

6-19-2011

## A Discussion of the Potlach and Social Structure

Frank Risdale

*The University of Western Ontario*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem>



Part of the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Risdale, Frank (1997) "A Discussion of the Potlach and Social Structure," *Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology*: Vol. 3: Iss. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem/vol3/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact [kmarshal@uwo.ca](mailto:kmarshal@uwo.ca).

---

# A Discussion of the Potlach and Social Structure

## Keywords

potlach, social structure, Kwakiutl, Alaskan Eskimo

## Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

---

## A Discussion of the Potlatch and Social Structure

---

Frank Ridsdale

---

### ABSTRACT

The Potlatch of First Nations peoples of the West coast of North America has been the focus of a great deal of anthropological research. In this article, I outline some of this research, first by discussing some of the interpretive modes of the Kwakiutl potlatch, and then by comparing the Kwakiutl potlatch with potlatching practices among some Alaskan Eskimo groups. This comparison strongly suggests that the social structures and world view of each of these groups is reflected in their respective ceremonial potlatches.

Marcel Mauss (1925), in his book *The Gift*, demonstrates the commonalities of reciprocity of exchange through the practices of gift-giving among peoples from all over the world. He illustrates that the moral obligation to give, to receive, and to return gifts provides the basis of all sociality and helps to integrate societies<sup>1</sup>. The complex dynamics of gift-giving have been the focus of anthropological research for many years. For example, anthropologists have been interested in the gift-giving practice of Northwest Coast Natives called the potlatch. Part of that interest lies in the ambiguous nature of the potlatch. Although the act of potlatching entails the giving away of food and wealth in a guest-host setting, it is also used for the issue of title settling and the validation of that title (Drucker 1965:55). This paper compares the Northwest Coast cultural institution of the potlatch among the Kwakiutl (pronounced /kwa:kjutl/) with a similar institution found among some various Alaskan Eskimo groups, such as the Kuskowagmut, the Ikogmut, and the Unaligmut. This comparison reveals that the potlatch of each group was structured around their respective social structure and world view. An overview of various interpretations of important cultural and social dimensions of both the Northwest Coast potlatch and the Alaskan Eskimo potlatch will provide a landscape for the analysis.

### FEATURES OF THE POTLATCH

The term "potlatch" derives either from Chinook Jargon meaning "giving" or from the Nootka verb "pa-chide" which means "to give" (Drucker 1965:55; Clutesi 1969:9). The potlatch was a complex behavioral ceremony practiced in various forms by many tribes of

---

<sup>1</sup>One can see this reciprocity of exchange today in the middle-class social life of Canadians. Dinner invitations manifest these gift giving-receiving-returning aspects and include the consequences of cessation of invitations or even aggression if return invitations are not offered; when this occurs, the symmetrical relations become disrupted.

the Pacific Northwest coast with similar forms being practiced among tribes in Alaska and northern California. Although the various forms of potlatch differed in detail, their underlying pattern and function were the same (Drucker 1965:55). One of the elements of this pattern was the giving away of food and wealth in a ceremony given by a chief and his group, as hosts, to a guest group in return for recognition of the giver's social status (Codere 1950:63; Suttles 1960:299).

Homer Barnett in his paper "The Nature of the Potlatch", clearly explains some of the definitive features of a potlatch of the Northwest Coast tribes. First, it was a congregation of people who were formally invited "to witness a demonstration of family prerogative" of a host group comprised of kin or local residences (Barnett 1938:349). Second, only one person assumed the role of host and donor of gifts, and any members of his localized kinship group could voluntarily support him in the preparations of a potlatch in return for patronage favors (Barnett 1938:350-351). None of these co-members, however, received gifts at the potlatch (Barnett 1938:350).

Third, there was an unequal distribution of gifts which were presented according to rank of the receiver, and which reflected the donor's judgment of the recipient's social worth (Barnett 1938:354). Fourth, the potlatch allowed the donor to make a claim in his family name to certain distinctions and privileges. The recognition of these claims "must come from the other members of society" (Barnett 1938:357). This recognition was the ultimate goal of the potlatch (Barnett 1938:357). Finally, although the gifts did provoke a reciprocal response, they should be viewed as true gifts and not as loans or capital investments; the ultimate aim was the distribution of wealth and not the accumulation of wealth (Barnett 1938:353).

### The Kwakiutl Potlatch

The most extensively studied group connected with potlatching are the Kwakiutl Indians of British Columbia who occupied the northeast corner of Vancouver Island and a strip of coastline about 50 miles wide and 300 miles long on the opposite mainland. The earliest in-depth ethnological description of Kwakiutl potlatch was given by Franz Boas (1889; 1897; 1920; 1921; 1925; 1935), some of which was based on data collected by his informant, George Hunt. Another early report was put forth by Edward S. Curtis (1915). This paper provides an overview of the Kwakiutl social structure and potlatch incorporating the works of Stuart Piddocke (1965), Abraham Rosman & Paula G. Rubel (1972), Helen Codere (1950), and

Philip Drucker (1965), all of whom have condensed Boas' lengthy volumes into concise packages.

