

The foolishness of Sa'laLEla

Scholarly sources:

Boas, Franz (1966) (Edited by Helen Codere). *Kwakiutl ethnography*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Boas, Franz, and George Hunt (1905) *Kwakiutl Texts*. (Publications of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, vol. 3.) Leiden, Netherlands.

Sa'laLEla

Meet Sa'laLEla. He was a twelve-year-old boy who lived in the sixteenth century among the people who called themselves the Kwakwaka'wakw. In the sixteenth century no one in this North American Indian group had ever seen a white person.. They didn't know they even existed.

Sa'laLEla's world was a most intriguing one.



Sa'laLEla's world

The Kwakwaka'wakw was one Indian nation among the Northwest Coast people. Sa'laLEla's group lived on the southern coast of Vancouver Island.



Sa'laLEla lived in a world of wondrous beauty.

Like most Indian children of the Americas, Sa'laLEla lived a life of great independence. His parents gave him and his siblings freedom to explore their own worlds and develop their own paths. This could bring adventure to the Indian children, but it could also lead to foolish mistakes along the way, as we will learn in the case of Sa'laLEla.



The Kwakwaka'wakw was divided into 20 tribes and each tribe had subgroups called numayms. Members of a numaym shared the same village.

Each numaym had three classes of people: noble families, middle class families, and slaves. The Kwak-waka'wakw were allowed to take prisoners from other groups if these groups attacked them. The prisoners then became their slaves.

Sa'laLEla was the second oldest child of a minor chief in his numaym. Hence he had noble rank.



Within the villages were large houses with beautifully decorated facades.

Sa'laLEla's house was over 100 feet long and wide.



About 40 people lived with Sa'laLEla inside his large house. These were the relatives of his mother and his father. Here Sa'laLEla and his siblings would learn skills such as carving, weaving, and food preparation. The Kwakwaka'wakw did not have a written language to learn.

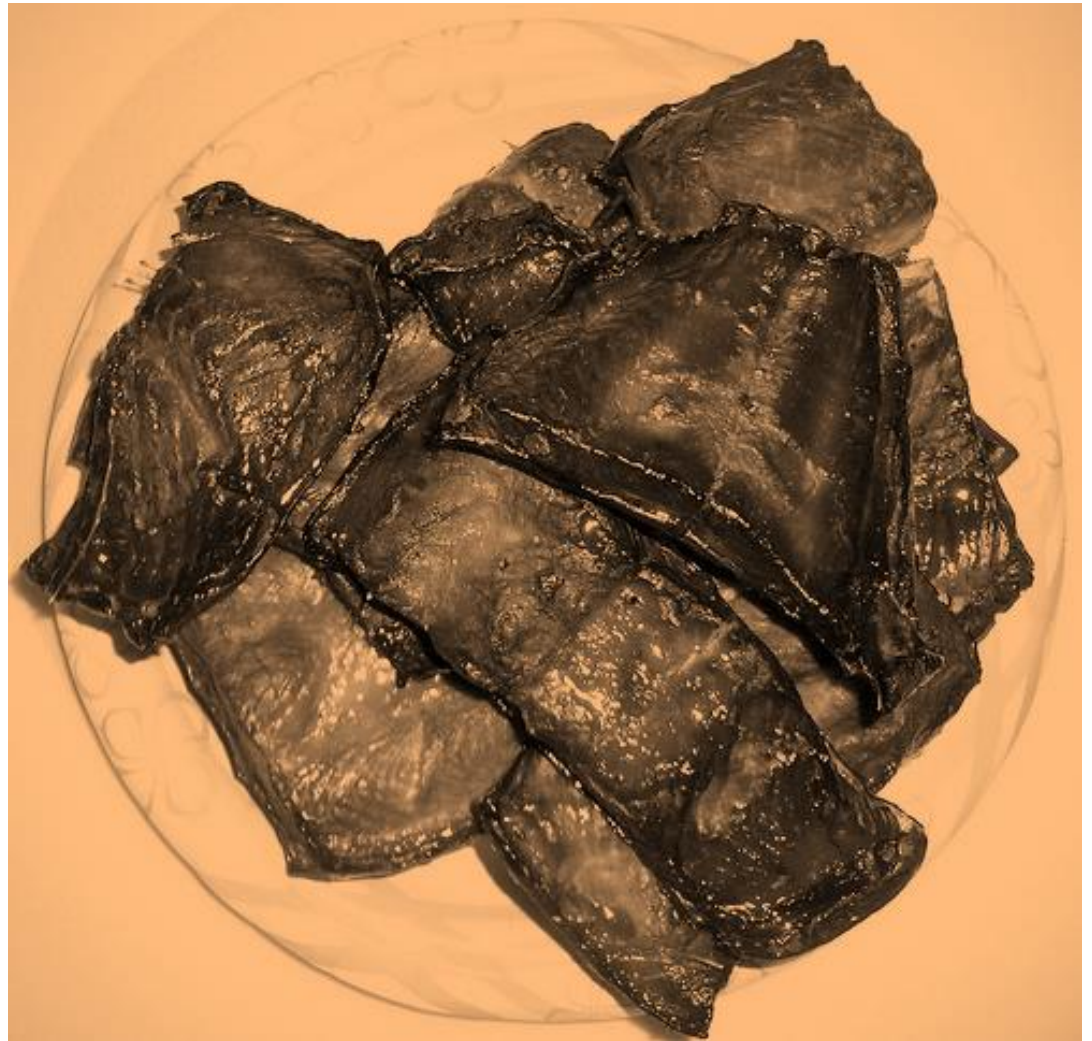
At night the elders would tell stories of the past, and of their mythical ancestors. Each numaym had a story of an original ancestor who had fallen from the sky in ancient days and later became a great human. Loyalty to the numaym was also loyalty to the ancestor.



