

# THE TLINGITS AND THEIR HISTORY

**T**HE PACIFIC NORTHWEST IS ENDOWED WITH ABUNDANT RAIN-fall and warmed by the Japanese current that flows off the Western coast of the Alexander Archipelago; the terrain is composed of hidden glaciers lying within heavily forested mountains that slope directly to the sea. The mountains protect the area from the subarctic climate of Canada and northern Alaska and the warm, moist air from the sea produces a mild climate creating a lush temperate rain forest. Southeastern Alaska, known as the panhandle, is an area of the Northwest Coast. The land is thick with spruce, red and yellow cedar, hemlock, alder, and fir, and a dense undergrowth of ferns, devil's club, moss, salal, labrador tea, Angoon berry, fireweed, and wild cabbage. The vegetation is canopied in the shadows of sunken mountain valleys and deep narrow inlets, or fjords, that penetrate far into the base of the mountains. Four major waterways carve their way to the sea: the Chilkat river in the north, the Taku river in the Juneau area, the Stikine river in the south and the Portland Canal on the boundary between Alaska and British Columbia.

The area is endowed with an easy and accessible food supply. On land there are moose, deer, elk, bear, and goat; ducks, geese, grouse and ptarmigan are abundant, as well as many edible plants, plant roots and berries. All this is combined with a sea full of shellfish, salmon, candlefish, codfish, halibut, whale, seals, and edible marine plants, such as sea kelp and seaweed.

Presented with endless resources of food and a mild climate, the Tlingits developed a complex society based on status and lineage, wealth,

**They were, perhaps some of the most expert boat builders in North America. The boats varied between 12 and 75 feet in length and were not only seaworthy—they were works of art.**

*Opposite:* **People arriving for potlatch at Chilkat.**

Photo: Alaska State Library, Winter and Pond Collection PCA 87-43



**People out of the foam...  
mastered the sea in huge  
canoes.**

Photo: Royal British Columbia Museum,  
Victoria, B.C.

family honor and clan respect. The culture was steeped in protocol and ritual activities that consisted of great oratory, elaborate dances and lengthy songs. The participants wore elaborate garments and beautifully carved wooden masks representing mythological beings and legendary figures. The rituals were carried out to the tempo of the drums, and were often accompanied by the clan chorus, who sang the traditional songs for each particular event. The effect was both dramatic and transcendental.

Tlingit legend tells of the Salmon Eaters clan, a people who sailed out of the sea foam from a Siberian Island and crossed the Bering Sea, using the Aleutian chain of islands and protected coastal islands as stepping stones until they reached the Nass River in British Columbia. The journey was so long and arduous that the people changed languages many times by the time they reached the Nass River, where they were called *people out of the foam*. Upon reaching Alaska the group began splitting and redefining and merging with other groups for many years until they became solidified into a branch of one ethnic linguistic group (NaDene) calling themselves Tlingits or *The People*. “Legends have groups traveling down the Skeena River in northern British Columbia and migrating by boat northward into southeast Alaska. Songs and dances enact another exodus over coastal mountains and down river valleys to the coast” (Langdon, 1993: 70).

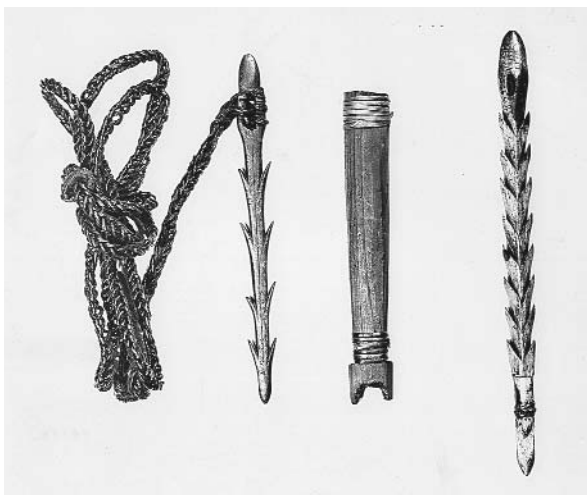
The past is also revealed by archeological evidence; a site discovered on Prince of Wales Island and dated 9,700 B.P., was occupied by an unknown group, possibly proto-Northwest Coast people who settled there and then spread out to other areas.

At the time of contact during the eighteenth century, the Tlingits



**Carved wooden halibut hook,  
with iron barb and short length  
of twisted spruce root line.**

Photo: Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago



**Harpoons.**

Photo: Department of Mines and Resources.



**Curing skins by smoking.**

Photo: Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

consisted of a loose confederation of eighteen tribal entities, or *kwans*, stretching from Portland Canal in the south to as far north as Eyak, north of Yakutat and south of the Copper River Delta, eastward along the Taku River to Atlin, British Columbia and further northeast in Yukon Territory to the village of Teslin, which is situated on a point of land at the confluence of Nisutlin River and Teslin Lake. The people mastered the sea in huge canoes and with equal ease adapted to the land. It could be said that they became one with the sea and the land—reminiscent of other Alaska Native indigenous groups who were, and continue to be, noted for their unique adaptations to the specific area they inhabit. Large areas of the land and the coastal waters were marked and defined, creating a strong concept of territory and ownership. Each clan had their own fishing and hunting areas that implied the rights of production of the lands and their responsibility to share its rich abundance within the framework of the clan system.

## **SOCIAL ORGANIZATION**

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Tlingit society was organized into two large groups or moieties—the Raven and the Wolf. In the northern area of the Northwest Coast the designation of Wolf becomes the Eagle. There is some confusion regarding this change, and some anthropologists theorize that the Eagle crest came from intermarriage with Haidas or Tsimshians. Under each moiety were numerous clans, and within each village there were, and continue to be, a number of different clan house groups. The master of a clan house was called *Hít s'átí*, and sometimes was referred to as a subclan chief. There was not an overall ranking clan chief above the *Hít s'átí* since, as George Emmons (1991: 24) explains, “each subclan was more or less an independent body regulating house groups could have a quasi chief or representative enabling them to unite on issues. In a dichotomous sense it was clans of the opposite moiety that exerted substantial influence; due to the strength of biological relationships, and affinal ties, they could express or withhold consensus and cooperation with their opposites.”

These strong influences existed due to an important basic aspect of Tlingit society. It was matrilineal, by which lineage was legalized through the mother's blood line, and the inheritance of status, clan and property came directly from the mother. Because of this marriage custom, affirmation or consensus was often required of the clan of the opposite moi-

ety. Each individual was required to marry his opposite moiety. Thus a Raven always marries a Wolf/Eagle which, as stated previously, were subdivided into clans, and the clans further broken down into house groups. A representation (Swanton, 1908: 399-404) of the some 20 or more clans under each moiety would include:

**Raven (or Crow)**

- Gānaxa'di (People of the Ga-nax)
- Dā'citān (Beaver People)
- Te`nedi (Bark House People)
- Kluxine'di (Martin People)
- Tak<sup>u</sup>ane`di (Winter People)

**Wolf (or Eagle)**

- Kā`gwantān (Burnt House)
- Daqlawe'di (Killer Whale)
- Xél qoan (People of Foam)
- Yenyé'di (Hemlock People)
- Nāste'di (People of the Nass)

Using the first two clans as an example of the further division into house groups:

**Gānaxa'di Clan**

- Whale House
- Frog House
- Starfish House
- Looking Out House

**Kā`gwantān Clan**

- Grizzly-Bear House
- Katsls House
- Drum House
- Halibut House



**Shark war helmet of the Nanyāa'yî Clan.**



**Bear war helmet of the Kā`gwantān Clan.**



A ceremonial event to raise status.  
Photo taken at Billy Williams'  
home in Atlin, BC, circa 1925.

