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THE KAWKIUTL POTLATCH: HISTORY, ECONOMICS, AND SYMBOLS

by

Gail Ringel

ABSTRACT

An outline of Kwakiutl history, concentrating on the changes which resulted from European contact, shows the transition from traditional economic patterns to a modern, market economy. The development of the potlatch, one of their central institutions, reflects this transition and serves to represent on a socio-cultural level the vast economic changes. The nature of the early exchange enforced a controlled hierarchial structure while later forms gave way to a limitless, socially mobile society.

An extensive and varied literature has been generated by anthropologists interested in the Southern Kwakiutl and one of their particularly colorful institutions, the potlatch. Once viewed as a cultural curiosity or even a destructive aberration (Benedict 1934), the potlatch has more recently been evaluated in a historical context of cultural change which makes sense of its social function (Codere 1961; Drucker and Heizer 1967). In a sense, these more recent studies come to grips with the difficulties of understanding a society in process yet they tend to obscure social change or institutional change, or both. While the potlatch has been treated as a symbol of social conditions (Codere 1961) there has been, to date, no attempt to examine the historical development of the symbol itself or of its changing relationship to the society.

Unfortunately the potlatch has been misunderstood rather than understood as a symbol. The social and economic transformations of Kwakiutl society have been dilligently traced over a period of one hundred thirty years only to indicate that no significant change has taken place (Codere 1961). The society is seen as fundamentally the same because the potlatch is practiced throughout this period. In 1921, the institution was abandoned, however, and during the following thirty years rapid acculturation to Canadian culture took place. If this process was quick and thorough (disregarding the problem of surface versus deep-seated change), must one assume therefore that the change

from Kwakiutl to Canadian culture entailed no great change at all? From this point of view, the “new” culture has only the appearance of novelty; the underlying reality is of two cultures so much alike that exchanging one for the other leaves basic cultural patterns undisturbed, unchanged. But the rapid and relatively untraumatic assimilation indicates only that these two cultures were similar in 1921 when the noticeable acculturation began. The evolution of Kwakiutl culture, its process of adaptation to changing conditions, resulted in a society which, by 1921, was similar enough to that of its neighbor for an exchange to take place. The presence of some form of the potlatch has been used to obscure rather than elucidate social and symbolic change.

The potlatch, an institution which symbolically expressed a social reality, remained long after that social reality had changed. Consideration of economic and historical detail together with the history of the potlatch itself indicates a complex relationship between material conditions and the social/symbolic expressions of them. It is not simply a matter of an institution (or symbol) becoming suddenly dysfunctional and then disappearing from the field. Rather, some vestige of the institution’s structure persists even as the content changes to reflect new material conditions. The vocabulary or specific content of an institution is able to adjust to social change keeping pace with material conditions just as vocabulary expands and contracts in a developing language. But the structure, the grammar, is slower to change; it accommodates new vocabulary and may change gradually, subtly, yet more profoundly in the face of new social conditions.

The symbolic content is found in both components of the institution; every aspect communicates something about social relations and both structure and content may be metaphorical statements. A change in content would be the increase in the quantity of potlatch goods or the incorporation of European trade goods as gifts; the symbolic content is a reference to the expanding market economy, the abundance of trade goods. Structural change would include group versus individual sponsoring of a potlatch or full assembly versus individual meetings for the purpose of bestowing titles; both of these are symbolic of the change from group to individual emphasis, the importance of personal status rather than identification with the group. Any change in ceremonial procedure, then, may affect this symbolic content, may change the message communicated through the enactment of the potlatch ceremony. In fact, it seems that the social feedback might reveal a disjunction between society and its symbols in times of change; the symbols communicated cease to be indicative of the social reality. In this way, the past confronts the present and, through this dialectical tension, evolves into the future.

The Kwakiutl inhabited an area rich in natural resources which they skillfully exploited to support their population. Their small villages were located on Vancouver Island and the mainland nearby, from Cape Mudge in the

south to Rivers Inlet in the north. During the spring, summer, and autumn, they harvested primarily aquatic resources which were stored to last over the winter. In addition to various species of salmon, the men fished for herring, olachon, and other fishes. The hunting of sea mammals was also a major economic activity. The women helped to prepare all these foodstuffs while supplementing the diet by gathering shellfish, seaweed, berries, and roots. Despite seasonal fluctuations it seems unlikely that food was ever scarce, and in fact, the general abundance of subsistence goods created an atmosphere conducive to leisure activity and the development of a complex social and ceremonial life.

