



OUR DEATH IS OUR STRONGEST SURVIVING TRADITION

A Guest Essay by the Artist of Our Cover Image

As a self-taught artist I felt I needed to study art formally to be a better artist and to have more skills to express my ideas. In 1986 I enrolled in Kwantlen College in the Vancouver, British Columbia area and began working on a Fine Arts Diploma. I really enjoyed my studies, and I loved art history because it showed me how art evolved and changed and why.

One day, a group of four of us students sat around chatting and the topic of death came up. One of the students had a grandmother who died, and another student knew a student in their high school who was killed in a car crash. Then I started naming people who I knew that have died. I came up with over 20 names and realized that given enough time, I could come up with another 20 names.

Among the three white students, they knew two people who had died, but as for myself, a Native American (in Canada: First Nations), I knew at least forty people. It was then that I came to the realization that they were living a normal life and that my life experience was abnormal.

I work across various styles and media and in some of my art pieces I point out this situation. The artwork included here is an example of this. I painted Yukon Reality to testify to the fact that we as First Nations have an extremely high death rate. In our tradition, after death we begin our journey to the Spirit World. This takes about a year. Once we are buried at our pot-

*Ukjese van Kampen
Independent Artist
Whitehorse, Yukon Territory,
Canada*



<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-4373-9526>

latch the grave is covered with a tent. It is a tent because we are travelling to the Spirit World and when we are travelling, we use a tent. After a year travel we enter the Spirit World and the tent is replaced with a fenced area, a 'grave house' or a 'spirit house'. This is more permanent.

Once we are in the Spirit World we can be reborn. Not as an animal, as in some Asian religions where it can be a consequence of a person not having lived a good life, but as humans. We enter the human spirit world and not the animal spirit world. There are exceptions, but that discussion is beyond the scope of this article. As to reincarnation, my great-grandmother, Annie Ned, believed I was a reincarnation of her second husband Ukjese. When I was about 4 or 5 years old she used to watch me and one day she announced that I was in fact Ukjese reborn! She saw in me many of the traits and mannerisms of Ukjese and at that point I was him and had his status. Symbolically, my aunts and uncles became my nieces and nephews and she considered me to be her husband.

Our worldview includes a series of different worlds. We live in this present world here on earth but there is another world beyond the horizon. This is the White Winter World and this is the world where white people came from. Above us is the Sky World. There are holes through the ground of the Sky World and when it is our night, it is their day, and that is why you can see the spots of daylight shining through the little holes at nighttime. White people call these stars. There is an Underwater World and if you are capable of lifting the edge of the water, you can walk down into that world. In reality, it is primarily the deities who can lift the water and not common people. There is an Underground World also, but generally nobody has been there but an old woman holds the pole that keeps the spinning earth steady. We can see that it is we who are spinning, and not the sky spinning as Europeans once believed. And there are the Spirit Worlds for various lifeforms and ours is the Human Spirit World, as animals have their own Spirit World. The Spirit World's day is our night and that is why the spirits come out at night, it is then they are awake. Below is my illustration to the various worlds that we believed in. Later in this paper I will explain more about how we are connected with the Spirit World.

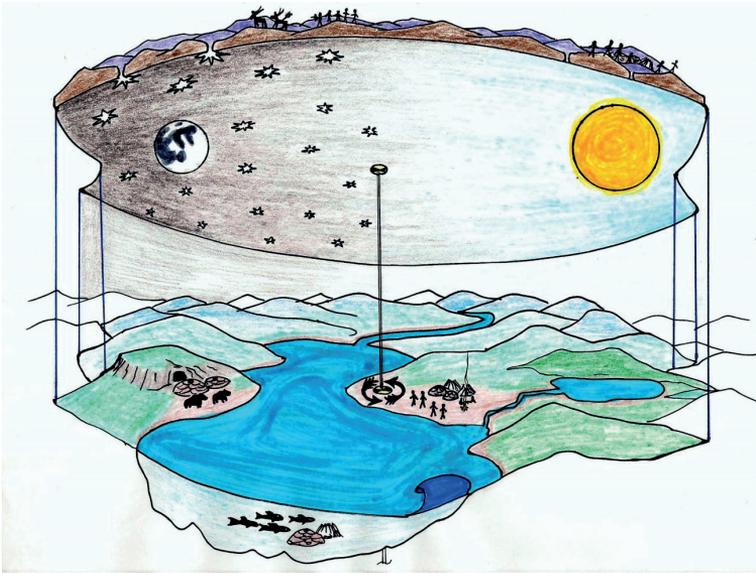


Fig. 1. Yukon First Nations world view showing the various worlds we used to believe in.