Rosman and Rubel (1972:669) claim that potlatches occurred at definitive junctures in the arrangement or maneuvering of rank of the individual or an individual who represented a tribe or an intratribal subgroup or *numaym* (pronounced "noo-my-um" /nu-mej:m/). These junctures were succession events in the life of the individual such as birth, puberty, and winter ceremonial initiation (Codere 1950:63). In this sense, potlatches marked the occasions of what Arnold Van Gennep (1960) considered as 'rites of passage' for the individual member of the numaym. Numayms have been referred to as "the fundamental units in the consciousness of the people" (Codere 1950:50). Members of a numaym were either "noble" or "common"; "commoners" were considered to have lower positions of noble social rank (Codere 1957:475). A "commoner" often referred to a person who was without a potlatch position, standing place, or chief's position (Codere 1957: 475). In addition, ranked individuals could, at their own choosing, become "common" by retirement from potlatch positions (Codere 1957:475). The third status level among the Kwakiutl were "slaves", but they were not part of the numaym (Piddocke 1965:251). In fact, Drucker (1939:56) claims that slaves were chattels with no real active part in social life. The primary significance of slaves, in Kwakiutl society, was that they functioned to serve as status symbols, impressing inequality on the native consciousness. It should become increasingly clear, that already we can see that the social structure and world view of the Kwakiutl played an integral role in the potlatch.

The highest office in a group was that of chief, which included name as well as "seat" (Rosman & Rubel 1972:665). The "seats" were potlatch positions which were ordered according to rank, with the chief of the numaym taking the most favoured position. Thus, rank was associated with the seating positions that individuals occupied at potlatches (Piddocke 1965:251). Those who partook in potlatching held single or multiple ranked social positions which were distinguished by titles, crests and a history which described when the ancestor of that position descended from heaven (Codere 1950:64). Gifts at potlatches were distributed according to rank (Drucker 1939:57). The guest judged by the host as holding highest ranking received the first gift, also which was the most valued gift. The guest second in precedence received the next gift which was not as highly valued as the first gift, and so on down the line (Drucker 1967:482). Helen Codere sums up Kwakiutl ranking as thus:

All the positions were ranked not only in relation to the other positions but also according to the numaym or intratribal grouping to which they belonged and according to which of the thirteen tribes the numayms belonged (Codere 1950: 64).

It is clearly evident that there was a fixation with rank among the Kwakiutl and that this was reflected in the structure of the potlatch. In 1925, Boas, relying on

information supplied to him by Hunt, reported that there were 658 seats or positions in the various numayms of Kwakiutl tribes (Codere 1950:65). There was also, however, a prevalent preoccupation with social rank in every aspect of their culture (Codere 1950:5). For example, the native Northwest Coast social groups were arranged as an entire series of graded statuses, one for each individual (Drucker 1939:57).

The office of chief could also be referred to as "the office of giving away property" (Boas 1925:91). Again the link between social structure and potlatching becomes apparent. One of the chief's tasks was to act as a representative of his numaym in giving potlatches (Piddocke 1965:250). As intimated previously, although the potlatch entailed the giving away of food and wealth, it also served as a platform to validate the hereditary claim of a ranked position by giving away property to guests of high status who, in turn, witnessed and recognized this announcement (Drucker 1967: 481-482; Codere 1950:63). It is important to note, that although a person may have a high ranking status, he had no right to use its privileges and honour until after he had given a potlatch (Drucker 1967.:482). Thus, the potlatch validated the rights of title which included names of houses and other property of economic and ritual importance, and the right to perform rituals and use feast dishes, carvings, masks and symbols that accompanied those rituals (Drucker 1967:482). Since the gifts were presented in order of rank, the potlatch validated the social rank of the guests as well; when it was the guest's turn to potlatch the act of witnessing and validating rank was reversed (Drucker 1967:484).

The dynamics of this ceremony involved more than just the single event of the potlatch itself. Potlatching encompassed a whole system of accumulating property in preparation for this ceremony, culminating in the distribution of that property at the potlatch, then preparing and accumulating once again (Codere 1950:63). The primary items used for potlatching in the historical period were Hudson Bay woolen trade blankets (Codere 1950:63). Items considered "trifles" or "bad things" (denoting their lack of prestige) were every day useful items such as flour, dishes, kettles, phonographs, and money, to name a few (Codere 1950:64). The ultimate concern was quantity, and these items were presented in such vast amounts that their utility became blurred (Codere 1950:63). The quantity of the items transferred at potlatches greatly increased in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when competition for status among individuals who were potential heirs led to intense rivalries with one another, with each rival attempting to outdo his opponent's latest effort (Drucker 1967:488-489).