Though singularly unsuited for agricultural activities, the mountainous surroundings did provide unlimited quantities of timber which the Kwakiutl utilized in their rich material culture. Huge trees served equally to provide transportation on the water and shelter on land. Large cedars were hollowed out and carved into canoes which would transport upwards of thirty people for an expedition of war or peace. Alternatively, these long heavy tree trunks might be lifted up onto carved poles to form the rafters for one of the big houses which would be occupied by several related families. In addition to building material, the wood was manufactured into a wide variety of household items which ranged from cooking utensils to storage crates. The most spectacular examples of Kwakiutl carving were found in masks and other ceremonial paraphernalia; it was here that expression was unchecked by technical requirements of practical needs.

In 1792, George Vancouver recorded the first known European contact with this Indian group, although the presence of European trade goods in their possession at that time indicates prior knowledge of at least some of the things that European "civilization" had to offer. The metal bracelets which were found along with a few other household items had probably been acquired through exchange with tribes to the north who had previously established trade relations with Europeans. However, until 1849, contact with Europeans was infrequent and there seems to have been little if any influence on native culture or material conditions. It has been called the Prepotlatch Period (Codere 1961) — the time during which the potlatch was present as an institution but "in competition" with other institutions on an equal basis.

The concept of competing institutions is a misleading one, however. It obscures the substantive content of the institutions as well as assuming that they are all of equal significance. To understand why the potlatch survived when other institutions did not, one must assess its role in the culture. What was the function of the potlatch? What social relations were mirrored by it? What conflicts did it resolve? In short, it is necessary to deal with the meaning of an institution and how this meaning may change over time. It is only through such an analysis that one can make sense of the survival or disappearance of an

institution and to use this information as a barometer of sociocultural change. The relative dominance of the potlatch as a social institution in various stages of Kwakiutl history is not an accident; its importance was derived from an ability to concentrate in itself a fundamental social reality and to express the historical changes in that reality.

Prior to 1849, the potlatch seems to have been a congregation of people invited to publicly witness and socially validate their host's claim to or transmission of hereditary privileges. These privileges, which included songs, dances, coppers and carvings, were displayed for the assembly and accompanied by a recitation of their legendary origins and history of transmission. Individual members were cited as the "owners" or those entitled to actualize the privileges, and new names from the hereditary stock were bestowed upon them and witnessed by the company. Any transfer of privilege took place through the potlatch where the new "owner" exercised privilege under the authority of the group. When the displays were completed, gifts were given to the guests who had formally witnessed the proceedings. The order of the gift-giving as well as the comparative values of the gifts reflected the social status of the witnesses; the guest received a token appropriate to his rank.

In its early forms the potlatch stressed first and foremost the Kwakiutl collectivity and the identification of its members with the group; the potlatch was a formal procedure for social integration. Its prime purpose was to identify publicly the membership of the group and to differentiate between the statuses of group members. Although individuals exercised personal privileges, they did so through the group; it was the identification with and participation in collective existence which gave individuals their names, their selves.

During this period, the "irreducible unit" of the host was the *numima* or kinship group — the primary organizing principle of Kwakiutl society. The members of such a group traced their lineage to a common real or mythical ancestor and originally, each group comprised an autonomous village community which would maintain friendly social relations with nearby groups and hostile relations with those farther away. Each *numima* had a name and held rights to fishing grounds and other sites of economic importance which were used by members of the group. The ties of blood were, therefore, reinforced by common residence and common ownership of economic resources. Although individuals enjoyed certain rights and responsibilities of ownership, all possessions, material or symbolic, were ultimately owned by the *numima*.

The highly articulated social ranking system of individuals sharply contrasts this picture of communal ownership. The apparent equality in distribution of material wealth did not extend to symbolic possessions which were claimed by individuals on the basis of hereditary rights. Perhaps the most crucial distinction between these material and symbolic possessions is that the latter were of a limited quantity while the former were not. An individual's

social rank or position was therefore based not on material wealth but on the possession of symbolic privileges which were in limited supply.