*Ukjese van Kampen
Independent Artist
Whitehorse, Yukon Territory,
Canada*

Below is my painting of my great grandmother Annie Ned. She was a member of the Order of Canada, as was her son and my great uncle; Elijah Smith. The Order of Canada is one of Canada's highest honours. It recognizes people across all sectors of society who have made extraordinary and sustained contributions to Canada.



Fig. 2. *Annie Ned*. Acrylic on canvas. 1993. Collection of German actress Luise Deschauer.

Why choose the title “Our Death is Our Strongest Surviving Tradition”? Even before the coming of the white man, our death rate increased. This started with the Tlingit middlemen traders in the very late 1700s and the beginning of the 1800s. They brought Russian trade goods into the Yukon. With this trade they also brought new diseases that they were catching from the Russians that were operating from what later became Alaska.

It is estimated that before contact there were between 7000 and 9000 Yukon First Nations people living in what is now identified as the Yukon. Through contact with the Russians via the Tlingits and subsequently the Hudson’s Bay Company and later Americans (The United States bought Russian America (renamed “Alaska” in 1867) Yukon First Nations experienced a very high death rate. By 1830 it is estimated that there were only 4,700 Yukon First Nations left, by 1900 there were 3300 and by the 1920s there were only 1500 survivors! Given these numbers we would have had a great many potlatches!¹

The potlatch is a ceremony that we have for special occasions including the death of a person. The population since the 1950s has been increasing and has now reached almost the same level as pre-contact. We are about 7000 Yukon First Nations people strong but there is still a huge death rate as I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Later, I will describe in more detail how a potlatch is conducted. For myself, who has spent decades researching my people’s art and culture, I have found little interest in our past traditions, and I also describe this situation closer to the end of this paper. But in contrast to that lack of interest for our traditions, is the high death rate and that maintains a continued Potlatch practice and thus that part of our tradition is strong.

Becoming more immune to the white man’s diseases has slowed our death rate but another reason for the population increase is possibly a higher birth rate. During my youth I knew many families with many children. Further, it is not unusual traditionally as well as contemporary, to have children by different partners. My mother had 5 children from 4 different men. This is

1. See Kenneth S. Coates’ book, *Best Left as Indians* (1984) for a more detailed account in his description of the Yukon First Nations population over the decades.

not a moral issue for Yukon First Nation people. Yet we still have a lower life expectancy than the Canadian average. The 2011 life expectancy for a First Nations man in Canada was 72.5 years versus a non-First Nations man's life expectancy of 81.4 years. But these numbers are misleading as these figures are of death by natural causes. I read once that the life expectancy of a First Nations man in Canada, when all causes of death are included, is only 42 years old! That means I have now lived more than twenty years past my life expectancy. Amazing considering there have been a number of times I have almost been killed.²

Aboriginal people in Canada face tremendous social obstacles including a lower education rate, higher unemployment rate, higher crime rate, higher incarceration rate, higher substance abuse rate, higher suicide rate, and so forth. These all contribute to that high death rate.

