working with Interfor who espoused a different view than those of a previous council chief who was not in support of Interfor’s logging activities and that of Chief *Umeeek*. The difficulty for Interfor is finding the most appropriate account, by finding the right person or people to work with. A similar issue arises for community-based researchers who, in the process of initiating research, face the struggle of finding suitable participants. Is the most appropriate initial community participation from those who already buy into the research (or logging activity), or should a diversity of perspectives be encouraged, which might slow planning and implementation but increase sensitivity and relevance of research?

Some community-based research delivers best results when information is gathered from a wide range of social groups (Harris and Clover, forthcoming), however the methods used to find people often limit who gets involved. For example, when the researchers are off-site, effective communication in remote contexts can only happen during personal visits. As Harris and Clover recount in their experiences, even though much effort was put into word-of-mouth, public notices, handing out brochures, and contacting town or community councils, attendance to their workshops was disappointing (Harris and Clover, forthcoming). Once participation is established, the quality of the relationship between researcher and community member can determine what information is shared. Kurelek argues that to be effective in this type of work, as a researcher you “need to get to know the people with whom you work and allow them to know you” (Kurelek 1992: 85). By getting to know a diverse range of community members well, researchers can identify issues that require special attention, and later in contexts such as social events can better determine the status and reliability of information by direct observation (Harris and Clover, forthcoming).

In terms of appropriation, problems particularly arise where local terms or concepts are “loaded” with religious or cultural significance of importance to the members of the originating culture but of far less significance to the researcher – at least initially. While there is an important distinction between insult and harm, the potential of either event

should be considered as reason to take pause. The appropriation of culturally loaded terms such to enhance one's research or to carry favour with potential informants would be inappropriate, and in a university research context would seem unethical. Do similar standards apply to corporations seeking to enhance public relations with the local community? Community-based researchers might benefit from deliberation on the following questions: How does the knowledge produced affect the way in which the community views itself? How does the knowledge produced alter how the rest of the world views the community? Who is the new information for and what purpose does it serve? Who benefits and who loses out? Are the benefits sustainable over the long term? How is the new information presented to the community and to outsiders, and is it portrayed in the spirit of the community's goals?

A company such as Interfor, coming from a different place than Clayoquot Sound, existing between national borders, linking people through an intricate web of economic transfers requiring the extraction of trees, transportation of logs and processing of timber, has its own worldview. As with community-based research, honesty as to the ultimate goals and worldview of the outside entity should be a requirement and foundation from which dialogue begins with the community. Knowing yourself and knowing where you come from is paramount to this, which can never be more the case when an outsider is exposed to ways of life, histories and perspectives that are utterly new. Virtually every person has an abundance of personal, historic cultural resources from which to draw her or his own philosophy. By drawing upon this wealth of culture from which you come, there are fewer ethical issues linked to appropriation. So many similarities exist amongst ancient worldviews, as was shown by comparing Neoplatonism with *Heshook-ish tsawalk*, that it may be possible to synthesize an honest hybrid of worldviews when working together to apply fundamental principles. It is in this way of self-knowing that outsiders, whether academic researchers or corporations, can avoid resorting to cultural appropriation by determining where there is or is not already common ground and a basis for working together.

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