The expression of these privileges asserted an individual's rank just as material wealth indicates social rank in other societies. But the ultimate significance of these symbolic expressions lay in identity with the *numima* because they were actually the *numima's* property. The expression of individual ownership then, was always and necessarily tied to an expression of group membership; it differentiated between members of the group even as it demonstrated their common identity. The assertion of individual social status was ultimately referred back to a collective identity.

The times at which potlatches were given express this dual purpose of asserting individual identity and integrating the individual into society. The potlatch accompanied every important change in social status — birth, marriage, death, among others; it was the ceremony which eased the transition from one social role to another. These critical junctures, commonly marked by rites of passage, may be socially perilous; the ritual assumption of new names at these times helps to clarify the nature of the transition and control it through language and reclassification of the subject. In Kwakiutl culture, this common current of name and status change tied into the hereditary system of ceremonial honor and prestige. Each name had a particular status and its social value was based on the traditional origin as well as the status of all those who had previously claimed it.

The hereditary nature of status positions combined with their scarcity to set a powerful limit on individual aspirations. Ceremonial privileges were inherited by the first born and validated through the potlatch, the symbolic honors moving through the generations in a predictable sequence. The only exception to this pattern was the acquisition of status through marriage whereby the son-in-law held the titles of the wife's family "in trust" for his children. Even in this situation, however, the usual pattern was for high-status individuals to marry into other high-status families. The status positions were determined by an individual's kinship position and the prerogatives promised at birth were systematically realized throughout the rest of the person's life. There was little if any possibility of social mobility.

The act of gift-giving which accompanied all potlatches is perhaps the most misunderstood aspect of this institution. The earliest ethnographic material overstressed the importance of material wealth and its lavish distribution or extravagant destruction. Hence, the literature concerning potlatches is peppered with erroneous statements about raising personal esteem through distribution of wealth (Rohner and Rohner 1970), the expression of unabashed megalomania (Benedict 1934), and various other misconceptions which are appropriate to a specific moment in Kwakiutl history, a moment which followed European contact and drastic changes in the native institution. The

probable nature of gift-giving in the pre-contact culture has emerged through more historical studies (Drucker and Heizer 1967) and the examination of exchange within its cultural context (Goldman 1975), making it possible to view the ‘potlatch’ as behavior that is common to many cultures.

It has been shown that gift-giving is an essentially social act (Mauss 1967) and that it functions primarily as an integrating force. The goods which pass between individuals are transmitted through the medium of the group and through this exchange the relationship of individual to individual, individual to group, and group to group is established and/or clarified. The gifts are at once interested and obligatory, bridging the gap between material and symbolic communication; “in giving them, a man gives himself, and he does so because he owes himself — himself and his possessions — to others” (Mauss 1967:44).

The symbolic, gift-giving act, is augmented by the relationship between the object and its possessor. The luxury items exchanged by the Kwakiutl were singled out as potlatch goods and their material presence was laden with symbolic significance. The Kwakiutl coppers, sheets of metal with forms embossed on them, are the epitome of this unity of material and symbol. They were given away and traveled among groups through a series of potlatches; they carried both a name and the history of their owners. These complex symbols of traditional wealth and status bound groups together through exchange and the history of a copper was the diplomatic history of these groups.

The potlatch exchange should be sharply differentiated from the relations of free market exchange or even the less complex barter, both of which supply individuals with their economic needs. The goods themselves have no symbolic content; value is a simple assessment of material worth. The market economy completely depersonalizes the exchange by mediating with a standard currency, but even barter may be a “rational” process in which exchange indicates nothing but supply and demand. On the contrary, in gift-giving, “the objects are never completely separated from the men who exchange them; the communion and alliance they establish are well-nigh indissoluble” (Mauss 1967:31).¹

Until 1849, the year in which the Hudson’s Bay Company established a trading post at Fort Rupert, potlatch distributions were small and their size was stable from generation to generation. The property given away consisted of surplus or luxury items; European trade goods in their possession were not among the potlatch gifts at that time (Codere 1961:446). Also, the idea that the size of the potlatch had any relation to the prestige of the donor was non-existent. The gift-giving which was part of the institution was in no way exceptional; gifts were exchanged as tokens, material symbols to bind potlatch participants to the hereditary system of titles and to each other. The institution seems to have served an integrating function, the function of bringing family groups together for the purpose of identifying individuals as members of the group and establishing their relation to the whole.

