

# The Katzie First Nation

by Terry Glavin

*Terry Glavin wrote this piece for the Katzie First Nation's Web site. It best reflects where the Katzie see themselves at this time, and I am happy that they have given me their permission to reprint the text here.*

To express a traditional view of territory and relations with neighbouring peoples, the Katzie First Nation is fortunate among First Nations for its possession of a written record of its history and its laws from the time of creation. This record is in the form of a verbatim account, related by the great Peter Pierre to anthropologist Diamond Jenness in 1936, when Peter Pierre was 75 years old, which was later published as "The Faith of a Coast Salish Indian" in 1955. During his childhood, Peter Pierre had been chosen among those of his generation to carry a variety of traditional responsibilities. His training began at the age of three; by the time he was eight years old, he was deemed ready to begin his training in the skills of a medicine person and in the skills necessary to maintain the oral history of the Katzie people. His education began under the guidance of three elders that his mother had hired for this purpose. By the time he was fourteen years old, Peter Pierre was already a practicing medicine person. Throughout his life, he continued in his vocation, administering to the sick among the Coast Salish tribes, as far away as Cowichan. Peter's son Simon acted as an interpreter for his father in his work. In later life, Simon Pierre was a central figure in attempts by BC First Nations to resolve the "Indian Land Question" travelling to London as an interpreter for a delegation of BC Chiefs. He was also instrumental in assisting tribal leaders throughout the BC Coast in protests against the Federal "potlatch law." Simon Pierre later took up the work that his father had begun, furthering the work of establishing a written record of Katzie culture, traditions, and customary law; most particularly in his work with anthropologist Wayne Suttles, beginning in 1952, culminating in the memoir "Katzie Ethnographic Notes," which was combined and published with Jenness's "The faith of a Coast Salish Indian." The contributions of Peter Pierre and Simon Pierre have been confirmed and elaborated upon by several elders interviewed during the course of research. The Katzie First Nation once comprised at least ten villages throughout the territory. The Katzie First Nation derives its name from the Halkomelem word for a type of moss, and it is also the name of an ancient village site in the immediate vicinity of the Katzie Indian Reserve at Pitt Meadows. The only other Katzie village sites permanently occupied at the time of



**The Peter Pierre family, 1906.**

**Back row: Margaret (Margie) Pierre (later Mrs. Andrew James) and Xavier Pierre (later married to Minnie Mussel).**

**Front row: Peter Pierre, Matilda Pierre (later Mrs. William Kelly), Catherine (Mrs. Peter Pierre) née Charles, and Amanda Mary Pierre (later Mrs. Clinton) Charnley. An older son, Simon, was absent for the portrait session.**

**Although only 25 years of age, Simon accompanied Chiefs Joseph Capilano of North Vancouver, Charlie Tsipeymult of Cowichan (on Vancouver Island), and Basil David of Bonaparte (near Cache Creek) to London, England, in 1907 to act as an interpreter for their meeting with King Edward VII to discuss the unfairness of land appropriations from the First Nations.**



this writing are the Katzie reserves at Barnston Island and at Yorkson Creek in Langley. The people now known as the Katzie First Nation were granted rights and title to their territory and their resources by the Creator, by Khaals, by their first Chiefs, and from the reiteration of customs from time out of mind. Long before the emergence of any other human community in the Lower Fraser region, the Creator placed five communities, each with its own chief, at different locations on the land. Those locations are now known as Pitt Lake, Sheridan Hill, Port Hammond, Point Roberts, and Point Grey. The Katzie people are the direct descendants of these first people. The people came to be known as the Katzie people descended primarily from Oe'lecten and his people, created at the south shore of Pitt Lake, and Swaneset and his people, created at Sheridan Hill. Xwoe'pecten and his people, created at Port Hammond, joined with Swaneset's people at Katzie, but later moved to what is now New Westminster and gave rise to the people now known as the Kwantlen people. Smakwec and his people, created at Point Roberts, and their history, lands, resources, and culture were closely linked to those of the Katzie people. The descendants of Smakwec and his people are many, but many have vanished. The Nicomekl, as a distinct people, vanished in the time of the smallpox epidemic of the 1700s. C'simlenexw and his people, created at Point Grey, are the principle ancestors of the people now known as the Musqueam. During these first days after the arrival of human beings, there were few trees, and although there were clams and mussels in the rivers and along the seashore, there was no wind and there were no birds, land animals, sturgeon, salmon, oolichan, seals, or sea lions. The Creator gave these first five leaders gifts and powers to bequeath to those that followed after them. When he placed Swaneset on the earth, the Creator provided the sun and the moon. For Oe'lecten, the Creator provided the seasons and the rainbow. Smakwec was granted power over all the underground channels that connected Point Roberts with Pitt Lake, Sechelt, and other places. Xwoe'pecten and his people were given no special powers. C'simlenexw was given the powers of the Swayxway mask. Oe'lecten was then granted a wife, and their children became the sturgeon and a white bird that can be seen only by Oe'lecten's descendants. Oe'lecten's people first settled in villages at Fox Creek, Widgeon Creek, and at the southwest corner of Pitt Lake, a village occupied until recently, presently known as Katzie Indian Reserve #4. Swaneset, honouring the Creator's instructions to finish making the territory surrounding the place he had been set down on earth, reshaped the land in order to make it abundant in berry and root crops. Standing on the peak of Sheridan Hill, which was