Each village contained members of both moieties and several or more clans under each moiety (depending on the size of the village) with members tracing their lineage from their mothers. Therefore a Tlingit of the Tongass tribe (an area near Ketchikan) might be a Raven belonging to the Gānaxa'dí clan and a member of the Starfish House, while another Tlingit in the same village could be Wolf, belonging to the Kā'gwantān clan and a member of the Xúts!hit or Grizzly Bear House. Individual Tlingit names indicated the moiety, clan house group, and geographical area.

Every clan had a history of its origin; each sublineage group had particular oral lineage histories. The respective house chief (Hít s'átí) acted as guardian for these treasures, and represented the house group politically. Both clan and sub clan celebrated the legendary history through oratory, songs, dances and the carved poles, houseposts and house panels. The origin stories were incorporated into a social framework of lineage, status, clan history, and the crests were carved or painted on tribal objects as outward expressions that redefined the events. While moiety was an important designation, the power rested within the clans and the house groups who owned major crests (Khà shukâ) that were lavishly displayed everywhere on crest hats, house fronts, ceremo-

nial hats, ritual clothing, totem poles, bent wood boxes, jewelry, and household items. As with all property, it was possible to sell, bequeath, bestow and lose or win in war. “The comparison might be drawn between the crest and European heraldic quartering or in the American sense to the cattle brand that the Western rancher burns not only on his animals to establish legal ownership but on the gate post of his corral, the wing of his chaps, on the jamb of his house and all sorts of places because it is his brand and he likes it” (Drucker, 1995: 190).

The society was composed of three status levels that Westerners might identify as aristocrats, commoners, and slaves. Membership in each group (except slaves) was dependent on heredity while status was in part based on heredity and specific feats or actions of the individual. An individual could never change clan or moiety but could attempt to elevate the status. The individuals with the highest status were, of course, the hereditary aristocracy who had a great deal of wealth (Nâtxh) and were highly esteemed. These individuals inherited status and maintained their status and respect in the community by increasing their power and wealth through effective leadership and marriage to a high-ranking person. They hosted ceremonial feasts (*potlatches*) for special occasions, and often distributed great amounts of goods and property to the respective opposite clan or clans. It should be borne in mind that these distributions actually resembled social and legal contracts and tribal validations. “The potlatch was not a struggle over material wealth but over symbolic capital, reputation, prestige, and honor” (Kan, 1989: 247).

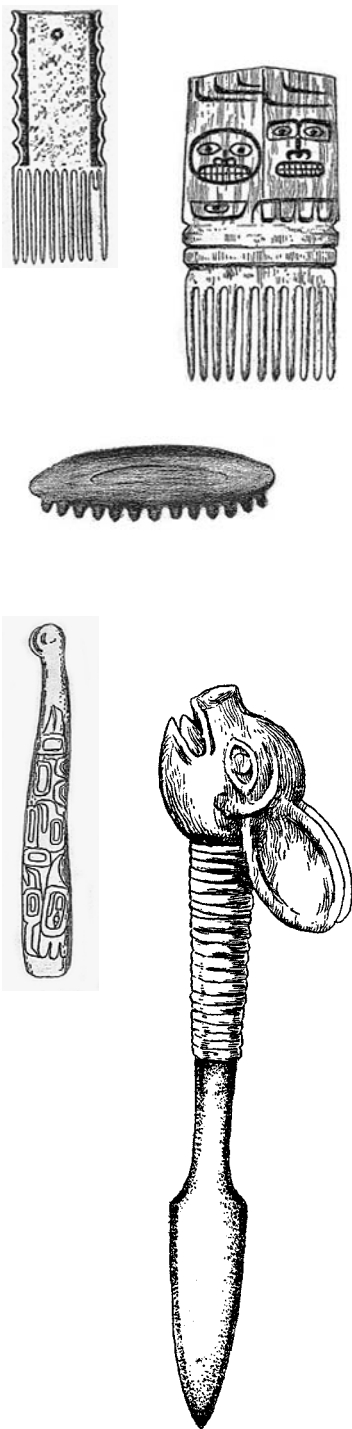
Each of the sub clans had a Hít s’âtí who was viewed as the primary custodian for the holdings of the group, both material and non-material. These included the dwelling place, ceremonial regalia, songs, crests, dances, names, hunting and fishing areas, as well as controlling of feuds and protecting the honor and position of the group. The wealth possessed by prominent leaders was not personal, but was regarded as tribal assets. “Chief’s power was more moral than real, since the group constituted the governing body. He presided over them in council and represented them in dealing with outsiders; but he governed largely through their consent” (Emmons, 1991: 391).

Slaves were obtained by capture in war or through debt or purchase. They had no rights and could be slain in a ritual killing at a potlatch, but they could also be set free. A shaman, although belonging to a specific clan, held a certain mobility within the cultural mesh and was viewed more as a separate part of the society since he had a very specialized role.

In family life, Tlingit men raised their own sons until they were twelve



Art was everywhere, as shown by these wooden combs, war club and stone-bladed dagger.



years of age, at which time discipline and training would be taken over by an uncle, a ranking brother of the boy's mother. At that time the boys would go to live with their mother's brother, who would carry out with more objectivity a difficult regimen of training than a natural father would not or could not provide, a practice known as the *avunculate*.

The husband might take his wife to his father's clan house to live, but it was her clan crest and lineage line that she proudly brought with her and that her children would bear. It was not a reduction in the father's role, but rather a shift in it. Within their legal system it was held sacrosanct. The estate of a deceased man would go to the eldest son of his sister or, if there was no nephew, to a younger brother of the deceased, but never to his own children. The entire socio-legal system was the reverse of Western tradition. This, in conjunction with their so called animism, shamanism, and anthropomorphism and combined with the illusive line of distinction that existed between the Indians and their universe, set them apart from traditional Christian thought and was very disconcerting to the Western mind, and, therefore, thwarted their understanding of the Indians.

"The great fault of all ethics hitherto has been that they only believed in themselves. This is particularly true in Western Christian traditions. Their material universe is man centered. Nature, in so far as it is noticed, is only a convenience or a temptation with no positive value" (Bates, 1960: 254). This contradiction allowed the Americans and Europeans to value only the tribal art and to completely dismiss the people's beliefs and the culture that produced it.

The culture of lineage-rights tradition, with its rich mythology and ceremonies, was expressed in the medium of art. This included wood-carvings, paintings, blanket weaving, basket weaving, and the working of copper and silver. Art was everywhere: on totem poles, canoes, paddles, house fronts, wooden storage boxes, serving bowls, eating utensils, fishing hooks, facial paintings, dancing staffs, drums, garments, and tools.

Tlingits were remarkably adept at working with wood and weaving the soft durable mountain goat wool, combining it with the inner bark of red and yellow cedar for weaving into blankets and clothing. "In their carving and painting of wood the Tlingits achieved their highest expression of their aesthetic genius" (Carpenter, 1973: 169). With such rich traditions, the Tlingit needed no written language. Their history books and legacy of beliefs are in the highly stylized patterns and designs, which today we admire and struggle to interpret.