But the gifts distributed at a potlatch were more than just a token of the collectivity for they reflected the recipient's status in the community, thereby reinforcing the existing social structure. The chief of the *numima* inherited his position by being the first son in a long line of first sons. His duties were primarily ceremonial — he was responsible for insuring the observance of rituals and for acting as master of ceremonies at his *numima's* potlatches. The chief's rank, like all other ranks, reflected a certain position in the kinship nexus of the clan, and the ceremonial responsibilities which accompanied the rank reflected the responsibilities associated with kinship roles.

The chief of the *numima* always received his gift before the others and the subsequent recipients followed in an order determined by the *numima's* ranked status ladder. No two individuals shared the same rank; the potlatch order was clearly defined and unquestionable. The value of the gifts were true to the status positions; the chief received the most valuable while others of relatively less status received gifts of correspondingly less value. This same practice was followed in ceremonial feasts where guests were served in a specific order and received a portion which indicated their social rank. The breast of a seal went to the chief while the second in rank received but a flipper; the next person was served a portion even less delectable and the rest of the animal was distributed generally among the other guests. But the order of service and the relative desirability of the portion communicated, in no uncertain terms, the recipient's social rank to all present.

The first major effect of contact with Europeans was a drastic reduction in the population of the Southern Kwakiutl. Estimated at between 7,500 and 8,000 in 1835 (Codere 1961:456), the population declined steadily due to a series of epidemics together with deaths related to the introduction of liquor. There were epidemics of smallpox in 1837, 1862, and 1876 interspersed with attacks of measles, tuberculosis, influenza, and venereal diseases. The overall effect was to reduce the population to 1,039 by 1924.

Shortly after the onset of these major epidemics, in 1849, the Hudson's Bay Company founded a trading post at Fort Rupert. The traders were interested in trading for goods of relative abundance in the area — furbearing animals and salmon — which the native inhabitants easily and willingly supplied. Many Indians took advantage of this expanding economy and four groups actually moved to Fort Rupert where they probably acted as middlemen for others who wished to trade with the Europeans. There was a marked increase in the material wealth of the Kwakiutl as a result of the new trade; the trade goods were abundant as well as cheap for the means of acquiring them fit hunting and trading patterns already established.

There was relatively little contact with White society until the establishment of the Kwakiutl Agency in Alert Bay in 1881. The Hudson's Bay Company, with its Fort Rupert trading post, was interested in maintaining trade relations but showed no desire to alter the patterns of Kwakiutl life. Throughout

this period, the Indians continued their native subsistence activities and maintained the economic calendar of nine months work (spring, summer, fall) and three months "vacation" for winter rituals. Apparently their crafts did decline during this period as they began to substitute European trade goods for aboriginal items, but many basic patterns of Kwakiutl culture remained undisturbed.

One very important change which did occur in Kwakiutl "foreign relations" during this period was the termination of warfare. As was mentioned earlier, the Kwakiutl generally maintained hostile relations with those groups who lived far away. Prowess in war was highly valued; expeditions for hostile purposes promised an opportunity to display courage as well as the possibility of capturing slaves. Furthermore, any warrior who killed an enemy that possessed titles or privileges of rank claimed this symbolic wealth for himself and was able to exercise these rights at subsequent ceremonials. But the British government exerted its authority through the use of naval gunboats and all warfare in the area had ceased by 1865. This reign of peace stimulated intertribal trade as well as making the Kwakiutl aware of the superior force of the British — an awareness which may have encouraged assimilation at a later date. Perhaps the most important consequence, however, was the elimination of an activity in which the men were able to express their courage, display their strength, and engage in a collective assault on "the enemy." The comradeship of organized aggression lost, the men suppressed their collective hostility only to succumb to quarreling amongst themselves.

The influence of the foreign culture increased tremendously when in 1876 the Canadian government passed the Indian Act which specifically forbade potlatching and other winter ceremonials. By this time the potlatch had already undergone extensive changes, however; the quantity of goods exchanged had swelled and European trade goods of definite material value supplemented the more traditional symbolic gifts. It was the decrease in population due to epidemics, the explosive increase in wealth, and the discontinuation of warfare which combined to initiate the changes in the potlatch.