#### Opposite

This masterpiece of pecked stone was likely used for ceremonial purposes, perhaps in the preparation of special oils or paints. The sculpture appears to be a human figure squatted on its haunches with its hands extended to its knees holding a bowl between the legs. An owl was carved on the front of the bowl and on the back, running from the buttocks to the top of the figure's head, was a snake. A Finnish settler found this bowl in the 1920s at Webster's Corners during land clearing.





**Widgeon Slough and Pitt Lake:  
traditional hunting grounds  
of the Katzie First Nation.**

once the highest mountain in the territory, Swaneset called on the help of the Creator and made Sturgeon Slough and its tributaries. He then made the Alouette River and other sloughs, including Katzie Slough. Swaneset then named all these waterways and named the river now known as the Fraser. After a time, Swaneset travelled to the sky and returned to earth with a wife, setting down again on the peak of Sheridan Hill. From the pieces of Sheridan Hill, Swaneset created many of the distinctive hills that mark the countryside between the Fraser River and Pitt Lake. When Swaneset had finished reshaping the land to make it abundant for his people, he then instructed all his people to gather at Katzie to make homes for themselves there, in the vicinity of the present Pitt Meadows Reserve. There on the banks of the Fraser River, his sky-born wife opened her dowry box and ushered oolichan and seagulls into this world, and she taught the people how to catch the fish and prepare them. By this time, the descendants of the

first people had multiplied and flourished and their descendants were establishing villages throughout the land. Swaneset encountered some of these villages in his travels downriver, during his journey to the island in the sea, where he married his second wife. This woman was the daughter of a chief whose people were different from all other people on the earth. These were sockeye people. Swaneset brought his new wife back to Katzie and in securing his relationship through marriage to the sockeye people, Swaneset assured Katzie people an abundance of sockeye for the coming generations. Since that time Katzie people have fished sockeye and other salmon species from a variety of fishing stations and seasonal villages along the Fraser, Pitt, and Alouette rivers. What is clear from the outset of the Genesis is that the descendants of Oe'lecten and Swaneset—the Katzie people—established themselves as the first and only human communities throughout the entire Pitt watershed, including the Alouette watershed and portions of land adjacent to the Fraser River.

In the words of Peter Pierre, Khaals, The Great Transformer, came to the world “to finish Swaneset’s work.” Much of Khaals’s work involves the separation of people from animals and the creation of new species of animals from people. In Peter Pierre’s narrative Khaals appears with two brothers and twelve servants, “mysterious strangers.” They arrive at a little nook on the west side of Boundary Bay. Khaals encountered a man and a woman there and “restoring their souls to the Lord above,” he changed the couple to stone, to stand as helpers to coming generations of people. From there Khaals proceeds to Tsawwassen and from Tsawwassen, he travels up river, continuing to perform such feats at a variety of places, each of which carry instructions to govern human behaviour on earth. The travels of Khaals comprise a great epic of the oral literature and it is referred to here only when it illustrates the extent of occupation of those territories identified with the descendants of Oe'lecten and Swaneset, or where the nature of Katzie possession of those territories is illustrated. At the mouth of the Pitt River, Khaals encounters a warrior. For