The Tlingit tradition, as in all Northwest Coast cultures, expressed their legendary histories and validations of the social and legal systems in forms of art, and this was a completely new concept for the Europeans and Americans. Sadly, the symbolic forms used in the artistic narration's were not appreciated and often held in contempt; and so explanations of details from informants, who could have provided it, were neither solicited nor willingly offered by the people themselves. In contemporary times the designs are neither completely understood nor fully interpreted. Nevertheless, the art and the genius are greatly admired, and artifacts are avidly sought after and collected by connoisseurs of art.

The essence of the Tlingit spirit world, daily life and historical interpretations were amalgamated into artistic designs that they chose to paint, weave, and carve. "Red cedar in particular may be seen as the *sine qua non* of the Northwest Coast art and architecture, and responds to the carver's tools in a way that has made it justly famous" (Carpenter, 1973: 165).

The art of story telling and oratory was used in conjunction with their ceremonial rituals; and few modern statesmen or orators could equal them in oratory. They were eloquent and dramatic, and the moment the speaker's staff was raised the group became quiet and transfixed on the words of the speaker. Even the most unrefined of traders spoke in awe of Indian "*talking*."

The Tlingit believed that somewhere in the mystical beginnings all living things shared the world as equals and lived in mutual understanding; animals, birds and fishes all had a spirit essence, and were, like humans, reincarnated after death. Tlingits noted that each creature was specifically gifted in a way that mankind was not; and all things were admired for these differences. In such a balanced universe, it naturally developed that people claimed descent either from supernatural beings or from actual birds, animals, and fish. "The people developed and inherited certain symbols as reminders of early history such as, a ceremonial hat, a mask, a dance, a legend of their origins and zealously guarded them as inheritance" (Hawthorne, 1956: 18). According to Tlingits it all began in the distant past, as long ago as time itself; and so that this history will not be forgotten, the stories are repeated over and over, again and again.

## THE LEGENDS OF THE RAVEN AND THE NASS RIVER

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Many legends of the Raven and the Nass River were documented by John Swanton, who interviewed Tlingits in Sitka and Wrangell in 1904. Swanton had the legends published in 1909, giving non-Indians access to these wonderful stories.

The mythological Raven at the head of Nass River became their cultural hero, and in the very beginning he created man from the leaves of a tree, and because leaves die in the fall, Raven said, “man will also die.” It was in the area of the Nass River where the Tlingits first acquired their most powerful crests. The Nass River figures in early Tlingit folklore and “in the traditional history of their more powerful clans there is a clear recollection of a Nass River exodus from the interior of British Columbia” (Carpenter, 1973: 166). It was at Nass River that the great young Raven Yēl released light on the world. A powerful chief who lived in the area had the box containing light, and Raven planned to obtain the box. He turned himself into a pine needle and floated on the creek, and when the chief’s daughter came to drink she swallowed the pine needle and became pregnant. When her time was completed she bore her child, and because the chief loved his daughter, he loved his grandson; and would do anything to please him and make him happy.

One day the child spied the box containing light. He cried out for it, and the chief gave him the box to play with. Immediately Raven seized the box and started to fly out of the smoke hole in the roof. The chief seized the Raven by his white tail feathers up—until that time the Raven had been a white-feathered bird—and held on to him for an instant in the smoke of the fire; and in that very moment Raven turned black. At last he pulled away crying “Ga.” He opened the box as he flew away, and the sun and the moon and the stars fell out and went into their places in the sky. It is said that the release of the light frightened the people, especially those that ridiculed the Raven, and some ran into the woods while others ran in terror into the sea.

Those who ran to the sea were transformed into aquatic mammals, the ones who fled to the forest became animals and those who climbed the mountains became birds. Only the people who had gone unclad in their human state, and not mocked the Raven remained as they were “and consequently these remaining Tlingits adapted their first crests in honor of their transformed kinsmen” (Carpenter, 1973: 167).

Raven continued on his journey and along the way he met a man named Ganùk, who was the keeper of all the fresh water. Raven was curious, and formed a plan to meet Ganùk.

As they were talking Ganùk asked Raven, “When were you born?” Raven replied, “I was born before the world began.”

This puzzled Ganùk greatly; so Raven sent him outside to ponder over it. While Ganùk was gone, Raven stole the fresh water. He carried it off in his mouth, and he made the Stikine, Taku, Chilkat, Alsek, and Copper Rivers, and all other large rivers. The small drops of water that fell from his mouth became the salmon creeks, and these he filled with salmon and trout; and he placed an old woman at the head of all salmon creeks. That is why the salmon go up the creeks to spawn. He put the tides in order by placing a woman in charge of their rising and falling, and he gave her a servant, the mink. He also made the world as it now stands on the strong foreleg of a beaver. The old woman underneath attends to the world, and when she is hungry she shakes it, and the people must put grease in the fire for her. Raven appointed a hollow tree eastward of Sitka as the place where the sun would turn back.

He made the west wind and said to it, “You shall be my son’s daughter, for no matter how hard you blow you shall hurt no one.” And he made the north wind, and a house for it with the sides all hanging with ice, and placed the house on top of a mountain in the north. He created the soft south wind that melts the snow, and the high wind of the east that carries rain. He took some red cedar bark and a white stone, the kind that is found on beaches, and he put fire into them so there would be fire forever all over the world.

Raven said to the land otter, “You will live on water as well as land, and whenever a canoe capsizes with people in it, you will save them, and make them one of your people.” Thus it is when people who have been taken away by land otters and return home they become shaman, and therefore it is through the land otter that shaman first became known. It is said that shaman can see one another by means of the Land Otter Spirit; whereas, ordinary people cannot.

It is told that while Raven was traveling, he rocked his canoe on the water just outside Sitka, and caused great waves that still occur there. He sent an invitation to the Killer Whale Chief and ate with him under the sea. He noted they seemed to live on hair seal meat, fat and oil, and the chief was named Gonaquade’t. He visited the Fish People, the Land Otter People, the Goose People, and the Porcupine People, and learned many things from them. In his travels he met a sculpin, who claimed to be older



**Ceremonial mask.**

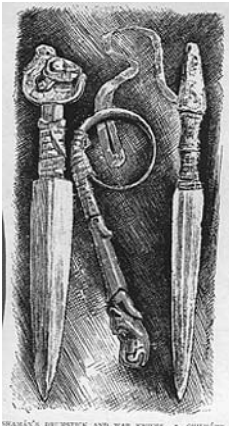
Photo: Canadian Museum of Civilization



*Above:* **Tlingit Hawk mask.**

Photo: Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago

*Below:* **Shaman's drumstick and daggers.**



than Raven, so he placed him in the sky where he is known as Pleiades. He said to the Lukan, a bird that lives far out on the ocean, “You will live far out on the ocean on the lonely rocks. You will seldom be seen ashore.” And to the eagle he said, “You will be very powerful, and fly above all other birds. Your eye sight will be without equal.” Then he put the talons on the eagle. Eagle feathers and down were considered very sacred symbols.