The effect of the population reduction on spiritual attitudes and beliefs of the Kwakiutl seems to have been minimal; throughout the epidemics people depended on traditional cures and no new religions arose to make sense of the widespread sickness and death. The inheritance of status positions through kinship was seriously affected, however, and there arose a confusion as to the ownership of traditional honors. At that time, there were not enough individuals left in the entire society to fill all of the traditional status positions (Boas 1966). The ambiguity of rank resulted in a proliferation of potlatches as individuals were eager to assert their claims. In aboriginal times, only the *numima* chief could give a potlatch but after 1849 individuals of lower rank began to give them as well. The economic structure of the Kwakiutl community was changing from a collective to an individualistic form; adequate funds for

gift distribution among the participants became the only prerequisite for a potlatch.

Although status could not be bought, the ability to potlatch and to potlatch lavishly was an indication of an individual's suitability for social rank. If two people claimed the right to the same rank, the one who showed a greater ability to potlatch would probably be recognized by the chief as the legitimate owner. After the kinship system had been disrupted by depopulation these conflicting claims became quite common. The confusion of what were previously clear and unquestionable lines of inheritance paved the way for ambitious individuals.

Individual financing of the potlatch proved disruptive both practically and symbolically. The traditional practice of giving gifts of a value to reflect the inherited social status of the recipient was undermined during this period. If a chief of lower rank had given a major potlatch while some of his seniors in rank had not, the lower ranking chief would receive lavish gifts at subsequent potlatches. This resulted in an ambiguous situation where low status figures received gifts which were appropriate to high statuses while some higher ranking individuals received less. Previously, the value of a gift was dependent on an individual's social position, but in these uncertain times a person's social status came to be dependent on the size of the gifts he gave and received. In this way, the potlatch became a symbolic expression of individual accomplishment rather than group identity; as the stability of social status eroded, personal claims took precedence over group concerns.

Though the influx of material wealth at this time was crucial in determining the direction the institution was to take, it alone was not sufficient to bring about so many changes, least of all the excessive violence of some later potlatches. Throughout the period of rapid change, the *numima* chiefs continued to exert considerable control over the validation of claims and the collectivity had an enduring influence on individual status (Barnett 1938). The validation was needed even more in rivalry situations where two individuals claimed the same rank. The potlatches which resulted from such disagreements gave way to the fantastic displays or destruction of property which brought fame to the Kwakiutl for their "conspicuous consumption," the disposal of material wealth for the purpose of displaying ownership. The final decision in these disputes rested with the highest ranking chiefs and there is no indication that people without status (commoners) were able to buy their way into the system. "In one case in which the commoner husband of a noblewoman [woman with high rank] had attained high standing through the use of money earned from the whites, the chiefs brought together all their [traditional] wealth to overcome him" (Benedict 1934:209).

It is clear that the uncertainty of status together with increased material wealth altered or expanded some aspects of the potlatch without actually changing the potlatch procedure. These two factors do not, however, seem

adequate to explain the bitter conflicts which were expressed in rivalry potlatches. This development may be attributed to a resurfacing of aggression displaced by the cessation of warfare:

The development of the potlatch system must be viewed as the substitution of the wealth rivalry — a sort of metaphorical warfare — of the potlatch for the physical violence that had frequently occurred earlier in the relations of the various Kwakiutl groups with one another and with other Indians. The Kwakiutl themselves saw this development . . . “When I was a young man I have seen streams of blood shed in war. But since that time the white man came and stopped up that stream of blood with wealth. Now we are fighting with our wealth” (Codere 1961:472).

Some scholars reject this explanation claiming that the connection made in metaphorical language does not constitute a connection in fact. The hostility is reclassified as a rivalry gesture and the connection between this and a “real” potlatch is denied (Drucker and Heizer 1967). But if these “gestures” were involved in status disputes then certainly they were at least related to the potlatches, or to what the potlatch had become in response to the instability of social organization.

There is reason to believe that in some sense an equation was made between the honors of war and the honors of wealth. The economic conditions of the Southern Kwakiutl did not necessitate a large work force to supply their subsistence needs — their rich environment yielded willingly to the demands put upon it. Yet an important aspect of waging war was the capturing of slaves who returned with the victorious warriors. Slaves made up 10-20 percent of the total population and they were necessary only inasmuch as they conferred prestige on their owners. They were simultaneously an indication of military valour and symbolic wealth.