The Kwakwaka'wakw and other Northwest Coast Indians were richer than most North American Indians.

This is because they had a permanent and abundant food supply. And they did not have to work hard to get it.

Salmon was their staple food. Salmon were caught in the ocean and upriver streams during spawning seasons.



The salmon were then roasted on cedar planks and were one of the most delicious foods any people ever had to eat. Salmon were also dried to be eaten during long winters.



The world of art

Sa'laLEla's life was more interesting than most American Indian boys' lives because he lived in a world of art. Both women and men created art every day they lived.

Women wove baskets.



And wove and beaded blankets.

The blankets were especially important to the people because they were the medium of exchange—or money—of the Kwakwaka'wakw. The people paid for all their needs with blankets.



The men's art
involved woodworking
and painting.

They made canoes
out of logs, carving
striking designs into
them.



They made canoes out of logs, carving striking designs into them.

They then painted the canoes and set them a sail.



They carved gorgeous masks—often representing their mythic ancestors.



But their main artistic feat was the creation of totem poles.



The totem poles that they carved and painted told the mythical history of their numayms and their ancestors.

This was the wondrous world that Sa'laLEla lived in—surely a world that any child would cherish.

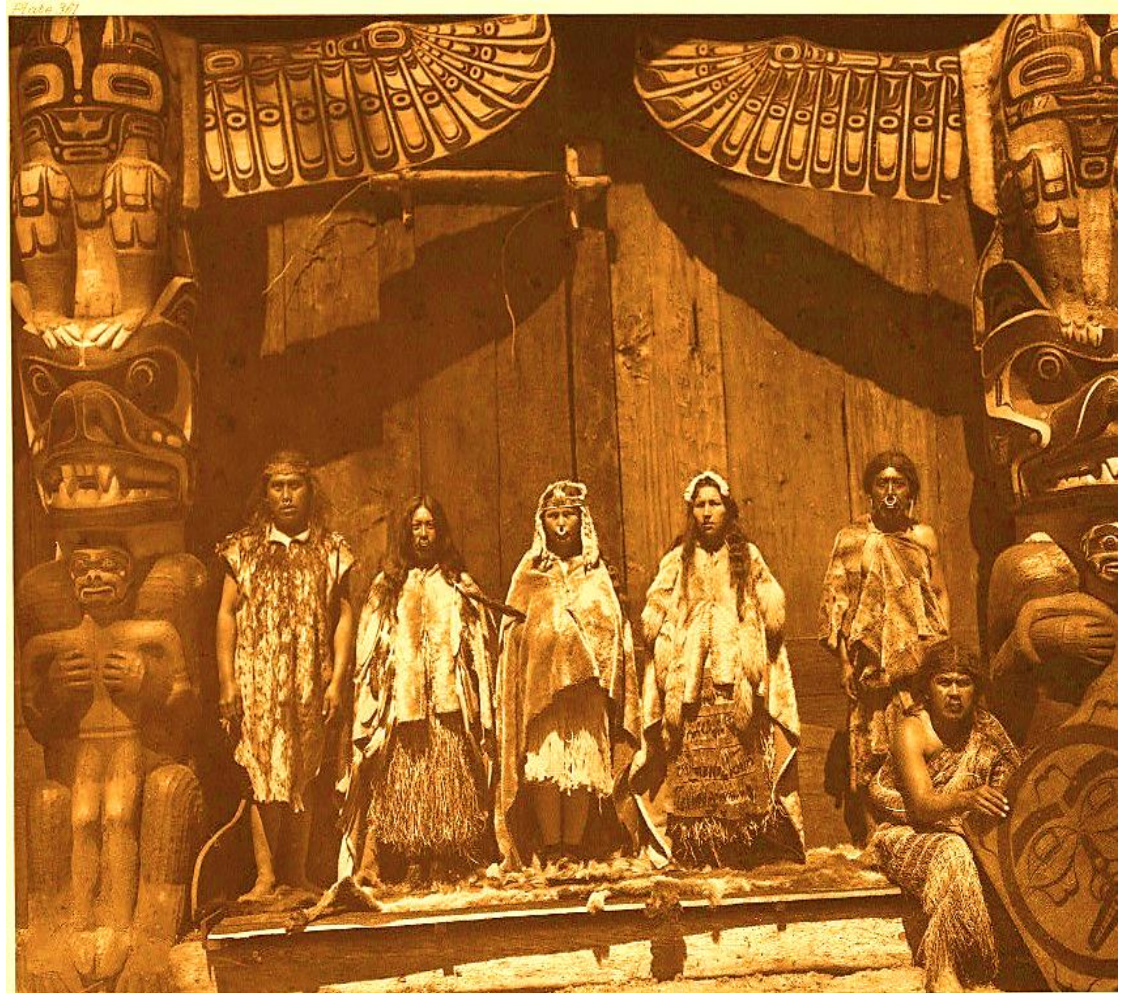
But being only twelve and being as free as he was, Sa'laLEla was bound to make some mistakes. His major act of foolishness occurred when he had his first responsibility in the potlatch celebration of his numaym.



The potlatch

The potlatch ceremony of the Northwest Coast Indians was unlike any other ceremony in the world.

On the occasion of a birth or marriage, the people of one numaym would put on a huge party for other numayms. The party would include music, feasting, dancing, feats of strength, and something else.