The mentioned points have been reflective of my own life. While I live a healthy lifestyle and have an education my family and some of my friends live a more destructive lifestyle. When I was 16 years old I was stabbed but did not have a life-altering injury except for the scar to remind me of that night. During that event three other people were stabbed and one of them did not live. The perpetrator spent 14 months in jail and later committed suicide. My mother was once stabbed 42 times by another woman over a bottle of wine that my mother did not want to give to her. My mother survived. Later that same year the woman who did the stabbing was hit and killed by a car. Interestingly, my mother who is still alive has outlived every man she dated or lived with except one. My brother was stabbed and killed. The person who murdered him spent less than two years in jail. I have lost two other brothers, one by disease and the other my father accidentally ran over and my brother was killed. He was two years old. My father later committed suicide. My nephew in 2019 committed suicide and my first cousin died of alcohol abuse in 2021. A huge number of former schoolmates and friends have died of either suicide or other causes as well a number of former girlfriends. These tragedies are so frequent that there is never enough time

*Ukjese van Kampen
Independent Artist
Whitehorse, Yukon Territory,
Canada*

2. For more information, see the health reports from *Statistics Canada* by Jungwee Park (2021) and Michael Tjepkema, et al. (2019).

between them to fully recover. It seems to be a matter of waiting for the next tragedy to hit.

As for the potlatch in this case, it is our way of saying goodbye and sending that person off to the Spirit World, but despite knowing that they are still an entity, and will be reborn, we are still deeply sad at the loss of the living person.

As in western art, that of First Nations artists often reflects society and the images I create are the reflection of the society I am living in. Some deal with our high death rate, some deal with our place in the modern world and the injustices I see and some are my efforts to raise awareness to our almost-lost older art practices. In this painting below titled *Yukon Reality* illustrates our high death rate. The grave houses go off into the distance seemingly to never end. In the grave houses are photographs of my family members, classmates, buddies and former girlfriends who have all died. I write a bit about each person in the space below the photograph. The grave houses are balanced by the beauty of the Yukon wilderness on the left side. While the social situation for Yukon First Nations has changed dramatically, the land remains majestic.

*Sacred Spaces
In North America*

RIAS VOL. 16, SPRING-SUMMER N° 1/2023



Fig. 3. *Yukon Reality*. Acrylic and photographs on board. 1999

After the coming of the white man, we may have started getting immune to the new diseases, but with the establishment of the mission schools large parts of our culture was destroyed. Initially we were still living as semi-nomadic hunter gatherers even after the white people established their infrastructure in the Yukon. Once white people established control, starting with the Klondike Gold Rush of 1898, we First Nations people had restricted say over our lives. Until World War II we continued our wilderness lifestyle and were generally outside of the white man's towns and thus their laws. World War II changed all that when the war caused a worldwide drop in fur prices. It now cost money to go trapping and we could no longer afford to purchase those trade items and foods that we have grown accustomed to for the previous four decades. With the military personnel flooding into the Yukon to build roads, airfields and bases to counter the possible Japanese invasion there also came many labour jobs for First Nations people. This caused a transition from the semi-nomadic hunter-gather lifestyle to one of being workers in the communities. Tellingly, during that time First Nations people were only allowed to work as unskilled workers.³

There were severe limitations for First Nations people as the communities were segregated and First Nations people had to live outside the white communities. Often towns had a curfew and First Nations people could be in the town during the day and buy items from the stores and work, but by eight o'clock in the evening, First Nations people had to be outside the town limits. The other area of big change was transportation. There were no real roads connecting the communities before World War II but in order to have an inland supply route to Alaska, in case the Japanese Navy cut off the sea supply route, the Alcan (Alaska-Canadian) Highway was built by the United States Army. Besides this road, now called the Alaska Highway, other highways were built: the Haines Road, Aishihik Road, the Canol (Canadian Oil) Road and a number of smaller roads. Along with this came the infrastructure in the form of buildings and numerous airfields.⁴

3. Besides my own observations, over years of research I have talked to many Elders who told me many stories of their lives.

4. Given the central place of these events in our lives, this history is considered general knowledge and figures in the contemporary Tutchone oral

Before World War II, First Nations people lived in the wilderness and the government had little means of collecting First Nations children for the mission schools. After the new roads and highways were built and with First Nations families moving to villages just outside the white communities to find employment, it became a lot easier to collect First Nations kids. Before World War II there was one mission school in the Yukon. After World War II four new mission schools were built and First Nations children were collected and sent to these schools. Students who attended these mission schools have told many horror stories about abuse. So, the Second World War is a major cultural dividing line. First Nations people before World War II spoke their language and almost all those born after World War II do not, including myself. Besides language loss there was a loss of lifestyle, spirituality, art and laws. Essentially, we lost our culture. The mission school was a multi-generational event. For example, my grandmother attended the Anglican Mission school in the village of Carcross, my mother attended the Baptist Mission school in Whitehorse and by my time the government was taking over operations of the schools from the churches and I attended the government residential school, Yukon Hall in Whitehorse.