his boastfulness, the warrior is turned to stone. Hearing the entreaties of the villagers the warrior was there to protect, Khaals spares the people. The mouth of the Pitt River is known to the Katzie people for its important fishing sites that are used to this day. Several important archaeological sites are situated around the mouth of the Pitt River, and surface artifacts are routinely discovered along the riverbank. From the Pitt, Khaals travelled up the Alouette, where he encounters a one-legged man fishing for steelhead salmon. At the close of this encounter, Khaals turns the man to stone; the “stone man” is still present at the place known as Davidson’s Pool, traditionally regarded by Katzie people as a significant ceremonial site. Khaals’s instructions to the steelhead fisherman well illustrate the nature of Katzie title to the Alouette River’s fisheries resources:

“Henceforward you shall be lord of all fish that ascend this river. To strangers you shall grant none, but you shall know the Katzie Indians who occupy this territory and grant them fish in abundance.”

From the Alouette River, Khaals turns back towards the Pitt River and encounters some of “Swaneset’s people” on the meadows near Sheridan Hill and turns them into suckerfish. All around the Sheridan Hill area and the “Pitt Polder” area, and around the mouth of Pitt Lake, Khaals encounters more people, and changes each in turn into various animals for the use and benefit of the Katzie people. Khaals visits the ancestral village site first established by Oe'lecten in the immediate vicinity of what is now Grant Narrows Regional Park and finds Oe'lecten is still the chief there. Khaals tells Oe'lecten, “I have travelled all through this country creating animals and fish for your use,” and sets about explaining to him the proper ways of harvesting these resources. Khaals specifically identifies the fish resources of both the South and North Alouette Rivers as being for Oe'lecten’s use. Khaals encounters a “large tribe” living on Pitt Lake opposite Goose Island and changes them to underwater people who live to this day beneath the waters there. Before the tribe was sent underwater he ordered that their customs be painted on the rock bluff to warn outsiders that they would die from drinking the water in the area: “Only Indians