The something else was a massive give-away of wealth. The hosts would give away hundreds of blankets and other works of art to those at the potlatches.

But the give-a-ways were not charitable contributions to neighbors. They were actually intended to increase the wealth of the hosts. For you see, when members of a numaym attended a potlatch given by another numaym, they were obliged to have a potlatch of their own and give away more wealth than they had received.

In this way, wealth continued to grow among the tribes, and members worked harder and harder each year to outdo their neighbors.



And this was the setting that Sa'laLEla got caught up in, and how he made his foolish mistake.



Sa'laLEla's foolishness

Because Sa'laLEla had reached puberty, he was first allowed to play a role in an upcoming potlatch that was organized to celebrate the birth of a cousin.

Sa'laLEla's role was to collect as many blankets as he could to give away at the potlatch. Being the son of a minor chief, he had the authority to bring together boys his age (including slaves) in the community longhouse to make plans.

But Sa'laLEla knew that high ranking in his community was not something that was inherited by birth. It had to be earned. And it must be earned by accumulating great wealth.



He had a plan. His plan was to trade for the blankets. Normally one got blankets by first borrowing them and giving them away at a potlatch. Then more would have to be returned at the next potlatch enabling the borrower to repay the debt and have some blankets left over for profit. But this was a very slow way to accumulate wealth.

"I think I have a better way," Sa'laLEla said to his age mates. "We always trade smelt oil to the Nootka north of us for blankets. We have a surplus of oil and I know of a Nootka woman who has a surplus of blankets.



So the boys embarked on a frigid journey up the coast to visit the Nootka Indians. They brought the smelt oil, which was used for fuel and eaten as a great source of protein.