Coupled with the loss of our culture was that we were not deemed equal to Canadians or even considered citizens of Canada. In fact, these changes only happened within my lifetime. For example, it was only after I was born (1959) that First Nations people did not need the permission of the Indian Agent to leave the Yukon Territory. The first time we could vote in a Federal election was 1960; the first time we could vote in a Territorial election was 1961. It was also at this time we could start attending public school, earn a degree and gain any sort of higher profession such as a pilot, a policeman, doctor, etc. 1965 was the first time a Yukon First Nation's person could legally enter a bar to sit down and order a beer. Indeed, my mother spent six weeks in jail because she was arrested for being drunk in 1954.

With the loss of our lifestyle and our culture being ripped away, along with being thought of as generally stupid, lazy, dirty and infe-

tradition. For a more detailed account, however, see Kenneth S. Coates *Better Left as Indians* (1984).

rior, we found ourselves till the present day with many social problems. This dysfunction has translated into a high death rate. Fortunately, we were able to keep practicing the potlatch. While the government made it illegal to conduct certain potlatches, it was hard for the government and church to end the funeral potlatch. However, Christianity did become part of the potlatch in the form of a preacher performing a Christian service as one part of the ceremonies.

There are two moieties, or clans, in the Yukon, the Wolf and the Crow or their equivalents. When a person dies, let's say from the Wolf clan, the Wolf people arrange the potlatch, but they do not do the work involved in the functioning of the potlatch. The Wolf people hire the Crow people to do the work. This work includes hunting, gathering, preparation and serving of the food, digging the grave and building the fence or grave house. The Wolf people decide when and where the potlatch and burial will take place. On the day of the potlatch people gather in the hall or potlatch house and a service is held, often with a Christian minister leading it. After the service the coffin in procession is taken to the grave yard and the person is buried. This procession is often led by a drummer who is singing a goodbye song. Prayers are said and the coffin is lowered into the ground and everybody says their goodbyes.

People return to the Potlatch House after the burial for the meal and the money collection. This is the last meal with the deceased person. One meal is burnt and when it turns to smoke it enters the Spirit World and becomes the meal for the deceased person. At the meal the Wolf people contribute gifts and money to the family and the money is placed in a large bowl. The person who contributes has their name called out and the amount; this is followed by applause. Once all the money is gathered it is counted up and announced to the gathering. The Wolf people use that money to cover the expenses of the potlatch, like the coffin and the rental fee for the hall, if there is one. Any food that was purchased is paid for. The Crow workers are paid for their work. Their name is announced and they go up to receive their pay, often having to do a bit of a dance or jig. This 'dance,' which is the person

*Ukjese van Kampen
Independent Artist
Whitehorse, Yukon Territory,
Canada*

humorously having to 'work' for their money is often applauded cheerfully by the people in the hall. (I have to admit, being a bit shy of my dancing skills, I often dance across the floor to the person giving out money very fast, to the amazement and amusement of the people in the hall.) Once all the Crow workers and expenses are paid, people who travelled from far away are given money to help with their costs. Gifts are also dispensed: blankets, tools, clothing, etc. Once all the money is given out the potlatch bowl is turned upside down to indicate that all the money collected has been paid out. With this system a person can die with no money and yet have a potlatch and a decent funeral and burial. All concerns are handled by their clan.

Below is my work depicting one such precession at the village of Champagne in the Yukon. I did a two minute sketch of the scene and later made the painting from the sketch. I was attending the potlatch of one of my relatives.