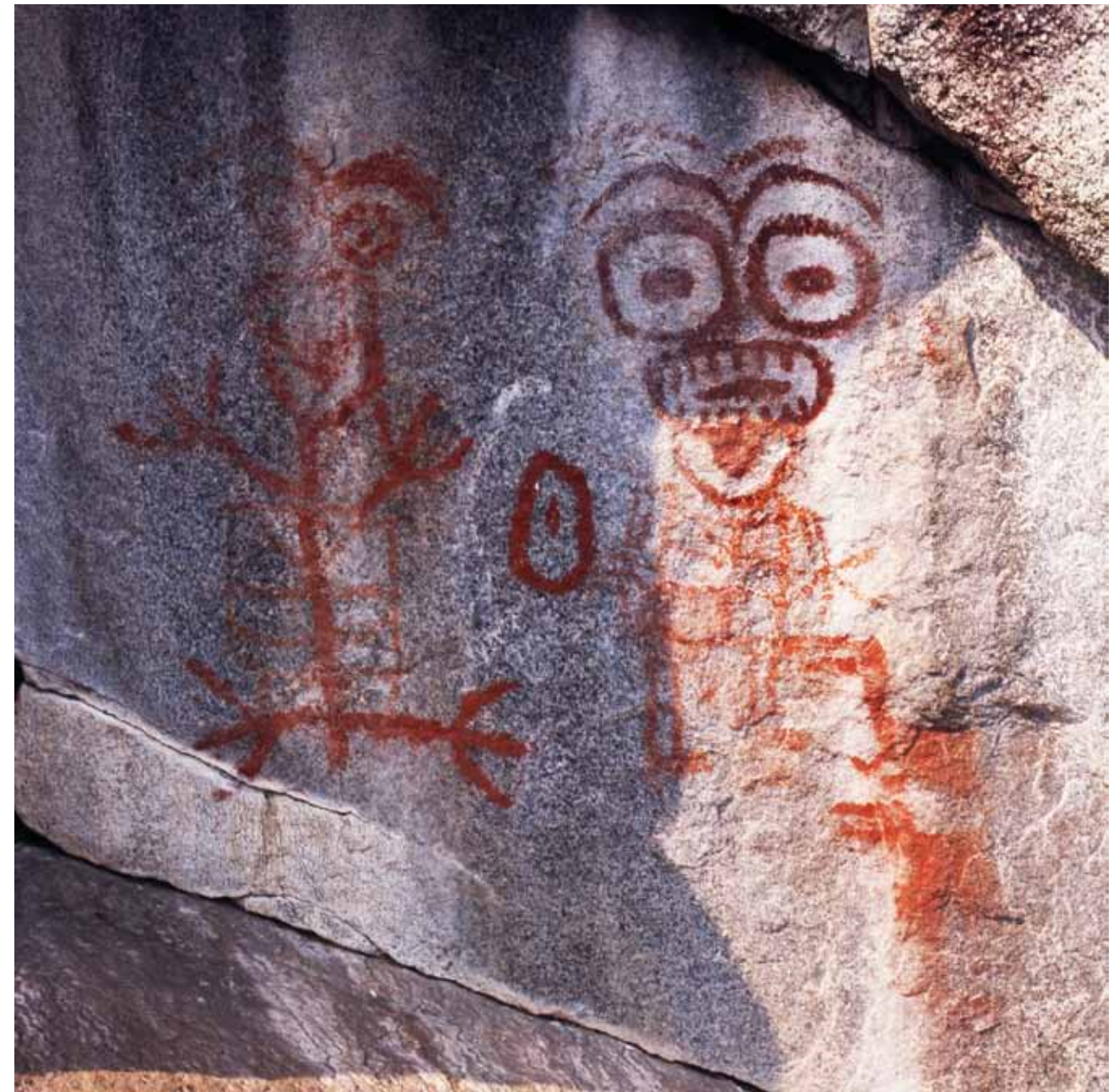
at the mouth of this lake would not die from drinking the water.” (In Peter Pierre’s narrative, he describes the death of a group of Nanaimo visitors to the area, in fairly recent times, after they drank the water from the lake in the vicinity.) Khaals continues in his travels and completes a circuit around the entire lake and performs many miracles that produced not only new animals, but also landforms and distinct weather patterns that are known to Katzie people to this day. Upon returning to Oe’lecten’s village Khaals teaches Oe’lecten two prayers. One to assist Oe’lecten and his people that title to the Pitt Lake country is vested and Khaals tells Oe’lecten, “You are the master of this lake in which I have created abundant food for you.” Khaals then makes a brief visit to Swanaset and his people and finds them “flourishing and content.” Khaals also finds people living on Barnston Island and shortly thereafter, Khaals “disappeared up the Fraser River, but whither he went no man knows.”

In the period immediately following Khaals’s transformations of lands and resources and his establishment of corresponding laws governing land use and resource harvesting, the descendants of Oe’lecten and Swanaset—the Katzie people—thrive in their newfound wealth and security and further developed customary laws governing resource sharing and resource conservation. During this period, the Katzie people further strengthened their unique and primary association with and responsibility for the land and resources the Katzie First Nation identifies as Katzie territory to this day. An illustration of the Katzie First Nation’s unique association and responsibility—in other words, “title”—is found in the story of one of Oe’lecten’s descendants, a woman who was accompanied by her brothers on a successful deer hunt. The events of the hunt prompted the woman to abandon the human community and proclaim herself “the owner and mistress of all the deer in this country.” Peter Pierre said the woman is nameless, but nonetheless ensured that there would never be a harvest of several deer in one hunt, but rather only one or perhaps two deer at a time, and “she still prevents the hunter from killing any deer unless he prays to her.” The woman

took the form of a deer, but kept her human face and is capable of conferring special abilities and powers upon hunters. Katzie hunters have seen her through the ages and Katzie elders report that she has been seen even in the most recent times. Throughout history, such powers have been conferred upon Katzie people in such a way as to demonstrate the primary title to Katzie territory and resources that is vested in Katzie people to the exclusion of others and as a means to maintain stable relations with neighbouring First Nations. In one such instance, a Katzie mountain goat hunter, Sya’ykewl, was granted the power of lightning. In Peter Pierre’s words, Sya’ykewl, when hunting at the head of Pitt Lake once encountered a group of “Douglas Indians from Harrison Lake” who had travelled over the mountains and were making canoes:

“Sya’ykewl closed his eyes, prayed to Thunder, and opened them again, whereupon a flash of lightning swept past the Douglas Indians. In their terror they petitioned him for peace and offered to give him one of their daughters in marriage. He accepted and from this marriage to the girl many of the Douglas people to this day claim Katzie descent.”