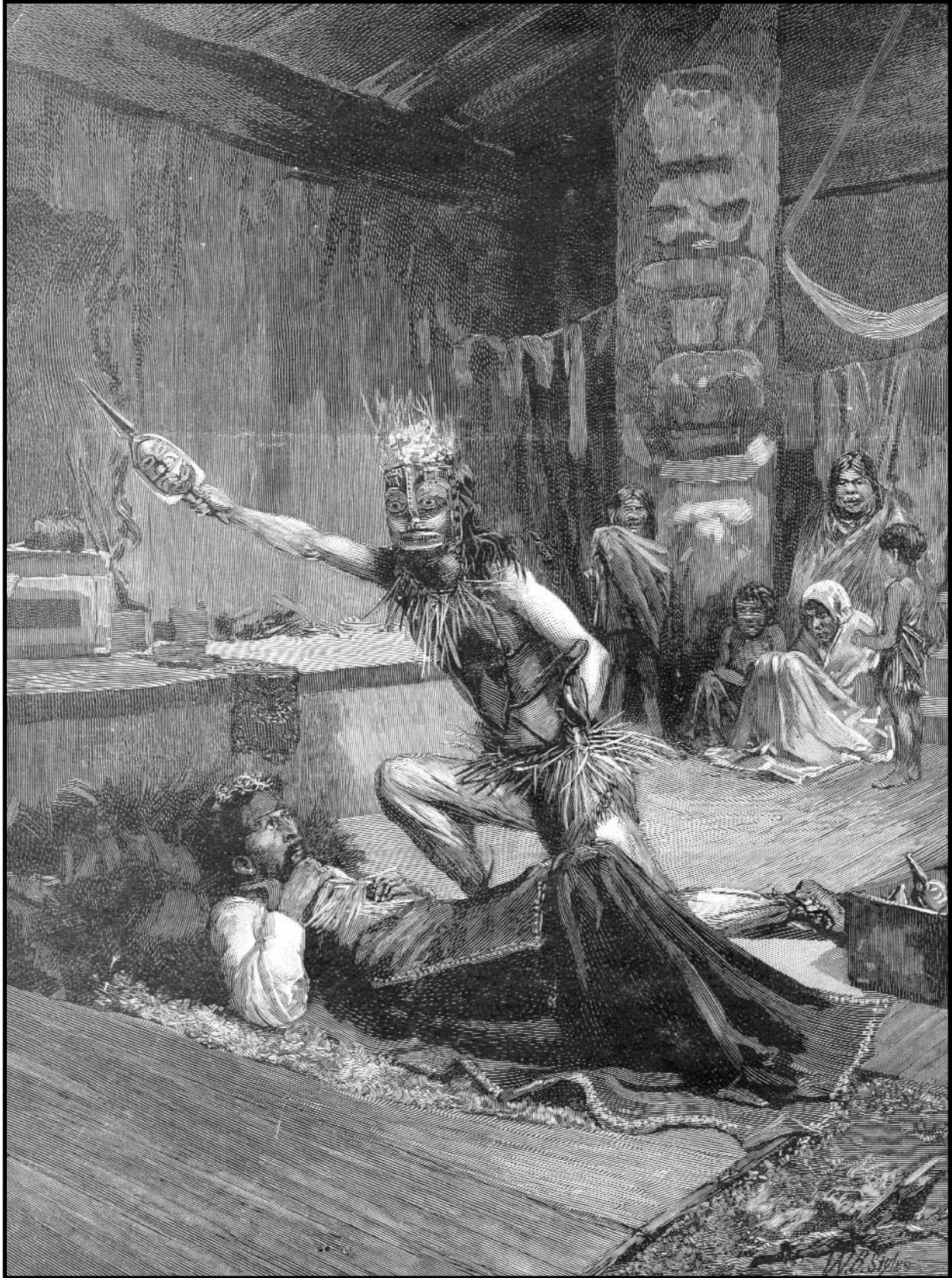
The Raven was also a very sly fellow, and because of this, he played many tricks on people, as well as on animals. Once he was walking along a beach near an abandoned fish camp and he saw a huge salmon jumping in the sea. Immediately he was filled with a desire to eat the salmon, but had no way to catch it. Suddenly he spied a piece of jade on the ground and thought “Aha, I have a plan!”

The Raven called out to the Salmon saying, “Do you know what this green stone is saying to you? It is saying ‘you thing with the ugly back. You thing with the filthy gills, come ashore’.” And as the salmon came ashore to fight the stone, the Raven struck it and killed it with a wooden club, thus, because Raven made jade talk to salmon, people have since made stone axes, picks and spears of jade.

There was a great flood with the waters rising up and covering some of the mountains. The people and animals fled to the highest peaks. Raven hung on to a cloud until the water receded. He knew for certain the waters were receding when he flew over the sea and found a piece of kelp. The animals and people began coming down the mountain; but some of the people who returned were turned to stone by the Raven.

It was after the flood that Raven’s mother died, and he said, “My mother is dead. I am going to drum and sing to praise her.” And he gave a feast in her honor, and danced at the feast with the chilkat blanket owned by Gonaquade’t.

The great young Raven, Yēl as the Tlingits call him, is comparable with figures in many tribal societies where the cultural hero is the trickster figure—for example, the coyote legends of the Southwestern Indians in the United States. “The trickster is a forerunner of the savior, and is at once a God, a man and an animal. He symbolizes the aspect of our own nature which is ready to bring us down when we get inflated, or to humanize us when we become pompous. The major psychological function of the trickster figure is to make it possible for us to gain a sense of proportion of ourselves. He is the satirist par excellence” (Singer, 1972: 289).



Tlingit shaman treating his patient



Shaman's headdress of  
bear claws.

Photo: Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago

## THE TRANSCENDENTAL LINK BETWEEN THE TANGIBLE AND THE INTANGIBLE

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Art was the expression of the metaphysical world. For the Tlingits, art, history and the legendary past, in addition to living patterns, were all one and the same, and thus were so intricately knit together that to loosen one would be to unravel the cultural fabric, causing it to disintegrate. In a sense there was no end or beginning of art, and no separation of it from daily living and the mythical past. The ceremonies employing the opposite moiety to erect houses and totem poles, to initiate persons into the secret societies and even pierce the lips and ears of their children represented a legal validation and a historical record. The combination of tribal validation and the use of the crest (Khà shuká) in the ceremony was an outward confirmation of their esoteric world.

It was the Ixt, the shaman, and his Yéik, spirit (his supernatural power or powers), who was called upon as a prophet and healer to act as the bridge between the spirit world and the tangible world. "He chose a life of dedication to the world of non-corporeal reality; and was moved to do so for some psychic or spiritual and manifestation of a particular quality of his being that set him apart from other members of society. He had to prepare for his vocation by undergoing arduous periods of isolation and personal sacrifice taking onto himself the suffering of his people and living through them" (Singer, 1972: 32). And if he failed in finding his guardian spirit, and failed in his psychological combat with the forces he had to conquer, he died!

The mysticism penetrated throughout the society through the use of meditation, the expanding of awareness and realization through the use of spirit guides and the belief in the reincarnation of souls. Fasting and bathing in icy waters and switching the body with bundles of faggots and nettles—even self-mutilations—were done to purify the aura of human sensuality and acquire superhuman powers, and enhance the telepathic means of communication and the interpretation of visions. In a world that was so greatly imbued with the transcendental and supernatural it was only natural that trances, taboos, amulets, the casting of spells, and bewitchment became a part of the cultural life.

