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A MINI-RESEARCH PAPER

on

THE NATIVE PEOPLE OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

"POTLATCH"

by

NOEL KNOCKWOOD, B.A.

Special Advisor to the Commissioner on Native Affairs

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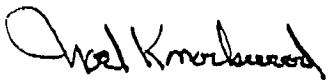
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PREFACE

The purpose of this mini-research paper is to determine why the Native Indians of the Pacific Northwest celebrated the "Potlatch" ceremonies. It explains their purpose and describes some of the ceremonies.

As European settlers arrived with their beliefs on Christianity, the Missionary's attempt to outlaw the ritual was a success and the ritual went underground.

After several years, it was learned that the "Potlatch" ceremony did not die or cease to be in operation. On the contrary, it was found to be alive in 1951 when it was re-introduced by the Aboriginal people among the Kwakiutl.



Noel Knockwood, B.A.
Special Adviser to the Commissioner
on Native Affairs

POTLATCH

Cole, Douglas and Chaikin, Ira. An Iron Hand upon the People "The Law Against the Potlatch on the Northwest Coast". Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre. University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1990

Introduction

In 1885 the Canadian government outlawed the potlatch, that seemingly profligate and ruinous gift-giving ceremony of many British Columbia Indians. Only in 1951 was the "potlatch law" dropped from the statutes. The legal suppression of the potlatch became a symbol, in both native and white communities, of the Canadian treatment of British Columbia. The potlatch was a central institution to many Northwest Coast Indians and they quickly saw the law as an instrument of injustice and intolerance. Second only to the taking of land without extinguishing indian title, the outlawing of the potlatch can be seen as the extreme to which Euro-Canadian society used its dominance against its aboriginal subjects in British Columbia. Only the repression of native languages among Indian schoolchildren can compete with the potlatch law as an example of the assault on indigenous culture. The potlatch law "tore away most of the traditional social fabric" of the Kwakiutl Indians.

The conflict between white and native over the potlatch was a clash of values. The ceremony was seen by many missionaries, Christian Indians and department of Indian Affairs field agents as a barrier to the assimilation of the native peoples into European and Christian society. To most Indians, on the other hand, their potlatch was a time-honoured and beneficial institution that did no harm.

"A Very Complex Institution"

The Northwest Coast potlatch was the occasion at which a traditional name, rank or hereditary privilege was claimed through dances, speeches and the distribution of property to those invited. The group hosing a potlatch displayed certain of its hereditary possessions, which included songs, dances and masks, recited the origins of these rights and the history of their transmission, and bestowed the new rank and name upon the member now entitled to use them. The ceremony was completed by distributing gifts, really payments, to the guests. The guest group, by witnessing the claims made, validated and sanctioned the status displayed and claims. This was vital; the claims had to be publicly witnessed to be valid. At the same time, there was reciprocity to the ceremony. The guests were confirmed in their own status by the order in which they received their gifts, by the amount presented to them and often by the seating arrangements.

The occasions for such validations and confirmations were many. Potlatches were most usually held at significant points in the life cycle--the naming of a child, the acquisition of a traditional family name, a girl's first menses, marriage and the redemption of a bridal payment, and death, with the raising of a memorial pole and the assumption by a relative of the name and position of the deceased. Potlatches also occurred at the winter ceremonials, similarly to accompany the acquisition of new privileges or rights. Other events, such as the wiping away of shame from some misfortune, might also occasion a potlatch.

Potlatching was "giving away," but it was invariably accompanied by feasting and dancing, and by the more or less regulated festivities inherent in the assembling of people for a festive occasion. Sports, gambling (Northwest Coast Indians were inveterate gamers), talking and gossiping, some lovemaking, and,

after white contact, sometimes drinking, accompanied the more formal ceremonies.

While this basic description is adequate, the potlatch was "really a very complex institution"[1] and any brief account inevitably does it an injustice. To begin with, no Indian used the word, except to outsiders, to describe his or her own giving-away event. The term was an invented omnibus word, originally from the Nootka *patshatl*, "gift" or "giving," and entered into general use through the Chinook trade jargon in the 1860s or perhaps even a little later.

While every coastal group--and many interior groups--had ceremonies that included payments or gifts on an extensive scale, each acted somewhat differently Major Tlingit and Haida potlatches occurred at the death of a chief, with a funeral and memorial ceremony for the deceased and a validation of the accession of the successor. Among the central coast Kwakiutl and Bella Coola, occasions for potlatches were more numerous, following a succession of events in the life cycle of an individual--birth, puberty, winter ceremonial initiation, marriage and death--all of which meant the transferral of privileges, names and ranks. These differences reflected variation in the social structure, kinship and descent systems of the groups involved. The variations and patterns are complex and elaborate but they involve, among other things, the matrilineal descent system of the northern coast tribes and the ambilineal descent of the central and souther coast, the preferred pattern of marriages, and variations in the division of the group by moiety, clan or kinship.[2]