The potlatch served as the principle mechanism through which two men vying for the same specific status could either establish their claim to it, or lose it. The potlatch, in this context, was now a platform for the gift giver to express insults, belittling his opponent while at the same time emphasizing his own superiority and worthiness of the position in question (Barnett

1938:355). The opponent would later reply with a potlatch, trying to outdo his rival by giving away or destroying (smashing canoes, breaking coppers, or throwing money into the fire, for example) even more valuables (Drucker 1967:488). This contest with property is referred to as a "face saving" potlatch (Barnett 1938:356). Those whose performance faltered, because they could not amass enough riches to surpass or match their opponent's latest potlatch, suffered a loss of status and prestige. At the same time, the winner's claim to the title was considered justified (Drucker 1967:489). The intensification of the competitive potlatch began around 1849, the same time that the Hudson's Bay Company established a trading post at Fort Rupert (Gil-Del-Real & Brown 1980:297). Another change at this time was that rather than being restricted to only chiefs, most individuals in the community were now giving potlatches (Gil-Del-Real & Brown 1980:297). It appears as though a change in social structure and world view, as a result of contact with Euro-Canadians, was reflected in a change in the potlatch. There has been a wide variety of analyses of these changes, as well as many other aspects of the potlatch, written by scholars of the Kwakiutl and potlatching. It is appropriate to now briefly examine some of these interpretations.

#### INTERPRETIVE MODELS OF THE KWAKIUTL POTLATCH

There have been numerous interpretations of Kwakiutl potlatching, including Ruth Benedict's (1934). Benedict, by placing emphasis upon the boasting and shaming which took place at the potlatches, offered a somewhat superficial psychological explanation, explaining the Kwakiutl behaviour and value system in Freudian terms such as paranoia and megalomania (Dunces 1979:396; Guemple 1994:39; Rosman & Rubel 1972:658). A more recent psychological explanation has been posited by Alan Dundes (1979), who proposes an anal-erotic model of the potlatch in which he equates the wealth given and sometimes "wasted" or destroyed at potlatches to feces. Although both make for interesting reading, their psychoanalytic approach limits their usefulness to social science research, because they do not explore the potlatch in social terms. Therefore, they will not be further explored in this paper.

#### Codere: accommodating-purgative outlet for aggression

Codere (1950) derived her explanation of the Kwakiutl potlatch as an accommodating-purgative outlet for aggression from informants' accounts written in Boas' early work. She suggests that the potlatch provided a non-violent arena for the playing out of rivalries in which "wars of property" were waged instead of "wars of blood". People were "fighting with property" instead of "with weapons" (Codere 1950:118). According to Codere (1950:108), the

acquisition of social prestige within a complex system of rivalry was the key element expressed in Kwakiutl warfare. Warfare was suppressed, then finally eradicated from the society during the same period of close contact with European civilization (Codere 1950:127). This period was also marked by an increase in frequency and size of the potlatch (Codere 1950:124). For additional evidence to support her claim, Codere (1950:120) relies on many of the potlatch songs and metaphorical language connected with potlatching, all of which use war imagery applied to the distribution of property<sup>1</sup>. Potlatching appears to have evolved and adapted to the new structure of the Kwakiutl society brought about by European contact.

Codere stresses that the Kwakiutl were highly skilled resource technicians who successively adjusted to European contact situations and exploited "them to their own ends" (Codere 1950:13). Furthermore, their exploitative subsistence techniques, which were applied to an area of great natural wealth, allowed them enough leisure time to devote the entire winter period to potlatching and other winter ceremonies (Codere 1950:4).

The result was that Kwakiutl potlatching prevailed in a "fantastic surplus economy" (Codere 1950:63). Codere (1950:68) also suggests that within this context of an overabundant subsistence economy there existed the scarcity of available social ranks and positions (Codere 1950:68). She refers to this as the "basic dynamic of the Kwakiutl potlatch" (Codere 1950:68).

#### Piddocke: ecological redistributive interpretation

Stuart Piddocke (1965), in his ecological redistributive interpretation of the Kwakiutl potlatch, challenges Codere's presentation of the potlatch existing in a context of great abundance of food and other natural resources. Piddocke (1965:246-249) claims that Codere fails to include in her analysis reports from Boas (1921; 1935), Curtis (1915), and others (Cobb, 1921; Godfrey, 1958; Neave, 1953; Rostlund, 1952) which indicate that the natural area was not as productive as she suggests. In contrast, Piddocke asserts that, for the Kwakiutl groups, resources in that area were not stable from year to year, and that "scarcity of food was an ever-present threat" (Piddocke 1965:248). From this, he constructs a pro-survival subsistence functional model of the potlatch. This model posits that there were food exchanges from groups with a surplus to groups suffering a temporary deficit. Piddocke (1965:244n.) acknowledges that his functional interpretation for the Kwakiutl potlatch is, in essence, an almost direct copy of Wayne Suttles' (1960) Coast Salish potlatch

<sup>1</sup>This metaphorical language is exemplified in the Kwakiutl word for the potlatch "p!Esa", meaning "to flatten", and the names of coppers (important potlatch items associated with mortuary rites or bride price) meaning "War", "Cause of Fear", and "Means of Strife" all imply warfare or the vanquishing of some rival (Codere 1950:120).



examination. With this in mind, a brief overview of Suttles' model will be presented.

