

Whitney White
SOAN 234
Final
Due 5/21/07

The Kwakiutl

Unlike many other Native American groups the Kwakiutl were cut off from the rest by the mountains, dissected by the river systems. They belong to the Wakashan language family. Their villages were large in numbers, and had three or four main large families. Surrounded by large Red Woods their houses were wood plank houses. They also used the wood for boxes, which was a distinctive technology system used to prepare food. These highly developed techniques guaranteed the maximum enjoyment of these surpluses throughout the year and especially during the long winter period when the Kwakiutl stopped almost all economic activity and were preoccupied with ceremonial. The economy was based on Salmon and fish in general; it was their major resource which involved trapping and spearing. They were dependent upon fishing because they had no agriculture, unlike other tribes we talked about in the beginning.

Opposite of the Northeast, the Kwakiutl of the Northwest gather in their large villages during the winter as compared to the spring/summer time. For them the winter is a time of ceremonial activity. During the summer they have different camps near other resources. Groups within the village have certain rights to berries, etc. The camps during the summer may be smaller. Each village has around three to seven in a house. However they have an endogamous warfare system because they fight each other. They fight other Kwakiutl people.

The basic social unit is called Numaym or sometimes referred to as "house", a distinctly Kwakiutl social organization. They have owned resource areas for fishing.

Their origin to them is from animal and human. An ancestor took off in animal form and became all human, and they are the descendants. They may also trace their descent through an ancestor like a father or grandfather. They were extremely wealthy due to numerous possessions like tools, utensils, houses and canoes which they made as both artists and craftsmen.

Rank is also very important for the Kwakiutl, and the potlatch is a label we put on activities of northwest coast which involves a number of things. It is also about the relation between different houses. "Each tribe was ranked in greatness in relation to all other tribes, and each numaym, and the individually held offices within each numaym, were similarly ranked". (Codere, chapter one). There has been a long series of hereditary social positions, ranked in order of social greatness and intricately elaborated and differentiated by a wealth of titles, crests, and ceremonial privileges. For the Kwakiutl the entire winter season was a vacation from economic pursuits and a time of the most intense activity and interest in sociability, potlatching and ceremonial. It was a Kwakiutl principle that each position had to be upheld continually by means of property distributions, called potlatches. There is also a sense of class status, the first being persons of rank, secondly commoners, and finally slaves who are people acquired in warfare or their descendants. The society is concerned with rank and maintaining it.

Rank was established by mythic charters. The creator set up rank when animals talked and the Chief gave people ranks. One important aspect is that there is a difference between the rank and the person who holds it. There are different ways to maintain or increase a person's rank. The house being one example of that. Potlatch is also used in negotiating a marriage. The husbands' family starts by making a gift, usually blankets

and Hudson Bay ones to be exact to the wife's family. So in return the wife's family makes a counter gift to the grooms' family of slightly fewer blankets. Plus one must note that they don't make the counter gift until the birth of the first child. The gifts are usually crests, names, etc. so the child will inherit them because they are matrilineal. Yet the children has a choice to choose which house they will want to belong to, like the fathers, grandparents or mothers, which is usually the one with the highest rank and name. This is done because it is going to give you the best title. In the collection of names, it offers a series of ranked positions.

Ranking for a Chief was different when considering his children. The first four children of a Chief would inherit a rank. However the fifth child would inherit no rank and would be classified as a commoner. Since four is considered the right number, and five is excessive. There are patterns of descent. You can inherit rank from both sides like I discussed earlier. From the father you get the basic name and rank. Yet for the mother you get supplementary powers and privilege. The son inherits from the father, but inquires goods from the female line.

Names are also very important in Kwakiutl culture. They transfer names so they don't die or be lost. The first name you get is when you're born and it's associated with the place you were born, but you acquire new names throughout your life and still have the old ones as well. It is possible to get names from grandfathers/grandparents. There is a cycle for a Chief, and if he passes all his names then his status becomes that of a commoner. Names aren't about a person, but are names that their family owned. There is a spiritual obligation to acquire many names. There was an increase in the ability to acquire more names because at the time of contact many people died and because of

wage labor. Potlatch had a role also because the people needed a feast to get these names. It was a heavy economic cost to get names.

You can see how important potlatching is so one must describe its qualities. It is from a trade language which means “to give”. This usually involves giving things away and sometimes even everything you have. You can see that it’s taken to the extreme by sometimes even destroying property, like valuable things by burning them. Codere classifies it as what most people know of as a giveaway. Secondly, in a different sense as a way to claim validation of rank or a defense of a claim to rank. Thirdly, it also asserts competition because it’s an aggressive act without violence. Its can be described as a symbolic warfare between the giver and the receiver. You want to outdo them, someone who is close or superior to your rank.

However in the 1930s and later the potlatch became outlawed for the Kwakiutl. The Indian agents didn’t understand what the potlatch was so they outlawed it. So with that colonial interference, they began doing it underground. In result it became a private practice and no longer public. Their identity began to die out due to continuous pressure from missionaries, etc. They sought all means of preserving the potlatch by even wage labor; they sought anything to acquire it. It seemed like the more agents pushed, the Kwakiutl would push back. This external pressure only created larger potlatches and the more blankets. The value began to get larger. There was also a shift from using fur and cedar blankets to standardized Hudson Bay blankets.