Prior to White contact there were several ways in which an individual could gain social distinction: the inheritance of status or titles, the display of courage and talent in warfare, the capturing of war victims for enslavement. The British government terminated Kwakiutl warfare as well as the right to keep slaves, thus depriving them of two important channels for the expression of self-esteem. The inheritance of status was a more inaccessible channel, however, and for many Kwakiutl the expanding economy associated with European activity in the area offered the only alternative. Material wealth soon became an important factor in assessing the social status of an individual, filling the status vacuum created by foreign prohibitions.

Perhaps the most important consequence of the acceptance and growing importance of European trade goods lay in the nature of the wealth which was introduced into the potlatch system. In the period before 1881 the only real influence exerted by the Europeans was the introduction and substitution of European goods for traditional material goods (Codere 1961). But the relationship between these new material goods and their owners was radically

different from that between traditional potlatch goods and their owners. The traditional goods carried an important symbolic significance, either as reference to Kwakiutl cosmology or as markers of group identity that persisted for generations. The European trade goods, on the other hand, were symbolic only of individual success in the new market economy.

This distinction is emphasized in the transition from animal skins as traditional exchange goods to woolen trade blankets; “Kwakiutl property was originally a representation of lives and not dead currency, and that value was not in mere quantity but in quality” (Goldman 1975:123). The exchange of animal skins was symbolic of the cosmological relationship between people and animals. Animals were hunted, they died so that people could live, and the wealth represented by their skins was the vitality of the people. The Kwakiutl were, therefore, bound to these animals — they were not unmindful of religious and moral ties to that which sustained them. There was no extravagance in exchange for the place of people and animals within the religious system, set powerful limits on the quantity of goods exchanged.

The new wealth represented by trade blankets created a glut of individual status — a disembodied status related neither to kinship, cosmology, or the traditional social structure. It was money alienated from the familiar system of meanings, detached from aboriginal status positions; its only significance lay in the economic system which had created it. At this time, the overall amount of goods given at a potlatch came to reflect the ultimate prestige of the donor. Previously, the gift was a reflection of and referred to the status of the recipient but it soon became, conversely, a statement about the financial status of the donor. What was originally seen as affirmation of the group and its members became an assertion of personal claims based on success in the new economy.

In addition to alienating gift exchange from the traditional symbols of life and sustenance, the tremendous accumulation of wealth in the form of white woolen trade blankets during this period initiated the concept of a standardized currency; there is no evidence that the Indians had such exact and abstract measures aboriginally (Drucker and Heizer 1967). The traditional coppers and other potlatch items began to be measured on this standardized scale and later, Canadian dollars fulfilled the same function. In this way, even traditional coppers and other symbol-laden gifts were made to reflect the new market economy; meaning and history were subordinated to money in the determination of rank.

The alienated wealth and rationalized concept of currency undermined the viability of the potlatch as an institution for it changed its significance from an expression of community to an arena for individual rivalry. The relative abundance of status positions after depopulation together with the abundance of new material wealth collapsed the system of limits and social stability.

The Kwakiutl chiefs, responsible for regulating potlatch activity, showed themselves willing to adapt to the new economic conditions. During

the post-contact period they created twelve new status ranks, Eagle positions, which were bestowed upon individuals of low standing. These individuals were the *nouveau riche* of Southern Kwakiutl society; their money was the new money of the expanding economy. The positions, which were established over a period of many years, became hereditary and were passed through generations in the same pattern as traditional honors. In the potlatch ceremony the Eagles received their gifts first and the announcements were separated from those of traditional positions. Unlike the real chiefs, their positions had no supernatural origin and the names were improvised by the first holders of the positions; they were "high-sounding, sonorous designations referring to wealth and potlatching" (Drucker and Heizer 1967:89). This attempt on the part of the traditional chiefs to mediate between the old and new economies came to an end and they refused to grant any more Eagle positions. They had proposed a limited solution for a limitless problem. The rapid economic growth promised to continue, and rather than relax traditional controls on prestige they withdrew their support completely.

By 1880 the major changes in the symbolic significance of the potlatch had already taken place. Four years earlier, in 1876, the Canadian government had made its first conscious attempt to curtail the practice when it passed the Indian Act prohibiting potlatches and other ceremonials. Missionaries and administrative officials agreed that the potlatch should be repressed. They saw it as an obstacle to "Kwakiutl progress" and indeed, at one time the potlatch did function to enforce traditional social structure and control foreign influence. The new law was impossible to enforce, however, because the Kwakiutl villages were not located in a central area and the small police force and Indian agent could not control their activities.