#### **Suttles: socio-economic redistributive system**

In the 1960's several economic models which exploited an ecological framework to explain the potlatch were put forth. Wayne Suttles, in his study of the Coast Salish, puts emphasis upon the potlatch as functioning as a socio-economic redistributive system "to maintain a high level of food production and to equalize its food consumption both within and among communities" (Suttles 1960:304). Suttles feels that the potlatch was an institutional outgrowth of an adaptation to an environment which had unpredictable fluctuations from year to year and, in doing so, accentuated intercommunity cooperation and sharing (Suttles 1960:302). While stressing the role of sharing under conditions of unforeseen shortages, Suttles also reduces the aspect of striving for validation of high status in a potlatch to a secondary or instrumental role which functioned to keep the system perpetuating itself (Suttles 1960:303).

#### **Rosman and Rubel: comparative structural analysis**

Above are brief overviews of some of the various interpretations of the Kwakiutl potlatch. Codere's aggression-outlet model has been criticized by Piddocke, yet, Piddocke and Suttles' subsistence-functional models also have their critics (see Orans 1974). The size of this paper can only allow for brief outlines of these models, however, one other interpretation should be discussed in more detail, as it will be used as a model for the comparison between the Kwakiutl potlatch and the similar institution found among some of the Alaskan Eskimo groups. This is Rosman and Rubel's 1972 comparative structural analysis of the Tlingit and Kwakiutl potlatches. They discovered that the rule of marriage for the Tlingit and rule of succession for the Kwakiutl reflected the organization of the potlatch respectively. An overview of their Kwakiutl analysis will be presented, then an overview of the Alaskan potlatch will be discussed to demonstrate that the potlatch of each group was structured around their respective social structure and world view.

#### **KINSHIP AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE**

The Kwakiutl tribe, as well as the numayms within, were usually made up of patrilineal descent groups, but often members may have been related through mothers or wives to the chief (Piddocke 1965:249). Rosman and Rubel (1972:664) clarify this by using the term ambilateral descent to denote Kwakiutl kinship. This means that there were descent groups, but there were no fixed rules concerning descent or the choice of partner in marriage. Levi-Strauss refers to this as a proscriptive rule of marriage which specifies whom one may not marry as opposed

to whom one must marry (Guemple 1994:149). Moreover, the descent group to which one was affiliated was primarily determined by residence (Rosman and Rubel 1972:664). Rosman and Rubel claim that there was no unilinear rule of affiliation present. Individuals may have had multiple membership in descent groups (1972:664). For example, this ambilateral descent pattern, comes into relief when examining succession in Kwakiutl society, where birth order reflected rank order. Succession of a chief's position in Kwakiutl society was one of primogeniture with a residence qualification and a patrilineal descent bias (Piddocke 1965:249). This means that the rank of chief, regardless of sex, was determined by birth order. The noblest position held by either parent went to the first born and the lowest rank went to the youngest child. Marriage, however, tended to be virilocal (Piddocke 1965:249).

Although residence patterns were usually virilocal, this does not mean that the wife was incorporated into her husband's numaym. In Kwakiutl society marriage was "purchased", first by the husband's numaym, and then, after children were born, "re-purchased" by the wife's natal group (Rosman & Rubel 1974:666). This means she once again belonged to her father's numaym if she decided to return to it. Moreover, if a numaym chief had only a daughter and no sons, he would marry the daughter to a man of lower rank, and they would take up uxorial<sup>1</sup> residence in his numaym and thus provide him with heirs (Rosman and Rubel 1972:668). Because both parents may have belonged to separate numayms and because birth order reflected rank, it was possible for two brothers to be chiefs of separate and competing numayms (Rosman & Rubel 1974:668). Therefore, as we have seen, succession to rank was not flexible, but group affiliation was flexible because residence and membership were optional. Since there was not a fixed marriage rule, the affiliation of children was also flexible (Rosman & Rubel 1974:666). The question remains: were the proscriptive marriage rule, the structure of ambilateral descent, and the fixed rule of primogeniture succession major determining factors in the organization of the Kwakiutl potlatch?

The absence of marriage rules and the employment of marriage as a strategy for flexible maneuvering in gaining access to a prestigious numaym, and thus giving one's children a future claim to its inheritance would indicate that a marriage would be one of the critical junctures for potlatching in Kwakiutl society. Conversely, because the succession to a chief's position was fixed and determined while the outgoing chief was still living (as noted on page three of this paper), it would be expected that there were not any funeral potlatches among the Kwakiutl. Rosman and Rubel claim that among the Kwakiutl potlatches occurred when individuals were incorporated into groups as well as at marriages, however, there were no Kwakiutl potlatches for the funerals of chiefs (Rosman & Rubel

<sup>1</sup>uxorial = taking up residence with the wife's family (opposite of virilocal)

1974:670). Also, the Kwakiutl social structure allowed for brothers to express a fully institutionalized rivalry, with one pitted against the other, because their numayms were in opposition to one another (Rosman & Rubel 1972:666). Moreover, the other life juncture potlatches were associated with the accumulative acquisition of new names. These names were integral to an individual becoming more firmly placed within a particular group (Rosman & Rubel 1974:667). As a person acquired a more important name while potlatching, people who were related to him could lay claim to him and thus membership to his group (Rosman & Rubel 1974:669-670). This further demonstrates the flexibility of the Kwakiutl social structure, and it also indicates that the Kwakiutl potlatch was inextricably intertwined with the social structure. An explanation of the Alaskan Eskimo potlatch forms and social structure provides the opportunity to assess whether this relationship was evident in another culture.