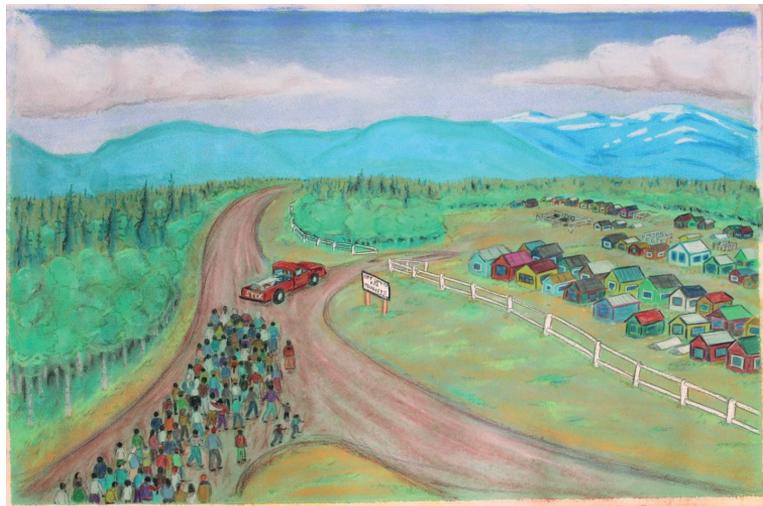


Fig. 4. *Yet Another family Reunion*. Pastel on paper. 2001.

Besides attending potlatches, I have performed some of these roles, as a Wolf for a Wolf potlatch, I have been an organizer, announcer, and a witness to dressing of the body. For the Crow-organized potlatch, I have been a worker such as a grave digger and pall bearer.

Below are a few photographs of my late brother Kevin's potlatch in 2003. First was the meal in the Kwanlin Dun First Nation's Potlatch House, Nàkwät'à Kú, in Whitehorse, Yukon. This was arranged by the Wolf clan. Everybody attended but Crow clan members were hired to do the work.



Fig. 5. The meal in the Kwanlin Dun First Nation's Potlatch House.

Next was the procession to the burial site at Steamboatlanding, about eighty kilometers from Whitehorse. The coffin was carried to the burial site. Note the drummer and Elder in front of the procession.



Fig. 6. The procession to the burial site at Steamboatlanding.

*Ukjese van Kampen
Independent Artist
Whitehorse, Yukon Territory,
Canada*

The next photograph is a year later and this potlatch is called the headstone potlatch. This is when the headstone is placed at the grave. Note the grave house behind the people which is from an earlier burial and two earlier graves of my older brother and stepfather in the front. A fence is planned to be placed around the three graves.



Fig. 6. The head stone potlatch

Traditionally children were not permitted at potlatches because the person who has died may not want to go on the year journey to the Spirit World. They will wait to be reborn. They may try and push the spirit out of a nearby child's body and take over that body. The spirit of a child is not firmly secure in the body until about six years old, or even later. The spirit of the person who is reborn will often remember their previous life and at about 6 years old they are now more in this world and forget their previous life. This is what my grandmother Annie Ned saw in me when I was four or five years old. I was acting like her previous husband. Elders can see these traits of deceased people in young children and like I said sometime the children remember parts of their past life and there are many stories illustrating this. When my daughter was four years old she announced to me: "I died a long time ago!" seemingly remembering a past life.

The journey to the Spirit World takes a year and for that first year a tent is placed over the grave. I am not sure why it takes this long, although it may be related to our human yearly-round, our

own yearly cycle that takes a year to return to where we were before, such as starting the spring at a fish camp and spending the summer there and, as the seasons pass, we depart, spending the fall at hunting camps, the winter at our winter camp and then, in the spring, returning to the fish camp. And thus it is related to our human life style of being born, living, growing old and dying and later starting again being reborn, just like the yearly cycle. The person has things they will need on their journey to the Spirit World, such as extra moccasins, tea pots and cups, blankets, rifles, etc. These are placed in the tent and after the year in the grave house. They may include the person's personal items, such as a young girl's doll or maybe a carved death mask. While many of our past rituals and meanings have been lost, it seems that the mask was made for important people upon their death. I have not learned why, only that it was sometimes done. In older times a button blanket was placed over the coffin. After the one year the person is fully in the Spirit World. The tent is then replaced with either a fence around the grave or a 'grave house'/'spirit house'. Before the coming of white people the items the person needed for their journey to the Spirit World was placed in the tent and later in the fenced area or the grave house but after white people showed up they started stealing the items! So now items are placed in the casket with the deceased person and buried making it impossible for white people to steal any grave items.