Another illustration of the special relationship between Katzie people and the resources of Katzie territory that is not enjoyed by other First Nations involves the grizzly bear population in the Upper Pitt watershed. Katzie people did not kill grizzly bears for their flesh. Only occasionally a hunter may take a grizzly bear for its hide. This custom arises from the fact that the grizzly bear was one of Khaals’s helpers. In Katzie tradition there are at least two distinct grizzly populations in the Upper Pitt. The Katzie maintained unique relationships with both populations. The Katzie have a special name for the first population in the lower part of the Upper Pitt Valley. If confronted by one, by calling the bear by this name, Simon Pierre reported the bear went away quietly. The second population in the upper reaches of the Upper Pitt was known as “Sta’mix” or “Warrior” grizzlies. According to Simon Pierre these grizzlies would “kill and eat strangers,” but would not harm Katzie people. Simon Pierre recounted an incident in which some Nlaka’pamux sent a hunting party



Red ochre pictographs located on the west side of Pitt Lake opposite Goose Island stared out at lake traffic long before the coming of the first white man.





to wipe out all the Sta'mix bears, but the bears killed all the hunters but one. "This would not have happened to the Katzie," he explained. This special relationship between the Katzie people and the Katzie territory is difficult at the best of times to express in contemporary common law terminology. It is correct to say, for instance, that the Katzie people enjoy unextinguished aboriginal title to the various resources of the Katzie territory within the constraints of the common law as it has evolved and the court's interpretations of Section 35 of the Constitution Act. It is also correct to say that the Katzie "ownership" of Pitt Lake Sturgeon, Sandhill Cranes, or Mountain Goats derives from the tradition that Sturgeon, Sandhill Cranes, and Mountain Goats were once Katzie people who were transformed to provide sustenance for the descendants of Oe'lecten and Swaneset. In the time that followed Khaals, all of the lands and resources within Katzie territory were soon fully utilized. The people grew in numbers until at times, "the smoke from their morning fires covered the country with a pall of smoke," in Peter Pierre's words, and until the period immediately before the first smallpox epidemic of the 1700s there were times when "the smoke of their fires floated over the valley like a dense fog." Before the smallpox and subsequent introduced diseases, the Katzie people were a comparatively large tribe or nation. The Katzie people have developed their own cartography, within the oral tradition, and developed an extensive nomenclature to locate and identify streams, rivers, berry bogs, valleys, mountains, and mountain peaks. It is in this nomenclature, particularly in the Pitt drainage basin, that the Katzie identity with the territory becomes conclusive. For instance, their name for the Pitt River translates as "River of the Katzie," and Pitt Lake translates as "Lake of the Katzie."

Throughout the research for this article and in repeated instances during interviews with Katzie elders, it became obvious that "ownership" and the

**Katzie First Nation Chief Joachim Pierre presided over the reserve for many years until his tragic death in a car accident in 1971.**

responsibility to share abundance are inseparable. In some instances, an extended family may "own" a resource-use site, such as a duck-net site on the marshy flats east of the Pitt River around Widgeon Creek, or one of the great wapato marshes throughout what is now the "Pitt Polder." In other cases, the entire Katzie community may own a resource-use site. Regardless, a right of ownership always implies the responsibility to share abundant resources; non-Katzie people ask "permission," but "permission" is expected to be granted. This balance is crucial to any understanding of Katzie's assertion of title to its territory. In some cases, it is obvious that the custom was, and continues to be, that neighbours should be specifically invited to share in abundance. As Peter Pierre's account shows, Swaneset not only invited neighbouring communities to come to Katzie to catch the first Oolichan, he travelled around the country "inviting more distant people to come and share their good fortune." To this day, Katzie elders express tremendous remorse when declines in oolichan populations, which have been quite severe through the 1990s, prevent them from continuing their traditions of sharing oolichan harvests with upriver people and with people from as far away as Mount Currie. As Simon Pierre informed Wayne Suttles in 1952, outsiders could come to fish for sturgeon in Pitt Lake, but "were expected to call the Village at the outlet of the lake and ask permission first." Similarly, Simon Pierre noted that even the smallest streams within the Katzie territory were each "owned" according to Katzie customary law, by "several Katzie families" and an outsider "could not fish anywhere on them without first receiving permission." The same law applied even in the case of resources as conclusively and solemnly entrusted to the Katzie people, by Khaals, as the Alouette River.