#### POTLATCHING AMONG SOME ALASKAN ESKIMO GROUPS

The Eskimo tribes of Alaska are primarily distributed along the Alaskan western coastline from the northern-most tip of Point Barrow, through the Bering Strait and Bering Sea, and into the Pacific Rim with tribes in the Aleutian Islands, Alaska Peninsula and bordering the Gulf of Alaska. The twenty-one "tribes" can be seen on the map (Figure 1) below.<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1: Map showing the 21 Eskimo "tribes" in Alaska

The word "tribe" used in the context of the Alaskan Eskimo is meant to denote a people with an in-group identity which sets them apart from other groups (Oswalt 1967:2-3)<sup>2</sup> The only tribes which are relevant to this paper are those which practice gift-giving ceremonies which are similar in form to the Northwest Coast Native potlatch. These include some of the Eskimo tribes of the Bering Strait and some of the Pacific Rim Eskimos. They are all speakers of the Yupik language with either the Yuk (Mainland) dialect or the Suk (Pacific) dialect (Oswalt 1967:31).

Alaskan Eskimo gift-giving ceremonies were practiced by tribes that ranged from Seward Peninsula southward. These ceremonies varied in style as well as elaboration in different areas. For example, Chugach ceremonialism was not as elaborate as similar rites performed by the Bering Sea Eskimos (Birket-Smith 1953:108). Edward William Nelson (1899) has recorded some very descriptive and detailed accounts of certain Bering Sea Eskimo groups' gift-giving ceremonies, such as the ceremonies of the Kuskowagmut, the Ikogmut, and the Unalignmut of Norton Sound. These ceremonies took place during the dreary winter months. Nelson lists the Unalit ceremonial calendar as follows:

- 1) *Asking Festival* — mid to late November

<sup>1</sup>The word "tribe" is no longer currently used to identify the groupings of people in these areas. Current usage identifies such groupings as "macro-bands" (see Damas, 1969 and Guemple, 1972).

<sup>2</sup>When I use the term 'in-group identity', I am referring to a territorial group which see themselves as a coherent group for certain purposes and express this identity through a group name.

2) *Festival of the Dead* — last day of November or the first day of December

3) *Bladder Feast* — during the December moon and sometimes into January, and,

4) *The Great Feast to the Dead* — not held at any definite time because there are years spent in preparation for this feast (Nelson 1899:358).

There is general agreement among Alaskan Eskimo scholars that the Great Feast of the Dead featured the same general characteristics of the Kwakiutl potlatch (Birket-Smith 1953: 223; Lantis 1947:109-110). In fact, some contend that, because they have so many similarities, the whole complex was borrowed from the Northwest Coast (Birket-Smith 1953:223-224). Margaret Lantis (1947:111) insists that other Alaskan ceremonies also possess potlatch features such as those which mark important life changes. A boy's first seal kill, for example, was expressed as an element of the Bladder Feast. On the other hand, Lantis feels that other ceremonies, such as the Messenger Feast, were not potlatches in the truest sense, because the gifts that were exchanged between host and guest were reciprocal gift for gift exchanges and not out and out gifts given away by the host (Lantis 1947:67-68 & 111). In this same category Lantis would include the Asking Festival, which by Nelson's (1899:359-360) description, is an intercommunity exchange of gifts between either *kashims* (this term will be discussed later) or the sexes, and the Trading Festival, which Nelson (1899:361) describes as an extracommunity extension of the Asking Festival.

These disputes about which is the most true potlatch among the Alaskan Eskimo feasts and festivals have little relevance to this paper. It is not my purpose here to limit the discussion to the truest form of Eskimo potlatch. Rather, my aim is to look for an acquainted form which involves some sort of exchange and the element of rank acknowledgement, and to see how the Alaskan Eskimo social structure and world view relate to that form. As a result, any of the feasts and festivals which exhibit some form of gift-giving and display of rank are appropriate for discussion. Nonetheless, the ceremony most often associated with the characteristics of the Kwakiutl potlatch, The Great Feast of the Dead, will be the focus of this analysis. Of particular interest is how it relates to the social structure of the Bering Sea Alaskan Eskimo groups. Prior to this, however, a brief description of the place where these ceremonies were held will be presented.

### *Kashims*

In most Alaskan tribes, ceremonies occurred in a community-oriented structure underground called variously, a "*kashim*", "*kazgi*", "*kashgee*", or "*kashga*" in the literature (Lantis 1947:104). They were and are meeting places of sub-community level societies. In coastal communities they were the focus of whaling

crews (Hughes, 1960). *Kashims* were present in large, stable settlements but some tribes such as the Chugach, did not build these structures (Oswalt 1967:87). The structures were built to serve as a common sleeping place for men and were the centre of ceremonial and ritual life in the village (Nelson 1899:285). In addition to the dances and festivals it housed, the *kashim* was also a sweathouse and the place where rituals, exclusive to men only, were held (Nelson 1899:286). *Kashims* were semi-subterranean structures, entered from an underground passage (Oswalt 1967:102). These buildings were the centre of the Eskimo's life whereby "as a child he must gain admittance by gifts to the people, and to the spirit which is *Kazgi Inua*, the master of the '*Kazgi*'" (Hawkes 1913:4). One of the ceremonies held at the *kashim* among the Eskimo of the lower Kuskokwim and Yukon rivers area was the Great Feast of the Dead.