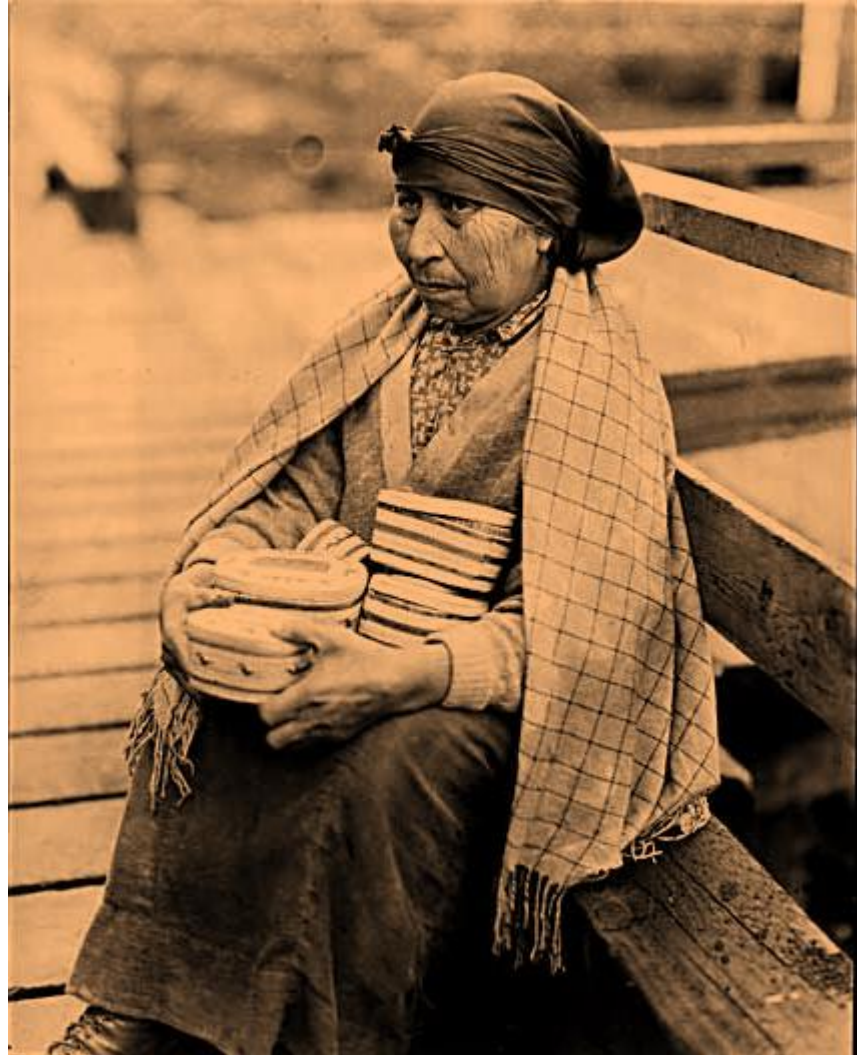
"The woman is not an expert trader," he told his friends snidely. "And I'm sure we can barter a deal for hundreds of blankets, while still not depleting our oil."



But Sa'laLEla was wrong about the woman.

The woman listened to Sa'laLEla's offer and tried not to laugh. "This boy has an ego that needs correction," she thought. "He thinks he already knows the ways of his tribe, but he's still a boy."

So the Nootka woman said this to Sa'laLEla: "I cannot help you at the moment. But I will give you some advice. Among your people, women will always obey real men. If you do not want to borrow the blankets from the women of your numaym, you should simply order the women to give them to you. They will obey." And she grinned.



"Ah, this shall then be our plan," said Sa'laLEla to his age mates.