Witches could curse people, it was thought, and so they were greatly feared. It was believed that they could complicate the lives of certain individuals or the group by spells and curses. Witches were not shaman and were seldom, if ever, members of the nobility. Generally they were members of other castes. The society dealt very harshly with suspected witches. There were three types of shaman who practiced Yāk (medicine). The Ixt shaman, who were both healers and prophets, practiced for the benefit of the people. The He'oyk practiced good or bad medicine and the Nuk'satie was a master of bad medicine. The latter two might be referred to as sorcerers or wizards.

The Indians endowed nature with spirit life, such as spirit of the earth, spirit of the air, spirit of the sea, and spirit of glaciers. Each shaman had his own spirits, usually five to eight, and each spirit had his particular song. The shaman entered into his spiritual combat wearing one of his Yéik guardian spirit masks. He began the ritual by beating his shaman sticks and singing one of his spirit's songs; then as the drums beat at a faster tempo he began to dance. During the dance he gestured with an elaborately carved rattle and passed into another dimension to contact his helping spirits, who in turn would lead him deeper into other realms. He returned after this journey with the means to heal or prophesy the future. He fasted and abstained from sexual encounters for a long period, and because he obtained power from his hair it was never cut or combed. He was called on to treat the sick, advise war parties, and predict the future. One of the great shaman spirits was Unseeable who, it was said, was the chief of all shaman spirits. He wore a tall hat and sat in the middle of a canoe with bowman and sternman. These three were much like the three Fates of Greek mythology.

Westerners have accused the shaman of being a sinister magician, a charlatan, a mental aberrant and a shrewd opportunist, but even the most cynical observer has been amazed at his powers. Cultural dimensions lock individuals into pattern grids that shut out other realities, and often blind one's objectivity in viewing other cultures, thus preventing a rational analysis and balanced view of other societies. If one pauses to ask "Has anyone seen an angel?" No one will answer. This is in spite of the fact that angels dominate Western beliefs and are seen in the finest paintings in the world's greatest museums.

In the material world, the carved red cedar poles were not only legal writ but a narrative link to the metaphysical world. The totem crests usually depicted mystical animals from the spirit world (past or present) and



**Chilkat shaman witch  
spirit wand.**

Photo: Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago





**Petroglyphs—carvings on rocks. These are still found in abundance on beaches in Wrangell, Alaska. Their origins are unknown.**

Photo: Maria Bolanz

actual animals represented with human qualities which, it was believed, they could manifest. A kind of fluidity of form existed whereby man and animals interchanged form and generated important events and/or changes in the clan or subhouse history. “For the Indian believed the legendary encounters with spirits and monsters were an actual historic event, and as much part of the natural order of the universe as was man himself” (Drucker, 1958: 191).

Margaret Lantis, an anthropologist, suggested in a lecture at the Anchorage Art Museum at the opening of the exhibit ‘Our Way of Making Prayer’ in 1996 that, rather than totemism, it is closer to a type of animalism since Tlingit society is based on an organizing principle of animal crests as symbolic origins of the various clans. These form cohesive relationships by building kinship groups, clans and moieties based on both existing and mythological animals to represent man’s relationship in the natural world. The logic afforded by the use of clan crests give a meaningful expression to the systems, concepts, and categories derived from experiences imposed by the surrounding world.

This was explored by Jenness (1943: 540):

We know what animals do, what are the needs of the beaver, the bear and the salmon, and other creatures; because long ago men married them and acquired this knowledge from their animal wives. Today the priests say we lie but we know better. The white man has been in this country only a short time and knows very little about animals; but we have lived here thousand of years and were taught long ago by the animals themselves. The white men write everything so that it will not be forgotten, but our ancestors married the animals and learned their ways and passed the knowledge from one generation to another.

The beauty of their logic enabled them to intimately understand their environment and to survive and thrive in it. They carefully classified plants into edible, non-edible, and medicinal; they analyzed the plants of the sea, and the manner and habits of the fish and mammals of the sea. They studied the stars, and expertly navigated by them; their knowledge of geography was meticulous and thorough. They were weavers of fine textiles and elegant blankets; their language is expressive and highly complicated. They were, perhaps, some of the most expert boat builders in



North America. The boats varied between 12 and 75 feet in length and were not only seaworthy—they were works of art. Their knowledge of engineering and construction was unrivaled in house building.

The Tlingit clan houses, or wooden tribal houses, were an elegant feat of engineering. The dwelling places were quite large—often wider than forty-five feet and longer than thirty feet—and were solidly constructed without joints, standing for many years. The wood work was both an architectural and an aesthetic wonder. The house was not only a dwelling, but a representation of the lineage line and contained the tribal wealth of blankets and coppers. The four supporting house posts, or gars, were carved with historical events of the history of the group and their crests, which were their privilege to use. No house could exist without tribal validation in the form of a ceremonial feast. It was this ritual in its multiplicity of forms that created the cultural adhesive.

**A modern representation of a ceremonial feast with Chilkat dancers from Port Chilkoot, Alaska.**

Photo: Alaska Dept. of Economic Development

## THE CEREMONIAL FEAST KHU.ÎX' (POTLATCH)

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Khu. îx' is the general name for a ceremonial feast meaning the *inviting*, and it was a complicated system of legal validation and distribution of property and a transfer of wealth and titles with corresponding obligations required of the recipients.

The significance and meaning of the potlatch, because of the colonial powers' limited understanding of it, was blown up as a circus and focused on as "a gigantic bloody savage farce of killing slaves and burying them beneath the totem pole at the feast" (Wherry, 1964: 100). The entire potlatch celebration and ceremony was reduced to this one simple exaggeration. Probably no one custom of the Northwest Coast Indians has been so misunderstood and taken out of context. A comparison of crosscultural misunderstanding might be drawn of the Aztec Indians in what is now Mexico, who upon viewing the ritual of holy communion practiced by the Conquistadors, drew the conclusion that it was a kind of cannibalistic ritual in which they created their God out of bread and wine and then ate him! The name "Potlatch" itself is a misnomer, and in reality is a corruption from a Nootka phrase *Patsbatla*, meaning "giving," and adapted into the Chinook jargon, a traders' jargon that was used on the Northwest Coast. The Tlingits themselves never used the term since each feast was named for the type of event it was to represent—mortuary, memorial, the dedication of a clan house, and later on, in the nineteenth century, the public validation of important events. The Khu.îx', or ceremonial inviting, was an integral part of the raising of a totem pole.

The respect for one's ancestors, honor for the dead and the belief in reincarnation are major threads that run through Tlingit culture. John Swanton, an early ethnographer in the field, observed that "the erecting of a house or a totem pole and the secret societies' performances, feasts and distributions of property which accompanied it, were all undertaken for the sake of the dead members of the clan; every blanket that was given away and the food offering that was put into the fire were in honor of their ancestors" (Swanton, 1908: 435). These gestures offer an example of ideology molding social responsibility since reincarnation meant rebirth into the tribe, so indirectly homage was being rendered to all the living members of the tribe. The Khu.îx' (ceremonial inviting) was

extremely formal. Invitations were sent out in different ways. For example, an invitation might consist of the ceremonial crest hat of the inviting chief being carried to each clan house in order to announce the event, a messenger might appear and announce the event with a special song composed for the occasion, while another announcement might be in the form of a ritual dance.

The Khu.îx', or potlatch, was the bonding for the social structure; the keystone that underpinned the culture. The event validated status and property, and served as the axis around which the social grouping of lineage and clan revolved. The concept of the ceremonial/inviting was the legal affirmation to right and privilege. It was the lineage group that would work together to amass property and act as a group host to opposite clan or clans (one never hosted one's own group).