### **Great Feast of the Dead**

As previously stated, there was no scheduled date for the recurrence of the Great Feast for the Dead. This is because there were years spent in preparation for the celebration. For four to six years, the feast givers accumulated furs and other valuable property to be given away in honour of the spirits (or shades) of their deceased relatives, who were considered to be the true beneficiaries of the feast (Nelson 1899:357). There were lesser versions of this feast which took place following the death of a relative, as well as annual observances of the shade of the departed which involved small offerings. None of these feasts were as lavish or as elaborate as the Great Feast, nor did they match the quantity of goods given (Lantis 1947:22). The feast givers or "chief mourners" were usually the nearest relatives of the deceased, either sons, brothers or fathers (Nelson 1899:363). Lantis (1947:22) points out that several families, even those unrelated to the deceased, shared in giving the festival. When enough of the chief mourners agreed that there was sufficient property to be distributed, a date for the feast was set (Nelson 1899:365).

Members of several surrounding villages were invited to the Great Feast of the Dead which extended over a whole week (Oswalt 1967:228). As in the Kwakiutl potlatch, there was a reserved seating arrangement. This, however, was not determined on the basis of rank, but rather on the basis of distance traveled. People who traveled the greatest distance were directed by the old headman of the village to the places of honour on the bench (Nelson 1899:368). Although the principle purpose of the feast ostensibly was to pacify the souls of the departed, an important factor was maintaining the social status of the feast giver (Lantis 1947:22). Still, the efforts to increase and maintain status were manifested in an entirely different fashion than the Kwakiutl potlatch.

In the Alaskan ceremony, the feast givers humbly entered dressed in their oldest clothes, which was a "way to express humility and show how little they



value their offerings" (Nelson 1899: 369). Although the element of rivalry existed, in that each feast maker wanted to give more than the others, they did not know how much others had to give. To insure that they were not subjected to ridicule later, they expressed humility (Nelson 1899:369). In addition, while the feast givers presented the gifts, they each made amusing self-deprecating remarks about how easily they acquired gifts. This in some way minimized the value of the gifts (Nelson 1899:373, 375). As presents were distributed, the level of excitement in the *kashim* increased, with shouts of laughter as women called out good-natured nicknames for the recipients and then tossed the gift to the recipient as they answered (Nelson 1899:373). Nelson's nickname, because of the ethnological specimens he purchased, was "the buyer of good-for-nothing things" (Nelson 1899:373).

It is clear that the Alaskan form of the potlatch was strikingly different from the Kwakiutl potlatch, even though the elements of rivalry, gift-giving, devaluation of gifts, and status validation are present in both. The insults and bragging present in the Kwakiutl potlatch were replaced with good natured joking and humility in the Alaskan form. It is evident that the very un-Eskimo elements of insulting and bravado which did not fit in with the Eskimo world view, were incorporated into the Great Feast of the Dead as joking and jest. Also absent from the Alaskan potlatch was the destruction of property. It appears that the exigent (harsh and unforgiving) Eskimo lifestyle would not allow for this. Further differences are revealed when looking at the structure of both potlatches. The Kwakiutl potlatch was structured to accommodate only one gift giver, whereas the Alaskan potlatch had many gift givers. In the rivalry potlatch of the Kwakiutl, in addition to the other guests, the rival was often the recipient of gifts. In the Alaskan feast, the recipients played a more passive role, and the fellow feast givers were rivals with one another. Therefore, the Kwakiutl potlatch featured one gift giver with the rival as a recipient, while the Alaskan potlatch featured many gift givers with rivalry among the gift givers. In addition, the gifts at the Alaskan potlatch were distributed to everyone present. Kwakiutl potlatching, however, involved a chief to chief exchange. Using Karl Polanyi's formulation (in Dalton 1975:91), the Eskimo potlatch would be classed as reciprocity because of the symmetrical placement of groups, even though the symmetry was delayed in time. On the other hand, the Kwakiutl potlatch would be classed as a redistributive institution because the members of the group are related "to a centre towards which and from [which] goods and services move" (Dalton 1975:91). In order to appreciate how the Alaskan social structure relates to its potlatch form, a brief outline of the social structure of the Bering Sea Eskimos will be sketched.