The meaning of "Kwakiutl progress" in this context may be seen as the change from the socially stable Kwakiutl organization, a society with a strong sense of limits, to the socially mobile organization or limitless society of the modern West. In its aboriginal form, the potlatch had served both as symbol and as reinforcement of the stable kinship organization. By the time the Canadian government condemned it, however, the potlatch had virtually ceased to function as a socially integrating force.

In 1881, the establishment of the Kwakiutl Agency at Alert Bay made potlatching virtually impossible in that area. To avoid the reprisals of local officials, the Indians took their potlatch elsewhere. The yearly migrations connected with subsistence activities provided adequate excuses for travel and it was during these visits to other villages that the Kwakiutl continued their observances. During this time, the ceremony became infused with new meaning for it expressed defiance of the Indian agent's authority. Conducting and participating in a potlatch was a direct defiance of Canadian law and people were simultaneously reminded of their past, their traditions, and aware of the political overtones of their actions. Though the institution persisted, its sym-

bolic relationship to society had changed and the expression it wore was at once a parody of and a leer at White society.

After 1880 the non-economic aspects of Western culture were more important in the contact experience. A school was started at Alert Bay in 1881 and literacy became greatly valued by the Indians. Although they expressed no interest in moral or vocational training, they found reading and writing useful in business activities and in the recording of potlatch proceedings. It was also at this time that the first group of Kwakiutl began to work at the Fraser River salmon fishery. Employment by the Hudson's Bay Company, temporary jobs such as the ones at the fishery, provided additional wealth for the men while Kwakiutl women often earned money in Victoria, on the southern tip of Vancouver Island, as washerwomen or prostitutes. Despite the variety of White contacts, the most important factor in Kwakiutl cultural change continued to be the expanding economy.

The Canadian police staged a major seizure of potlatch goods in 1921 in their first real attempt to enforce the Indian Act of 1876. A radical change occurred in the potlatch procedure around 1926, perhaps in response to this raid. The Indian Act prohibited the assembly of individuals for the purpose of a potlatch and the Kwakiutl decided to circumvent the law by conducting their potlatch in a house-to-house distribution of goods. By this time, the traditional housing arrangement had been abandoned. Small houses for nuclear families had replaced the large structures which had given shelter to kinship groups in what was, perhaps, another indication of the decay of social structure, social cohesion. The chief and his secretary proceeded through Alert Bay in a geographical sequence, thus ignoring the customary order of gift distribution. Not only had the congregation of the community been abandoned, but the identity of individuals in relation to the community and to one another had been lost as well.

One analysis of the potlatch underlines strong continuities in the face of these drastic changes and contends that the purpose of the potlatch remained the assertion of claims to hereditary status and the privileges associated with those statuses (Drucker and Heizer 1967). In postulating this enduring meaning for the potlatch, one neglects the function of the ceremony itself which played an important role in conveying symbolic information. The assembly of individuals for the purpose of acknowledging claims still emphasizes the relationship of the individual to the whole. The aspect of the ceremony which stresses collective identity is lost when an assembly of all those involved is no longer necessary for claiming those rights and privileges. The physical presence of all group members communicates a social fact; it serves as a symbol for the collective identity which is lost in the shuffle of cultural change.

Demonstration of group solidarity, then, should be seen as an important component of the potlatch prior to 1849, prior to the initiation of potlatches sponsored by individuals rather than by the group. This component became

progressively less important as social mobility fired individual ambition until the collective expression disappeared completely under pressure from the Canadian government. Although this change has been interpreted as only an "outward change of form" there is evidence which supports the idea that the consequences were serious (Drucker and Heizer 1967). Younger people are unfamiliar with traditional dances and other displays; they do not know the chief's order of precedence and some do not even know their own traditional titles. In losing the group, it would seem they have lost the individual as well.

The changes in the potlatch did serve to represent new conditions in society illustrating the new emphasis on individual rather than group identity. Under stable, traditional circumstances, the potlatch concentrated symbols of all the individuals and their relation to the group. As material conditions changed and the traditional social limits collapsed, the potlatch became a vehicle for expressing the invidious distinctions between individuals. It continued to be central to Kwakiutl culture because, through its various forms, it succeeded in expressing the changes in the social reality.