The Hít s'átí, or chief, was the principal figure at a ceremonial/inviting, since he was custodian of the group's wealth. He directed the labor, assembled the property and collected contributions from his clan, arranged the amassing of goods to be given away, and acted as host for the event, but it "was a major clan group activity which served to maintain the sense of membership and to further the solidarity of the group" (Spencer and Jennings, 1940: 190). It was the tribal way of establishing and maintaining a stable relationship between local segments and the other extended villages. A chief would announce the event to be celebrated and request the support of his clan in other extended villages. Upon receiving their affirmation of support the chief outlined the time, selected the groups to invite, directed the labor, assembled the property and collected contributions from his kinsmen. The lineage of his wife/wives, as well as, the lineage of the wife/wives of the deceased chief and their clans' recognition and acceptance of the feast was required—this was a factor in promoting social stability between intermarriage lineage lines. The chief's matrilineal kinsmen were the hosts at the event and all members of his group shared in the proceedings and received public acknowledgement on receiving names, titles, and inherited property. It benefitted all members of his household to offer their assistance, and the chief could always count on their support.

"Proud and haughty behavior, subtle references to one's descent, titles, privileges and one's use of valued lineage names and crests were carried out with pretended indifference to the property amassed" (Spencer and Jennings, 1940: 191). Property was given away to guests, and offered to the deceased members of a clan by throwing objects or food into the fire or simply broken like a copper. This was carried out with an elegant

disdain to indicate a wealth so vast that these losses did not matter. The gift giving was the basis of showing respect to the invited clans of the opposite moiety, and carried with it an act of bonding, which in return required some form of reciprocation at some future time. The acknowledgement and partaking at the feast of the opposite moiety were the quasi-legal structures that strengthened the economic ties and reaffirmed social integration of the group. Hierarchical precepts and rigid protocol offered built-in provisions to control the rivalry.

### **THE NEW TRIBAL HOUSE INVITING**

One of the most important ceremonial invitings of the Tlingit was the one for the newly built tribal house. The house was so implicated with rank and title, so massive in architecture and size and so involved with gigantic expenditures, planning and construction, as well as, representing the symbolic origin of the group with the carved house posts and portal entrance posts, that its importance cannot be overstated. It was built by the Hít s' àtí, with the consensus of his clan, and the chief had to support all the workers while they were building the house. The new house and the associated house posts, the assumption of titles of the deceased chief, all required public validation through the ceremonial inviting. In other words, the new Hít s' àtí legally claimed his inheritance and right to his position as titular head and in doing so raised the esteem of his group by the potlatch.

### **INVITING FOR A HIGH RANKING PERSON'S DEATH RITUAL**

Equally important was the potlatch given for a death of an important person, Yù at kùtik. This was carried out in stages and involved ceremonial rites that concluded, at least a year later, with the mortuary feast and the raising of the mortuary pole (Q'do Ke dí). The corpse would be displayed dressed in his finest ceremonial clothing, and his face painted with the death sign of his moiety; the wake would last four to eight days, and the mourning songs and chants continued day and night. The grieving family and friends cut their hair, blackened their faces, and lamented their loss. At the end of the wake the body was removed through a hole in the roof then cremated. In pre-contact times a slave or slaves could be killed to attend his master in his journey. The bones would be placed in a painted wooden box (Khà dàkèdí). All these formalities were tended to by the opposite moiety. On the eve of the potlatch the formal *smoke feast* was held. All details were carefully planned "to ensure this the aristocracy, and the guardians of the matrilineal group of the

Hít s' àtí had to involve themselves significantly in the planning and execution of the funeral” (Kan, 1989: 166). Condolence speeches were given, “the crying songs” were sung, and some of the deceased’s possessions were distributed along with names and titles. Meanwhile behind the scenes the major shifts the death may have caused in the power structure were being pondered and evaluated.

Forty days later it was assumed the deceased had completed his journey on the spirit trail and had reached the land of the dead. This was a very dangerous journey for the spirit trail was infested with grizzly bears, monsters, and harmful forces. This was the time for the Forty Day Observance. It was a feast of joy and filled with speeches of loving remembrance of the deceased.

A year or two later the mortuary feast was held and the box of ashes was transferred to the back of a totem pole that had been carved for the occasion. In the event of a chief’s death, this marked the final transfer of the inheritance (khà nêx’i) and the end of any moiety conflict that might have arisen during the change in power within the lineage, and confirmed the assumption of the heir to the role of chief. The mortuary potlatch marked the transfer of titles and names and privileges, and was full of praise and homage for the deceased. This was carried out in the same manner as the other types of *invitings*, although conducted for its own specific reason. Unique to this potlatch were the very sad mourning songs by the host and hostess, the people would shed tears and gradually the songs would become happier.

## **THE COMMEMORATIVE INVITING**

The third important ceremonial inviting was the memorial or commemoration feast (Khà dàtíyí), sometimes referred to as the anniversary feast. Some scholars regard the mortuary and memorial feast and their corresponding totem poles as one and the same, except that the memorial pole contains no burial remains. “The totem pole set up at this feast was in memory of the deceased, yet it reflected equal honor on his successor,” (Emmons, 1991: 193). The successor assumed the titles and needed to validate his status and worthiness to bear the crests, titles and names that were a part of the position he had assumed along with the control of the property/wealth of the house. In honor of his ancestor one or more slaves could be killed. All heirlooms and crests were displayed and gifts were given. It was his prerogative to bestow new titles and names to ranking members of his group, and to acknowledge and honor individual names already acquired by other members of the group. Names were

important clan possessions as they indicated family history, rank, and lineage. “Each family had a series of titular names, the use of which was strictly observed. They could be inherited or acquired by the association with some important event or received during a potlatch to elevate the person’s status within the tribe” (Inverarity, 1950: 25). During his life an individual may have several names—his name at birth and a name acquired for a specific deed, such as booty in war. The name, just the word itself, had such significance and meaning that it revealed the family, rank, clan, area and event. Names could be acquired out of the lineage, even from a foreign group as a gift. “All qualities and special privileges belonging to the original owner of the name were acquired by the new owner” (Inverarity, 1950: 24).

Historically these events were quite magnificent. Invitations were sent out months in advance. At the appropriate time the guests would arrive in huge carved canoes with slaves at the paddles and actors in carved masks prepared to enact a clan story. Dancers in costume, song leaders with carved staffs and a chorus dressed as mythological animals chanted to the drum beat as the canoes moved through the water. Others came by land, dressed in their finest blankets and crest hats with their faces painted according to clan and rank, and announced their arrival by singing songs that had been composed for the occasion. The chief’s representatives greeted them at the beach and everyone received a gift. They waited there for their formal invitations to enter the tribal house.

During the ritual, the chief wore a chilkat blanket, a ceremonial robe of woven mountain goat hair and red cedar bark, his crest hat, which might be trimmed with ermine skins that hung to the ground, and he sat in the rear area of the house—considered to be the place of honor—with his wife, who wore a button blanket, abalone shell earrings that could be seen across the Nass River, bone bracelets, and in contact times, gold bracelets that encircled her forearms to her elbows. The ranking nephew would sit either in front or behind the chief, depending on the nature of the feast, while selected members of the chief’s clan also occupied the rear area of the house. Other members of his clan stood in the front at the entrance of the clan house to greet the guests as they arrived and usher them in. The opposite moiety entered singing their entrance song (Ne xae shî), followed by the procession song (Yà na át da’shiyî) as they walked to their places at the feast. The master of ceremonies (Nà’kâni) welcomed them in Gunāh khâ ah etî, the special oratory language with high pitch meaning speaking around the fire, reserved for the *imitings*. The guests were seated with the opposite moieties facing one another in two long rows that extended from the entrance

to the formal area; in the rear of the clan house the chief sat with his family, solemnly watching his guests arrive while appearing indifferent to the vast amounts of wealth he had collected.