#### ALASKAN ESKIMO SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The Bering Sea Eskimos of Alaska share with some other Alaskan groups what George P. Murdock

refers to as Yuman type social organization, which features bilateral descent and Iroquois cousin terminology (Oswalt 1967:203). This is evident by their use of kinship terms which lump parallel cousins (father's brother's children and mother's sister's children) together with sibling terms, but which differentiate cross cousins (father's sister's children and mother's brother's children) from sibling terms (Oswalt 1967:202-203). This terminology not only suggests an exogamy rule being applied to parallel cousins, but it also suggests a prescriptive or preferential marriage rule, in which cross-cousins were preferred, although not obligatory, marriage partners. Nelson reports that among the Unalit of the Bering Sea groups, marriages to first cousins or remote relatives were frequent (Nelson 1899:291). Murdock, (in Oswalt 1967:203), declares "the Yuman type as unstable with descent in a state of flux and little internal consistency". However, according to Kaj Birket-Smith, because of evidence of amulet totemism which is restricted to a common ancestor who is definitely known (thus distinguishing it from clan totemism), there is "a rather clear concept of patrilineal lineages" among the Bering Sea Eskimos (Birket-Smith 1972:159). Nelson, who states, "the wife is considered to become more a part of the husband's family than he of hers", seems to support this contention (Nelson 1899:291). In many cases, betrothals are prearranged by parents when the children are young. In other cases, a boy may take up filial residence with the parents of the girl he will marry, who is frequently four to five years of age. The marriage will take place when the girl reaches puberty (Nelson 1899:292).

The social structure of the Bering Sea Eskimo and that of the Kwakiutl are evidently different. The Kwakiutl social structure is complicated by flexible marriage patterns and optional residence affiliations which allow marriage to be used as a device for social maneuvering. While there is a limited amount of information regarding the social structures of the Bering Sea Eskimos, certain aspects have been documented which allow one to infer that the Eskimo social structure was much less complicated by concerns of social maneuvering than was the Kwakiutl system. Although not totally fixed, there was an element of the preferred marriage rule present in the Alaskan structure. In addition, parental prearrangement of marriages indicates that there was more of a fixed pattern of marriage partner choice than was exhibited in the Kwakiutl structure. Following Rosman and Rubel's structural analysis, the Alaskan preferential marriage rule suggests that marriage would not be an important enough occasion in Eskimo society to warrant a potlatch because social rank differences do not enter into the selection of a spouse. This is mirror image reflection of the Kwakiutl social structure/potlatch relationship. Lantis reports that, generally, marriage in Alaskan Eskimo societies "did not have many ritual elements" (Lantis 1947:8). Moreover, among the Unalit people of the Bering Sea groups, marriage was simply an affair where the bride prepared a dish of food for the

groom, and the groom gave the bride a new suit of clothing (Lantis 1947:9). This demonstrates how variations in the social structure of the Bering Sea Eskimo relate to variations in their borrowed trait of the potlatch. The Kwakiutl potlatch was also related to the primogeniture rule of succession embedded in their social structure. A brief overview of the rules of succession in the Alaskan Eskimo social structure will provide the basis for further discussion.

Nelson reported that among the Bering Sea Eskimos, the headmen possessed no fixed authority, but were only "deferred to [insofar as they would] act as chief advisers of the community" (Nelson 1899:304). Hence, the chiefs yielded to the judgments of the communities. They gained access to that position from the general belief among the people that they possessed an unusually high degree of common sense, superior ability and good judgment (Nelson 1899:304). On occasions, the son of a headman, should he have the necessary qualities, could succeed his father (Nelson 1899:304). A leader could also be replaced by another man by common consent, if that man demonstrated a skill which would promote the welfare of the village (Nelson 1899:304). It is generally agreed that this system of succession is a survival mechanism which is related to the exigent lifestyle of the Eskimo. Because of the scarcity of resources, errors of judgment could be fatal and cause a great deal of harm to the community. Therefore, good judgment as a prerequisite to leadership, would be of primary concern. It can be further argued that because succession to leadership was not fixed, the son of a headman would have a good opportunity at his father's funeral to demonstrate that he is capable of being as good, or even better, a provider, or skillful hunter, as his father. With this in mind, a funeral potlatch would have the greatest prominence in a society which exhibits this type of succession arrangement. As was mentioned, the Bering Sea Eskimo's most elaborate type of potlatch ceremony was the Great Feast of the Dead. Conversely, the Kwakiutl rule of succession was fixed and this too was reflected in the potlatch. Therefore, in these two different cultures which possess similar versions of the potlatch, the social structure and world view of each culture is related to their respective potlatch systems.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the fixed primogeniture rule of succession and the flexibility of marriage choice, with its options for status movement in the Kwakiutl social structure, was reflected in the organization of their potlatch system. The Kwakiutl social structure determined which potlatches were important, how the gifts were distributed, who the participants were, and the frequency of the potlatches. Moreover, Kwakiutl potlatches defined kin group membership—at least momentarily—by specific guest (affine) versus host (kin) (Guemple, personal communication). Likewise, the more fixed pattern of preferential marriage and the flexible succession of leadership contributed to the

organization of the Bering Sea Eskimo potlatches, determining which ones were important, and how often they took place. The Eskimo world view, perhaps conditioned by an exigent lifestyle which fostered flexibility in social organization, inhibited the more plutocratic characteristics of the Northwest Coast tribes from being integrated into their potlatches. This discussion of the Northwest Coast Kwakiutl potlatch and the similar institution present among the Bering Sea Eskimos reveals that the potlatch and the "inviting in", or Great Feast of the Dead, were structured around the Kwakiutl and Eskimos' respective social structures and world views.