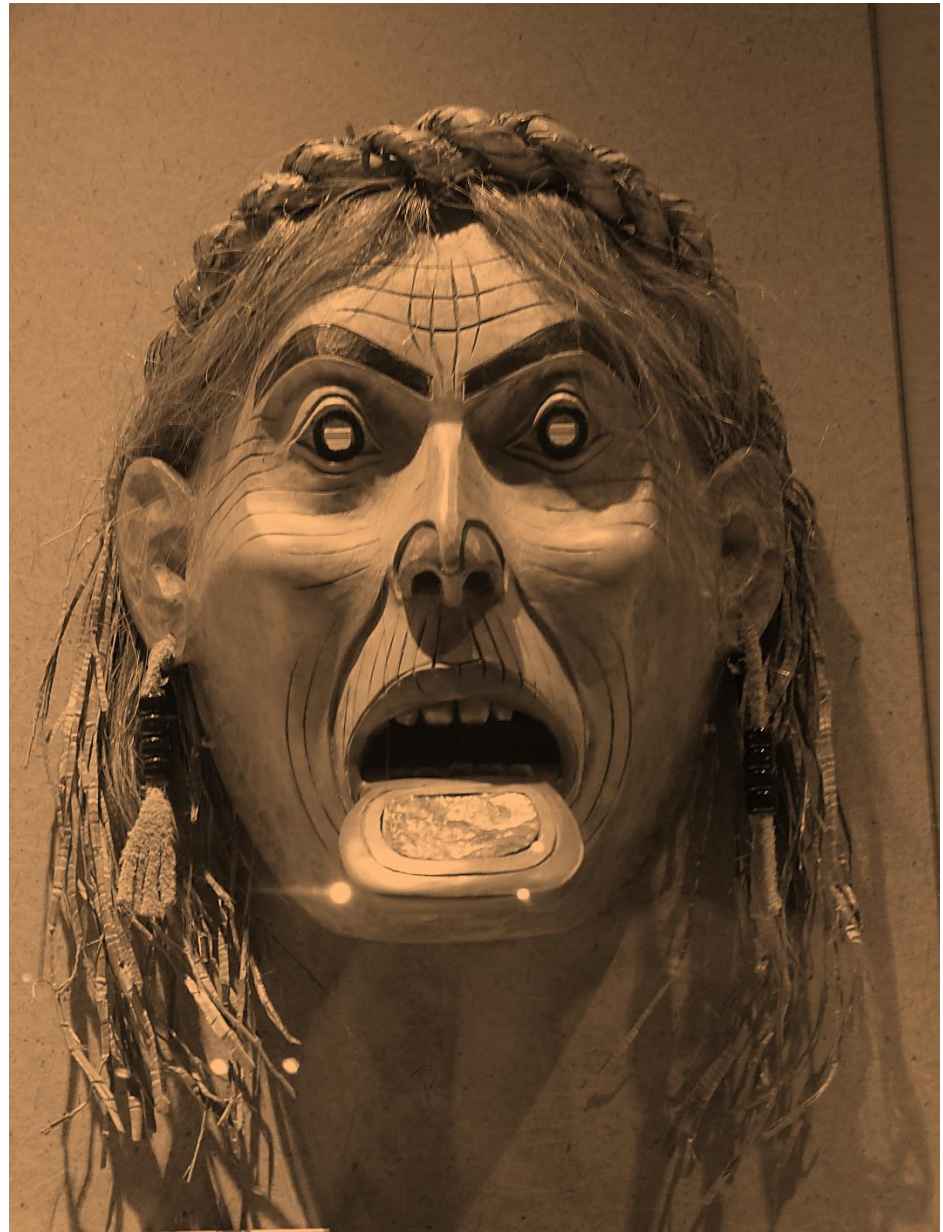
Sa'laLEla then ordered each slave boy to go to every house of his numaym and find a woman spinning wool or weaving blankets. "You must say this: 'Woman, you are to donate ten blankets for the upcoming potlatch, on the orders of Sa'laLEla, son of the minor chief.' He will come to your door the morning of the potlatch and collect them."

And so the boys did as Sa'laLEla had commanded. Sa'laLEla was delighted. He would amass wealth quickly and earn high ranking while still a boy.