On the other hand they were known as fierce and atrocious in their warfare. They had a natural desire to behave that way. They could easily get rank just by killing someone and they would receive whatever that person had, meaning their rank,

ceremonial objects, and crests. What they had is now yours kind of philosophy. They would just steal the rank and crests just by killing someone from a village with a high ranked person. So a person with an extremely high rank had to be careful at all times of their life. This is somewhat similar to the Plains mourning war, where someone who just lost someone in their family could go out and kill someone else for the death in their family. It's similar in some sense. They both have justifiable reasons for going out and killing someone because of their culture. Yet fighting could be brought about from retribution like the Plains warfare in relation to the mourning war I described because they might kill someone to restore a sense of rank or status. Going to war just for tribal honor is not done because they aren't necessarily a single group, they fight each other. So it's just individual groups.

There have also been some transformations of the Kwakiutl warfare due to contact. Guns develop within the system, and they know have a strong sense of trickery. Seek or trick way into camp and then they are able to get out easier, and guns made this possible. When talking about trickery they are referring to the guns because they can now shoot at a distance. The description of a gun is somewhat mystical and magical. Buying the ball and powder become more ceremonial and theatrical.

Four months season of these theatrical ceremonies know as the winter ceremonies or dances. "These had a religious element in that supernatural spirits which had first appeared to certain ancestors, came again to descendents of those ancestors, and old initiates who had had this experience conducted the dances and ceremonials which were the first steps in freeing the new initiates from their state of ecstasy and possession" (Codere). Still it must be remembered that supernatural spirits appeared only to youths

who had the proper hereditary claims to them and, more important still. To those whose sponsors had sufficient property to give the impressive potlatches required at the time of their initiation.

Animals play a large part in Kwakiutl culture. The behavior of animals appear in myths, and they see animal behavior as human, and some more than others. Salmon is their foundation food and is the closest thing to human. Since they have similar societal structures; they have houses at the bottom of the river. Their skin comes off easy like a blanket on a human. They may even say they have a sacrificial relationship because they swim up river so the Kwakiutl can catch them.

The Eagle is also important and has some meaning with the potlatch. The eagle is seen as a scavenger because it drops down from above to take salmon. It also has an aggressive trait which is highly valued because people can relate to it. It has meaning for the potlatch because the people who first receive gifts at the potlatch are symbolic of eagles because they are seen as scavengers. They are scavenging off the people who have the wealth to give away. They are getting something for nothing. When eagles go down to feed they are very quiet but when they eat they are extremely loud. This is a relation to humans when fighting at a potlatch. There are close similarities to animals.

Bears are also another important animal, and has the closest animal-human similarity. Bears also live off salmon; they hunt alone, and walk on two feet. They have a similar drive for hunger. Their characteristics are similar because they both become restless and can't control hunger. There is also the similar social lives and the drive to eat.

The Raven is associated with death because it can turn living things into death. It

links children to realm of death. They eat dead animals so they are linked to death. The Kwakiutl bury the after birth under a tree and becomes the guardian and it links the child to life. However if they don't they after birth may end up on a beach or something and the ravens might eat it, and that's dangerous because it makes it closer to death. There is a power because you are now more in touch with own mortality. Death is part of producing power, life transformed into death. There are only few birds that feed on corpses.

The owl is known as the spirit devil. The spirit is near that of humans. The vocalizations are important because of essential characteristics that link it to humans. Yet if you kill one you may have bad luck, run into misfortune or even die. This is one of those omens you don't want to encounter. It has imperial connections. This is very similar to other cultures and is seen in mine, but we even believe that just by hearing an owl something bad is probably going to happen. They do have a cannibal dance which mimics the call of bard owls because they link owls to cannibalism in some sense their spirit devils people. We can see all connections in relation to human beings. They build nests and stay there the rest of their lives, the same things can be said for eagles, and they have permanent nests.

Beavers are carnivorous with the Kwakiutl. There is an intimate knowledge because they trees are living beings. The beavers are eating the flesh of tree because they are alive, they are eating the guardians because placenta buried under tree.

In Kwakiutl culture there is also a trickster animal like many other cultures. For the Kwakiutl it's the mink. Since in that area their prominent. They are also intelligent, quick, and kill in groups. They also kill more than they can eat, and are active and social

just like human beings. They are known as a mediator between humans and the spirit world. They are aggressive and playful which shares fairly similar characteristics with humans.

There is an opposition for Irving Goldman about Codere's view of the potlatch and he challenged it. For Goldman giveaways at the potlatch were not a way of establishing rank, the rank is what allowed you to giveaway. Since property meant life and power. He thinks that Codere got it mixed up; she has it opposite of what it really is. He has two different principles, generalized exchange which is a way to show you deserve to be in that position. It's a right, a privilege not a duty. Giving is the ultimate honor; this concept is popular in Native cultures. The Chief has the right to a giveaway which is a valuable, noble act. However if you don't have a crest, you have no privilege to give things away, you haven't earned it.

In the end, the Kwakiutl had an importance on rank, potlatches, cosmology of human-animal relations, and winter ceremonials. All of these things were important to their culture, and they tried to maintain these even after contact with settlers and hopefully in some aspect today. We must remember that when observing a culture and writing about it that we learn our facts from the people themselves and not try to suggest totally what you think. You can see this in Codere's and Goldman's different accounts of rank for the Kwakiutl and how opposite they are. However we can conclude that rank was important for the Kwakiutl and the passing down of names was also very important for their society. They were a very distinct group and rich in culture.