Speeches, drumming, and dancing filled the intervals. At the appropriate moment the spirit dance was begun, and as they danced, eagle down scattered from their headbands signifying friendship and welcome. As the food was being served, the chorus, composed of clan sisters, sang directed by the song leader who used the dance staff to beat the tempo on the floor.

Some members of the chief's clan sat quietly, observing with great dignity the proceedings, looking out for a possible breach of etiquette or an accident in protocol. These were considered unforgivable errors. The following day the gift giving (At ta,ùx'ù) would take place with the host's moiety giving the gifts to their opposite moiety. One's own moiety was known as *my friend* and one of the opposite moiety was spoken of as *my outside shell*.

Lavish events were discussed and remembered for years. Great quantities of food, including rare and unusual foods, were important for the event. Food was considered wealth, and lavish quantities were served in huge carved dishes—one was three feet long! Canoes were filled with food to be given away. Affirmation of status required an investment in the form of blankets, boxes of eulachon oil, seaweed, berries, furs, weapons, moose and deer skins, carved vessels and boxes, and above all, the highly prized copper, since all major potlatches required one. They could be given away or broken, and were carried by servants or slaves on these occasions, and on these occasions often beaten as a gong. Coppers (Tinâ) were of small intrinsic value, but were valued as high as 10,000 blankets, and when they changed hands they were valued according to the last amount paid for them. "The potlatch was conducted very seriously replete with drama; elaborate oratory and protocol, amidst the display of vast amounts of property, ceremonial dress, elaborate etiquette and great dignity accompanied by a strong sense of pride and honor" (Spencer and Jennings, 1940: 192).

The ramifications of the potlatch and the raising of the totem pole that accompanied it were not only powerful symbols to the Indians of the Northwest Coast but to the colonial governments as well, for they did not fail to recognize it as one of the major cores of the indigenous culture, along with their lands and language. The land they had taken without title, and the languages could be crushed by the boarding schools, but the threat of the potlatch had to be crushed *in situ*. Canada chose to outlaw it by the Indian Act of 1884, while the Federal and Territorial governments in Alaska did not actually legally ban it, but behaved as if they had, and



severely discouraged the practice. Both governments chose to enforce their policies through the churches and the regional boarding schools. Canada later felt obliged to use direct law enforcement, including fines, prison sentences, and confiscation of potlatch property. Alaska's policy was indirectly strengthened by the action taken by Canada and it was able to continue enforcing its position through the churches and boarding schools without enacting a law. Officially the policy was the complete assimilation of the Indians into Western culture, and the remaining barrier was the potlatch! Presented to the public with less coercive wording it was spoken of as immoral, degrading, spreading disease in group gatherings, pauperizing the people by draining their assets and leading to prostitution in order to pay for the potlatch.

The missionaries accepted the challenge. They chose to come to a remote part of the world, to live in isolation from family and friends, and to relinquish frequent contact with their homeland in order bring Christianity to the natives of Alaska. "They opened stores to obtain the things they needed, and they offered cheap trade goods, medicines, tools and could offer expertise in technology, especially sawmilling. They were opponents of disruptive forces, especially liquor" (Cole and Chaikin, 1990: 55).

Rightly and wrongly the clergy and layworkers helped the Indians understand and accept the new land laws and the resource developments that were occurring and greatly impacting on the indigenous people. As the very foundation of the Indians' existence broke away from under their feet the churches offered them a new way of life, the Christian Way, to begin again. By the turn of the century many Tlingits had become Christians, and were agreeing to abandon the potlatch and destroy their totem poles. Governor Brady considered the potlatch the most abhorrent of all the Indian customs and promised the Tlingit Christians of Sitka that he would expunge the potlatch from Alaska.

"In 1904 native groups gathered in the territorial capital of Sitka for a potlatch, the last of its kinds given by the Sitka Tlingits. Governor Brady hosted the ceremony at which a Tlingit chief came forth to renounce their old customs and present the governor with a raven hat said to be from the eighteenth century" (Cole and Chaikin, 1990: 59). Hoonah and Yakutat refused to yield, and continued to hold potlatches for some time.

Some Indian agents were more sympathetic to the Indians and attempted to ignore the situation when they could. "Feeling that the potlatch was neither Government nor departmental property; but entirely the results of their own labor, and that at least some of goods disposed of went to the needy among them" (Cole and Chaikin, 1990: 64). Many of

the elders said they would rather die than relinquish the potlatch, and reminded the Government that it was like the Fourth of July, Christmas, and anniversary celebrations. As a result, for fifty years the Canadian Tlingits, Haidas, Tsimshians, and Kwakiutl fought many legal battles, including test cases and imprisonment to continue to hold potlatches.

The more rigid Canadian officials, such as Superintendent Scott, continued the battle declaring that “the potlatch are attended by prolonged idleness and a waste of time by ill-advised and wanton giving away of property and by immorality” (Cole and Chaikin, 1990: 133). The more lenient agents were under a great deal of pressure from their superiors and were forced to change, leave the service, or retire. Meanwhile, agents such as DeBeck, who “wanted to make them do what I know is best for them” (Cole and Chaikin, 1990: 179), remained in the system. The Indians and the Colonial governments were at war on the Northwest Coast!

The Kwakiutls were the most conservative and never ceased fighting, partly because their marriage customs and secret societies were also declared illegal. George Hunt, Dr. Boas’ informant, was arrested for illegally participating in a secret society ritual where supposedly human remains were eaten (the corpse was said to have been dead for two years). Willie Seaweed, a famous Kwakiutl carver, continued to make dance masks for potlatches until 1940. Some of his finest masks were made during this period.

The anthropologists, who had done field work among the Northwest Coast groups, actively protested against the Canadian law and the attitude of Alaska. John Swanton argued that since the Indians were not permitted to take part in civic and political activities the potlatch was their only source of pleasure during the long winter months. Peter Macnair, of the Royal British Columbia Museum, wrote, “The law tore away most of the traditional social fabric. It was enforced to persecute native people and not to prosecute the potlatch” (Macnair: 514). Boas wrote, “The results would be havoc as would be created by the destruction of white man’s cheques, drafts and other forms of credit and cause complete demoralization of their business system” (Boas, 1992). Sapier, the director of the Ottawa National Museum bluntly stated, “It seems to me high time that the white men realized that they are not doing the Indian much of a favor by converting them into inferior replicas of themselves” (Sapier, personal correspondence, 1915). Newcumbe feared, “With all their custom birth, marriage, family life and death suddenly destroyed they would become lost, listless and indifferent” (Newcumbe, personal correspondence to Sapier, 1915).

The pressure continued. At a potlatch in Alert Bay the goods were confiscated, and several hundred items, such as coppers, masks and crest hats were sold to George Heye for American Museum of Indian Art-Heye Foundation in New York, the Ottawa National Museum and the Royal Museum of Toronto. The latter two later returned the items to the Indian people.