### REFERENCES

- Barnett, H. G 1938. The Nature of the Potlatch. *American Anthropologist*. 40:349-358.
- Benedict, Ruth 1934. *Patterns of Culture*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Birket-Smith, Kaj  
1953. *The Chugach Eskimo*. Nationalmuseets Skrifter, Etnografisk Raekke, 6. Copenhagen.  
1972. *Eskimos*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc.
- Boas, Franz  
1889. First General Report on the Indians of British Columbia *Report of the British Association for the Advancement of Science*, pp. 801-893.  
1897. The Social Organization and the Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians. *Report of the U.S. National Museum for 1895*, pp. 311-738.  
1920. The Social Organization of the Kwakiutl. *American Anthropologist*, 22:111-126.  
1921. Ethnology of the Kwakiutl. *Thirty-Fifth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, 1913-1914, pp. 41-1581.  
1925. *Contributions to the Ethnology of the Kwakiutl*. New York: Columbia University Press.  
1935. *Kwakiutl Culture as Reflected in Mythology*. American Folklore Society, memoir 28.
- Clutesi, George 1969. *Potlatch*. Sidney, British Columbia: Gray's Publishing Ltd.
- Cobb, John N. 1921. Pacific Salmon Fisheries, 3rd edition, appendix I. *U.S. Bureau of Fisheries for the Fiscal Year 1921*.
- Codere, Helen S.  
1950. *Fighting with Property*. New York: J.J. Augustin Publisher.  
1957. Kwakiutl Society: Rank without Class. *American Anthropologist*. 59:473-486.

- Curtis, Edward S. 1915. *The North American Indian, Volume X. The Kwakiutl*. Norwood, Mass.: The Plimpton Press.
- Dalton, George 1975. Karl Polanyi's Analysis of Long-Distance Trade and his wider Paradigm. In *Ancient Civilization and Trade*. ed. by J. Sabloff and C.C. Lamberg-Karlovsky, pp. 63-132.
- Damas, David 1969. Contributions to Anthropology: Band Society. *National Museum of Canada. Bulletin* 228.
- Drucker, Philip  
1939. Rank, Wealth, and Kinship in Northwest Coast Society, *American Anthropologist* N.S. 41:55-65.  
1965. *Cultures of the North Pacific Coast*. New York: Chandler Publishing Company.  
1967. The Potlatch. In *Tribal and Peasant Economies*. ed. by George Dalton. Garden City, New York: The American Museum of Natural History.
- Dundes, Alan 1979. Heads or Tails: A Psychoanalytic Study of Potlatch. *The Journal of Psychological Anthropology*. Vol. 2(4):Fall 1979.
- Gil-Del-Real, Maria T. and Bert R. Brown 1980. Potlatching and Face-Maintenance Among the Kwakiutl of British Columbia, *The Journal of Psychoanalytic Anthropology*, 3(3):Summer 1980.
- Godfrey, H. 1958. A Comparison of Sockeye Salmon Catches at Rivers Inlet and Skeena River, B.C., with Particular Reference to Age and Maturity. *Journal of the Fisheries Research Board of Canada* 15:331-354.
- Guemple, Lee  
1972. Eskimo Band Organization and the "DP Camp" hypothesis. *Arctic Anthropology*. 9 (2) 80-112.  
1994. *Concepts of Society and Culture*. London, Canada: University of Western Ontario.
- Hawkes, Ernest William 1913. The "Inviting-In" Feast of the Alaskan Eskimo. *Canada Department of Mines, Anthropological Series*. no.3.
- Hughes C.C. 1960. *An Eskimo Village in the Modern World*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Lantis, Margaret 1947. *Alaskan Eskimo Ceremonialism*. New York: J.J. Augustin.
- Mauss, Marcel 1925. *The Gift*. (Citations from English edition, London: Cohen and West, 1954.)
- Neave, Ferris 1953. Principles Affecting the Size of Pink and Chum Salmon Populations in British Columbia. *Journal of the Fisheries Research Board of Canada*. 9:450-491.
- Nelson, Edward William 1899. Eskimo about Bering Strait. *Bureau of American Ethnology*. 9th Annual Report, pt.1.
- Orans, Martin 1975. Domesticating the Functional Dragon: An Analysis of Pidocke's Potlatch. *American Anthropologist*. 77:312-328.
- Oswalt, Wendell H. 1967. *Alaskan Eskimos*. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing.
- Pidocke, Stuart 1965. The Potlatch System of the Southern Kwakiutl: A New Perspective, *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*. 21:244-264.
- Rosman, Abraham and Paula G. Rubel 1972. The Potlatch: A Structural Analysis, *American Anthropologist*. 74:658-671.
- Rostlund, Erhard 1952. *Freshwater Fish and Fishing in Native North America*. University of California Publications in Geography 9.
- Suttles, Wayne 1960. Affinal Ties, Subsistence, and Prestige among the Coast Salish. *American Anthropologist*. 62:296-305.
- Van Gennep, Arnold 1960. (Original 1909) *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.