*Ukjese van Kampen
Independent Artist
Whitehorse, Yukon Territory,
Canada*

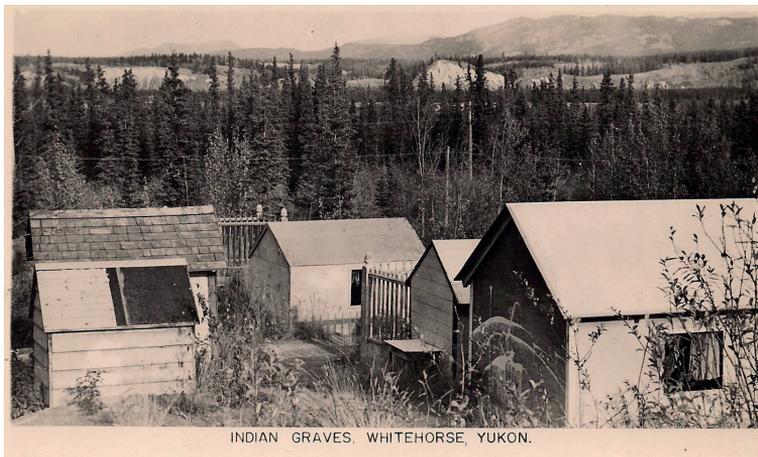


Fig. 7. Postcard from Ukjese van Kampen collection

Above is one of the earlier postcards of our grave yards. They were tourist attractions until in the mid to late 1970s, when the Yukon Indian Women's Council began protesting that our cemeteries were not meant for that purpose. This is just one of the examples of how white people thought themselves superior to us and that 'we' belonged to 'them' and as a result could do as they pleased when it concerned us. By 1978, they were no longer listed as tourist attractions.

Once the person is in the Spirit World they can be reborn. We are reborn as humans and not, like in some beliefs, as an animal. Animals go to their animal Spirit World. There are cases where there are cross overs, but that is beyond the scope of this article. We can be reborn as either male or female but we mostly are reborn as our previous sex. We are always reborn into our clan. I will give an example of this to illustrate.

We always follow our mother's clan and since my mother is Wolf clan, I am Wolf clan. As I had mentioned earlier, my great grandmother Annie Ned, named me Ukjese and from that point on I was acknowledged as the former Ukjese by my family. I did not have to take on the role of her husband as that was only symbolic; I was starting life and she was now an Elder. However, she would live for another thirty years, past the age of one hundred! Annie Ned was Crow clan and a Crow can only marry a Wolf. So her former husband Ukjese belonged to the Wolf Clan.

The story deepens. The earlier Ukjese, the one who discovered the fishing camp of Klukshu before the coming of the white man, was also Wolf. Since he discovered Klukshu, Klukshu belonged to the Wolf people and Crow people needed permission from the Wolf people to fish there. This same Ukjese later committed a crime against the Crow people and he had to pay retribution to the Crow people. He handed Klukshu over to the Crow people as payment. So now Klukshu belongs to the Crow people and the Wolf people must have permission from a Crow person to fish there. When I married my Dutch wife, she automatically was designated as a member of the Crow clan; I now have to ask my Dutch wife permission to fish at Klukshu!

The clan system is a major part of our lives. The members of our clan are like family and so if you go to a new area, you will always

have connections there in the form of your clan members. While we lost a great deal of our culture, our clan system and potlatches have survived the transition from our old semi-nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle to life in the twenty-first century.