By the 1920's, the potlatch had become completely dependent on the expanding economy and a ten-year recession followed by the Depression of the 1930s virtually extinguished it. In 1952, when a new Indian Act made the institution legal once more, a potlatch was held but only a few old men bothered to attend (Drucker and Heizer 1967). Holm (1977) describes contemporary observance of traditional Kwakiutl rituals and maintains that in many ways, they are unchanged. Yet the symbolic significance of many items has been forgotten and old family songs are used again and again when traditionally, new ones should be written. The vitality of the potlatch seems tied to the older people who may still feel themselves part of a more traditional system of meanings, but they will not live forever.

Conclusion

Though the explicit pressure exerted by the Canadian government was instrumental in terminating the potlatch, it would be a mistake to attribute any major changes to this influence. Kwakiutl culture was caught in a struggle between the personal distinctions of status and the impersonal distinctions conferred by success in the market economy. The traditional status positions were most threatened when material wealth became a means of claiming those honors. This identity of symbolic and material wealth undermined the value of limited hereditary titles by giving people unlimited access to them through new economic opportunities; the market economy was an ever widening wedge embedded in and splitting apart the stable social structure. Once European trade goods became acceptable potlatch gifts, the expanding market flooded the traditional system and catalyzed the transition to impersonal status based on

material wealth. The social mobility introduced by this development upset the old hierarchial status system and pitted individuals against one another in their attempts to gain wealth and titles. In a sense, their successes referred more and more to the European trade economy rather than to the Kwakiutl hierarchy despite the fact that the traditional symbols were still employed.

The concerted effort by traditional chiefs to control status acquisition by "commoners" may be seen as an expression of the conflict between old and new status systems; "all groups having interests in the status order react with special sharpness precisely against the pretensions of purely economic acquisition" (Weber 1946:192). The Eagle positions were built as a social dike to hold back the powerful flow of new money. But the crumbling kinship system was not shored up by this adjustment and the eroding structure collapsed under the pressure of the upwardly mobile *nouveau riche*. The potlatch, temporarily buoyed up in these turbulent waters, was swept away by a flood of this new kind of symbolic wealth.

Responsibility for this social change may therefore be traced to the disruption in the Kwakiutl economy. The relatively stable acquisition and distribution of goods in aboriginal society supported stratification by status and the exchanging of gifts merely marked the established order. Economic transformation, however, subverted the traditional order and invidious distinctions based on the ownership of material goods became more relevant in determining individual status. The gift giving act was appropriated as a means of displaying wealth; it became a divisive rather than integrating force in society and through it, the meaning of the entire potlatch changed.

Through this discussion of the Kwakiutl potlatch it can be seen that there is a dangerous pitfall in the assumption that all institutions are expressive of a social reality. Material circumstances change and social organization must adapt to these changes if a society is to survive. The institutions which both reflect and enforce social organization and values also adapt but this is essentially a reaction; archaic institutions or survivals are thrown into relief against a background of new material conditions. The situation typical of many contacts between European and Native American societies is one of rapid change in material conditions followed by a pantingly frantic attempt on the part of native institutions to fill the gap between social reality and the symbolic expressions of that reality.

In this mad scramble to make good the symbolic relationship between society and its institutions the outward forms of previous expressions are often transplanted into a new social medium. One often finds familiar symbols in unfamiliar places. These "survivals" are "processes, customs, opinions and so forth, which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home, and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved" (Tylor 1973:72). These things which stick out of their context

have survived into a new cultural milieu and serve as a reference to the past.

Static though it is, this concept of survivals is useful in a discussion of cultural change. It yields interesting results when applied to the evolution of social institutions and indicates a process for making sense of developments over time. Through a careful examination of the mixture of old and new, one can determine the relevance of specific social facts and attempt to describe the relationship between the material conditions of society and the expression of these conditions in social institutions.

NOTES

1. Strangely enough, the acuity of Mauss' observations comes independent of the evidence at his disposal. Working primarily through the ethnographic materials of Boas, he ignores the violent and competitive nature of the "rivalry potlatches" which predominated Kwakiutl society at the time of Boas' research. His conclusions are validated through cross-cultural studies which illustrate more clearly the social and symbolic aspects of gift-giving. The justification for accepting his analysis lies more in this comparative work than in his treatment of Kwakiutl material.

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