While Khaals had admonished the "stone person" at Davidson's Pool—"henceforward you shall be lord of all the fish that ascend this river. To strangers you shall grant none, but you shall know the Katzie Indians who occupy this territory and grant them fish in abundance"—Simon Pierre was clear about the law governing the operation of fish weirs on the Alouette:





A Yellow Cedar wolf head, carved by Lorraine Pierre, adorns the stern end of a travel canoe.

“When the family that erected the weir had caught enough, they remove some of the sections to allow the fish to pass freely up-stream to spawn. But if other people came and asked permission to catch fish there, the owners tied the sections back on for them.”

Whether a particular resource or resource site was “owned” by the Katzie community in general or by a group of Katzie families or a single family, the requirement of outsiders that permission be requested first, before a resource may be harvested, appears to have been a universal law. Just such a principle applied in the case of the cranberry bogs on both sides of the Pitt River. According to Simon Pierre, a cranberry bog just below the Alouette belonged to all the Katzie people; but the bogs north of Sturgeon Slough and adjacent to Widgeon Creek belonged to specific families. As Simon Pierre told Wayne Suttles, “When outsiders came, they had to get permission from the owners before they could gather the berries.” It was Simon’s father’s responsibility, as a young

boy, to guard over the cranberry bogs as harvest time approached. Wayne Suttles observed this about the Katzie view of “aboriginal title” with respect to cranberry resources—a view that can be said to have extended, in one way or another, to all resources:

“From Simon’s remarks it appeared that the owners of the bogs did not refuse anyone permission to pick when the berries had properly ripened, nor did they exact tribute from the outsiders. I infer that ownership of (or perhaps one should say, identification with) a rich cranberry bog was its own reward in that it permitted the owners to play the role of hosts. A host at one time and place is potentially a guest at another. What the owners of the bog probably enjoyed was not payment in berries or cash at the time, but in hospitality later.”

Such balanced reciprocity was a cornerstone of the aboriginal economy. It explains much about the Katzie people’s relationship to their resources and the Katzie relationship with other First Nations. Katzie title should not be regarded as any less elaborate than the forms of title imposed upon Katzie resources, largely to the benefit of settlers, from the colonial period onward. A case in point is the ownership and management of “skous,” or wapato (a white potato), a nutritious tuber that was practically unique to the Katzie territory. Some wapato ponds were hundreds of feet in length, scattered throughout the marshy areas of Katzie territory in named and owned tracts. The Katzie owned some tracts collectively; other tracts were owned and carefully managed by individual families (similar to the arrangements that prevailed in the Katzie cranberry resources). Production required great care and attention and the harvest was undertaken from canoes, or by “dancing,” wading through the shallows and treading on the plants until the roots floated to the surface. Hudson Bay Company officials, after arriving in the early 1820s on the Fraser River, observed hundreds of native families travelling to the Katzie territory in the autumn months to assist in the wapato harvest. Rather than being simply a casual resource-gathering activity, the wapato harvest should be regarded for what it was: agriculture. The Katzie were proud of their renowned wapato, and it was obviously a valuable “trade commodity.” It was the presence of an effective customary law governing the ownership and distribution of the wapato resource that allowed such harvests, as those described by Simon Pierre and observed by HBC officials. Directed harvests of saltwater resources by Katzie people, either through reciprocal relationships with saltwater people, or long-standing rights of access, was an occasional practice. It was likely more common that neighbouring First Nations transported shellfish and other saltwater resources to Katzie, as friends and relatives do to this day.

#### Following Pages

Like times of yesteryear, in 2008, Mike Leon is sworn in as the new Chief of the Katzie First Nation during a ceremony that for the very first time was open to the public. The band opened its heart and minds to the non-native community and then asked its “witnesses” to do the same by taking the spirit of the evening back to their homes and workplaces. A crowd of 250 sat on rough-hewn wooden benches and watched from under the low light from bare bulbs as the chief and his aldermen took an oath to abstain from drugs or alcohol during their two-year term in office. A huge barrel-shaped stove quickly warmed the longhouse and the crowd inside. Once the ceremony was over, the band hosted their guests with a hearty meal that included several different dishes of salmon.