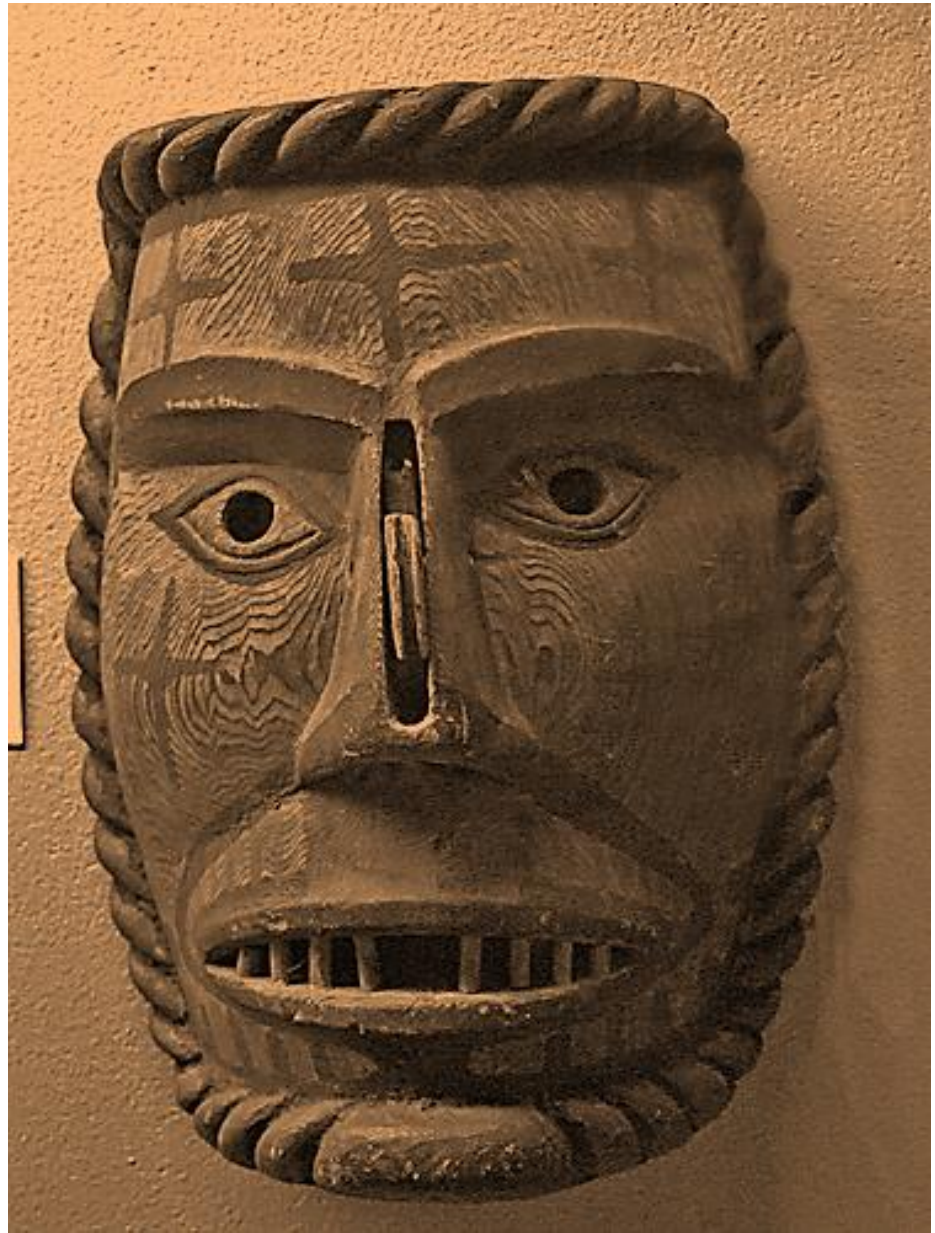


And on the morning of the potlatch, Sa'laLEla went to the first house to collect the blankets. But there were no blankets. Instead, on the door was a laughing mask.

"What is this?" he exclaimed.