Not all is bleak. Yukon First Nations are now politically very powerful, and each First Nation that has signed the Land Claims Agreements with the Canadian government has equivalent power to the territorial government. This success has come at the cost of our heritage and culture. In order to survive in the past we had to be highly adaptable to changing situations and Yukon First Nations rapidly and successfully adopted the political, capitalistic and bureaucratic life styles. This type of society puts art and culture on the back burner. Until we return to focusing on our heritage and culture we will have a sense of lost identity. This results in low self-esteem which leads to social problems and high death rate. One of few remnants of our past culture is the remaining potlatch rituals we still have because of the high death rates that have made the continued practice essential. Can there be a balance between the two? I do not know. But I feel that I would lose my artistic self if I became more involved in the politics of the Yukon; therefore I follow a more artistic path and spend a lot of my time in other areas such as Europe and Japan.

This artistic path requires me to have a good understanding of our past traditions and with at least a strong potlatch and dance tradition; I feel I still have something from the old that I can hang on to. I did not need to research these aspects of my culture. The potlatch is a Wolf-Crow event and being part of the ritual from young has given me the knowledge of the Wolf-Crow system and thus an understanding of all the art related to this. The potlatch is also a link to our spiritual beliefs and world views. Again there is a link to the artistic research. So having a knowledge allows me to more fine tune the focus of my research and exploration into the other art forms we did in the past. Even having to attend many potlatches also made me examine why we have so many potlatches, which, as I mentioned, is from our abnormally high death rate. This prompted me to examine this issue and this has also resulted in me producing various series of paintings, photographs and performance art that is making

*Ukjese van Kampen
Independent Artist
Whitehorse, Yukon Territory,
Canada*

statements about my people's social situation. These resulting works of various arts are part of a bigger 'story-telling' approach of the situation of my people.

Abstract: In Canada, Yukon First Nations are politically powerful and, when viewed by an outsider, everything appears to be progressing well. But the adoption of the Western political model has a downside. We have generally sacrificed our culture for that political power. The loss of our culture has resulted in many social problems and this essay discusses what has resulted from those problems, specifically our high death rate. Ironically, our death ritual, the Potlatch, is one of the strongest surviving cultural traditions we still exercise, while our languages, laws, art, lifestyle, and spirituality are almost all forgotten.

Bio: Dr. Ukjese van Kampen is from the Wolf Clan, Northern Tutchone people in the Yukon Territory in northern Canada. Besides his Native American ancestry he can trace links to his European heritage back to the MacPhail Clan in Scotland and has in-law links to the Netherlands. Dr. van Kampen has a BFA, MA and a PhD from Leiden University in the Netherlands and a second PhD with the University of Lapland in Finland. Dr. van Kampen has long been fascinated with Native Americans and has focused much of his research on Yukon First Nations art, costume, and history and is often lecturing at conferences and universities worldwide on those subjects. He has presented and/or had art exhibitions in Japan, Mexico, United States, the Netherlands, Finland, Poland, Canada and many other locations as well as he is quite involved with universities in the Czech Republic. His most recent writings have been included in *Původní obyvatelé a globalizace* [Indigenous Peoples and Globalization] (Czech Republic: Nakladatelství Pavel Markvart, 2021) and *Kwanlin Dün: DäKwändur Ghà Chàkwadindur—Our Story in Our Words* (Vancouver: Figure 1 Publishing, 2020). Dr. van Kampen is active having art exhibitions, doing performance art, lecturing and curating in Canada, Europe and Japan.

WORKS CITED

- Coates, Kenneth S. *Best Left as Indians: Native-White Relations in the Yukon Territories, 1840-1973*. U of British Columbia P, 1984.
- Park, Jungwee. "Mortality Among First Nations People, 2006 to 2016." *Statistics Canada*, 20 October 2021. <https://www.doi.org/10.25318/82-003-x202101000001-eng>
- Tjepkema, Michael, Tracey Bushnik and Evelyne Bougie. "Life Expectancy of First Nations, Métis and Inuit Household Populations in Canada." *Statistics Canada*, 18 December 2019. <https://www.doi.org/10.25318/82-003-x201901200001-eng>
- van Kampen, Ukjese. *History of Yukon First Nations Art*. 2012. Leiden University, PhD Dissertation.
- van Kampen, Ukjese. *The Journey of Floral Bead Styles from 1500s France to 1800s Yukon First Nations*. 2022. University of Lapland, PhD Dissertation.