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[1]H.G. Barnett, "The Nature and Function of the Potlatch," 1

[2]Abraham Rosman and Paula G. Rubel, *Feasting with Mine Enemy,*

Feasts and gift-giving probably served several functions. One might well have been to compensate for the variability of food supply between groups.[3] Feasts and gifts also provided a means by which a chief could attract and hold a labour force, forming a way to compensate commoners for their participation in the harvesting of his or her resources. And, of course, feasts and potlatches legitimatized and bolstered the privileges and wealth of the chiefs and nobility.[4]

"A worse Than Useless Custom"

On 7 July 1883 the Canadian cabinet was advised by the prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, acting in his capacity as superintendent general of Indian affairs, that measures should be taken to suppress the potlatch. Cabinet accepted his recommendation that, pending the introduction of legislation at the next session of Parliament, the governor general issue a proclamation discountenancing the custom and requesting that Her Majesty's Indian subject abandon it.[5] Less than a year later, on 19 April 1884, an amendment to the Indian Act made engaging in the potlatch a misdemeanour. Outlawed at the same time was the tamananawas dance. Both ceremonies were to be declared offenses effective 1 January 1885.

Native people were wards of the government, to be put out of harm's way and encouraged, through example and education, eventually to advance from their "primitive" level to that of the

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[3]Wayne Suttles, *Coast Salish Essays.*

[4]Ruyle, "Slavery, Surplus, and Stratification on the Northwest Coast," Kobrinsky, "Dynamics of the Fort Rupert Class Struggle.

[5]Privy Council Office, Minutes, No.1, v.260, 7 July 1883, 5-12.

whites who surrounded them. Ancient encumbrances that hindered upward progress, such as the potlatch, needed to be discouraged, even outlawed. This civilizing policy would later earn condemnation as "enforced acculturation," even "cultural genocide," but it did aim at admitting the native to full Canadian citizenship.

"What Is Best for the Indians"

The law was dropped from the statues in 1951. By then the potlatch had become a "non-issue," a matter of no concern--or very minor concern--to most Indians, church officials and government agent. The potlatch, at least the potlatch that Sproat, Dawson, Boas, Blenkinsop, Pidcock, DeBeck Halliday had know, seemed pretty much dead. It survived, largely unseen, on the west coast of Vancouver Island, along the Skeena River, in remote Kwakiutl villages and elsewhere, and in subtle forms in feasts, sports days and Christmas celebrations all along the coast.

In 1951 the Indians of coastal British Columbia, after three decades of rapid change, were subject to conflicting tendencies. For many the postwar forties had been a time of reassessment, with younger progressives seeking equality, an end to discrimination and even integration into Canadian society. The old ways seemed doomed to inevitable demise. Few worked to retain them, and native spokespersons, especially the Native Brotherhood, were more concerned with gaining equality and opportunity in the postwar white world than in preserving customary usage and practice.

Among the Kwakiutl, Jimmy Sewid, in 1962, gave his first real potlatch in over twenty years. The previous year his uncle, Chief Tom Dawson of Kingcome, had put on a potlatch at which he gave Sewid a talking stick that bore crests from Sewid's mother's and father's sides. Sewid decided to put on his own "do" to announce the gift publicly at Alert Bay and to give his grandchildren names. People were invited from Gilford and Turnour islands, from New

Vancouver, Fort Rupert and Kingcome. Although the potlatch lasted only one night, almost all the protocol was traditional. The value of the gifts was less than $1000, "just small presents." He had not borrowed money or relied on his family for help. "It was," he confessed, "not like the ones in the past, the real big potlatches"; "it was just a small token and I just wanted to do it." When his youngest son married a Saskatchewan Cree woman, Sewid arranged "a big do" on their return to Alert Bay. Previously, for his other childrens' marriages, he had sponsored a reception and a dance "in the white man's way"; now, with a new chest containing dances from Moses Alfred, he gave "this Indian do."[6] In 1978 his daughter Daisy remarried her husband, this time in the Indian way. On that occasion, Chief Harry Assu of Cape Mudge announced his own potlatch to celebrate the raising of a memorial pole to his father, Chief Billy Assu. The ceremony, held in the new Kwagiulth Museum, cost Assu "around fifteen thousand dollars." Assu's biggest potlatch, a memorial to his wife, Ida, was five years later. Participants came from almost all Kwakiutl groups, even from the Nootka people. Jimmy Sewid gave Assu a copper; other coppers came from Willie Cranmer of Alert Bay and from Paul Willie and adam Dick of kingcome. The red cedar bark ceremony was performed, then the *klassila* dance, and speeches were made. Finally "the big gift-giving" started. "You know," recalled Assu, "some of our people used to wonder whether the potlatch was a good thing or not. When I think about that potlatch now, I know it was good."[7]

[6]Sewid, *Guests Never Leave Hungry*

[7]Assu with Inglis, *Assu of Cape Mudge*

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