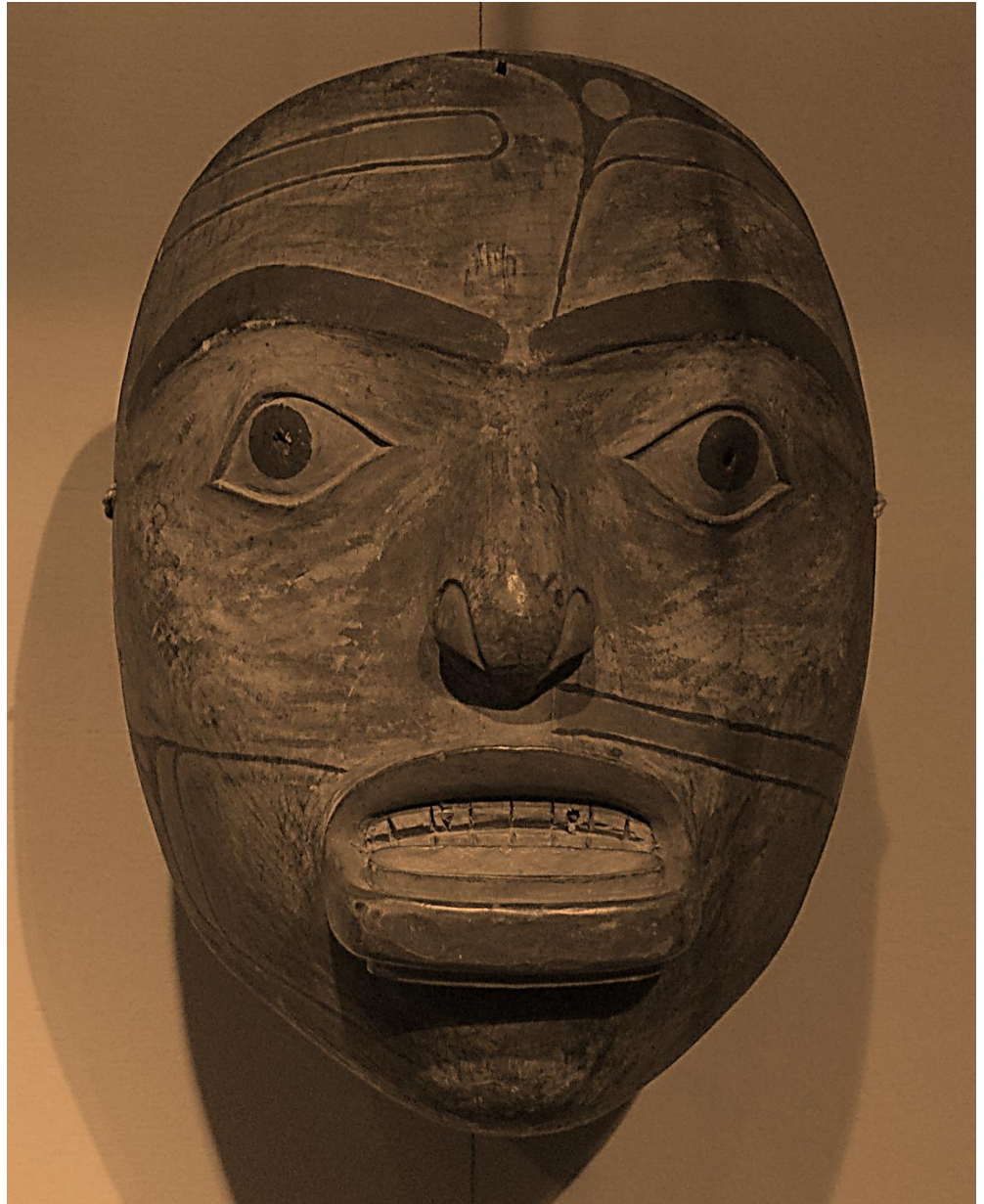
He went to the second house.
Again there were no blankets—
just a laughing mask.



And he went to the third house.
Another laughing mask.

He panicked.

Not knowing what to do, he ran
home to tell the story to his
mother.



His mother listened carefully. "You know Sa'laLEla," she began. "You have been given much freedom in the numaym, like all our children. The elders hope that each will learn by watching what others do, but in your case, you have not learned. The Nootka woman sensed this."

She went on. "Surely, in our village the men do hold the ceremonial offices, but the women inherit just like the men and have many of their privileges. You must know that your sister Kakaso'las, as the oldest child, will inherit everything from your mother and your father, while you have to earn your own wealth and ranking. Given all this, it stumps me to understand why you were so fooled into thinking our women would obey you.

"It is a lesson you will hopefully never repeat."



Sa'laLEla was mortified.
How had he become such a
fool? What was to become
of him now?

Sa'laLEla looked outside and
saw all the canoes coming in
for the potlatch. People
from four numayms would
attend. And there would be
no blankets to distribute.
His entire numaym would be
shamed and there would be
no blankets returned to
them at the next potlatch.
This was all because of his
foolishness.



Sa'laLEla walked toward the longhouse. His mother followed him.

"Do come in," an elder directed. "The festivities are about to begin."

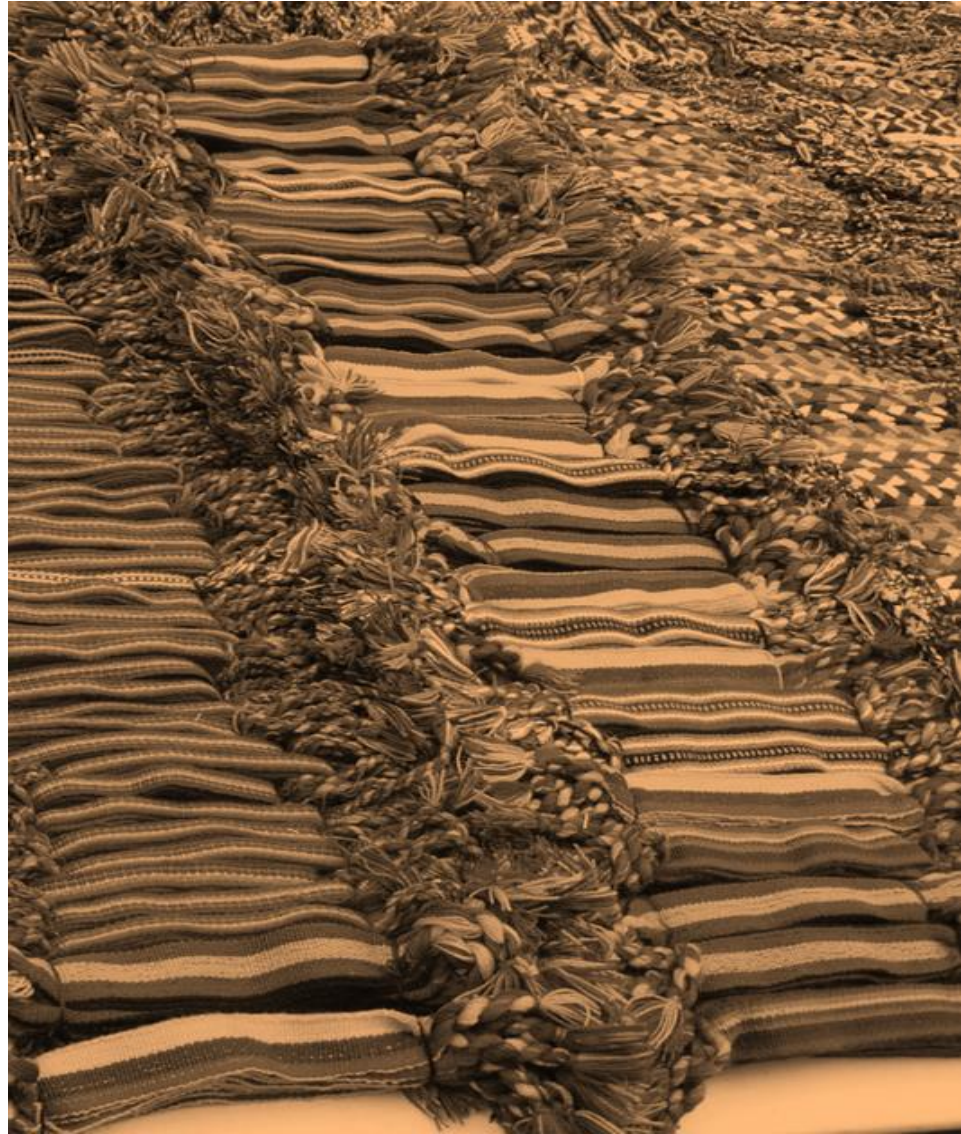
Sa'laLEla knew he had no choice. He walked inside and saw all the masks, ornaments, copper plaques, canoes, and baskets piled high, ready to be distributed.

But what was this?



Blankets!

Piles and piles of blankets!



And some of them were the most beautiful he'd ever seen.

His mother touched his shoulder. "You see, Sa'laLEla, our women took pity on you because you are very young yet. They felt that you would heed the way of our people in time, by being less concerned with yourself and quick wealth and more concerned for the wellbeing of the numaym."

Sa'laLEla dropped his head.

"But the women wanted you to know that you must pay these back."

Sa'laLEla knew.



Sa'laLEla enjoyed that potlatch more than any he'd ever attended. He listened with renewed interest to the stories that told the history of his people. He studied the dances that acted out this history.

He would learn.



The end

Let's talk!!!