In the crusade against the potlatch no notice was ever taken of the sordid and tragic practices occurring in the government boarding schools and mission schools, which Alaska continues to ignore, and only Canada now is acknowledging the child abuse and sexual exploitation of both male and female students.

It was not until 1934 when MacKenzie King and his liberal party took office that the sanctions were lifted against the potlatch. The law was finally removed from the statutes in 1951 and Alaska reduced its resistance to the custom about the same time. There was a consequent resurgence of the potlatch and carving of totem poles beginning in 1960.

As a *cause célèbre* of the colonizing powers, probably no custom of the Pacific Northwest Coast Indians was so exploited by ridicule, distortion and misrepresentation in order to demean the solidarity of the Indian society as the *inviting*. As a result of this policy, most existing poles were chopped down or burned.

## **THEORIES ON THE ORIGINS OF TOTEM POLES**

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While the destruction of the totem poles is well documented, the origin, development and historical dating is still debated among scholars. The questions and answers on the origin of the totem poles are often just as enigmatic and mysterious as the highly stylized designs and split form designs of the Kùtìyà (markings). Is their actual origin documented in the maze of explorers' accounts? Did the Indians stealthily conceal the totem poles from them? Are they a fairly recent phenomenon that reached its golden age between 1800 and 1880, and then succumbed to acculturation or are they the development of a very ancient tradition? Perhaps more importantly, are they only relics of the past or are they still a part of a vital cultural heritage?

The answers to these questions rely upon written accounts of early explorers and fur traders, archeological discoveries, the legends of the

Northwest Coast people, and detailed analysis by art historians regarding the progression and development of the art form and the Tlingits' use of tribal art in their modern society

The written history of Alaska begins with the eastward expansion of Russia and the second expedition of Vitus Bering and his discovery of the coast of Alaska in 1741. Bering commanded the *St. Peter* and Chirikov commanded the *St. Paul*. The ships separated during a storm, and Chirikov became the first European to encounter the Tlingits at Salisbury Sound. A reconnaissance group that went out from his ship did not return and a subsequent search party also did not return. No one knows whether the Tlingits killed them or they were swamped and drowned.

As a result of the Vitus Bering expedition Russia claimed most of what is now Alaska by the right of discovery, and began to build an active trade in furs using the Aleuts as both hunters and middlemen in dealing with other native groups. In 1783 the Russian fur trading company began expanding from Kodiak to the mainland in the direction of Southeastern Alaska. This was the beginning of the Russian-Tlingit contact. During the next decade, following their advances in the area, no mention was made of totem poles until they founded a settlement at what is now Sitka, and their records mention encountering free standing poles. In 1802 the Tlingits attacked the fort, burned it, and massacred all but two Russians.

In 1805 Alexander Baranof, general manager of the Russian-American company and Governor of Russian America, returned with the flotilla of 300 bidarkas manned by 800 Aleuts and two small ships on which there were 120 Russian and aided by the guns of warship *Neva* destroyed the Tlingit village and burned the totem poles. (Hullyu, 1970: 126)

The Russian presence was not an isolated phenomenon on the Northwest Coast, and other European nations, lured by the abundance of furs and a possible Northwest Passage, took considerable interest in the area. Spain, which had already established a strong presence in the New World, maintained a wary eye toward foreign activity on the Northwest Coast and continued vigilance was combined with a keen interest in searching for the fabled Northwest Passage. As a result, from 1774 into the first quarter of the nineteenth century, Spain sent eight expeditions from México to explore the Northwest Coast. Six of these expeditions reached Alaska, and well-documented accounts exist of the

voyages. In 1774 the Spanish viceroy in México, Fray Antonio de Bucareli, sent Juan Pérez in command of the frigate *El Santiago* with Francisco Maurelle as pilot to explore the area. They reached Dall Island, discovered what is now Forrester Island, surveyed and described the land of the Kagani Haida, and after a rest in Bucareli Bay returned to México. A year later, two ships were sent from San Blas, México, to continue explorations. Juan Pérez was in command of the *Santiago* and Bruno Hecate was the pilot; the second boat, *La Señora*, was under the command of Don Francisco Bodega y Quadra with Francisco Mourelle as the pilot. In July 1775 six sailors went out in a canoe for water and were ambushed and killed by the Indians. For this reason the point of land was named Punta de los Mártires, or Martyrs' Point. The two boats became separated during a storm. The *Santiago* returned to San Blas, while the *Señora* continued on, reaching what is now Sitka. Slightly north of Sitka they went ashore for water and saw a crudely constructed shelter with a parapet of trees for defense. They planted a cross on shore and took possession in the name of Spain calling it Puerto de los Remedios, now Salisbury Sound. They noted that the river was full of fish. The date was 18 August, and so we can assume this was a fishing campsite and not a village. Maurelle charted Cabo del Engaño (Cape Edgecumbe) and Ensenada de Susto (Sitka Sound). Both names were given by Bodega y Quadra, and were later changed by Captain Cook. They made no mention of totem poles on this journey.

Captain Cook, sailing on a British expedition in 1778, mentions the expertise of the Northwest Coast Indians in working with wood, but did not mention totem poles. He noted sighting the area of Sitka Sound and seeing villages, but continued on northward passing Mount Saint Elias.

In 1779, on orders from the Mexican viceroy, another expedition was sent northward under the command of Ignacio de Arteaga. He sailed with two ships, the *Nuestra Señora del Rosario* under his command and the frigate *Virgen de los Remedios* under the command of Lt. Bodega y Quadra with Ensign Mourelle acting as pilot for the third time. They reached Bucareli Bay on the west side of Prince of Wales Island and explored the area for two months. No mention was made of freestanding totem poles in their detailed accounts on the southern Tlingits. They ventured as far as the Copper River Delta site of the most northern Tlingit Village of Eyak, crossed Prince William Sound and entered into Cook Inlet—the site of modern day Anchorage.

In 1785 Comte de Perouse sailed with two ships, the *Astrolade* and *Boussole* from France, on a scientific expedition around the world. They sighted the coast of Alaska and landed at Lituya Bay where they stayed for six weeks among the Tlingit. La Perouse gives interesting and animated accounts of the Tlingits in this area. He notes they were in possession of iron, copper, hatchets, beads, and what Perouse refers to as carved poles. "While reports of interior house posts are common in the eighteenth century, the large free standing poles were unusual. Only at Dadans on the Queen Charlottes and Lituya Bay are there early reports of such sculptures" (Cole and Darling, 1990: 132). The expedition met with a terrible misfortune when 24 of his crew drowned while taking soundings in an inlet passage.

Captain Dixon, sailing under the British flag in 1787, described Native art and carved figures as a type of hieroglyphics, noting a certain elegance. In the same year an American seaman, John Bartlett, sailing on the *Gustaves Adolphus*, described and sketched a portal entry pole at a Haida village in the Queen Charlotte Islands. He described it as being in the shape of a man's head with the passage through his teeth. He estimated the pole to be forty-five feet high.

Spain was now alarmed by the Perouse voyage, fearing greater French presence in the area and the possibility of a Russian advance southward. They had become aware that the Empress Catherine planned to send an expedition to occupy Nootka Sound to thwart the English presence. In 1788 the Mexican Viceroy sent two ships to the Northwest Coast, the *Princesa* commanded by Alférez Estevan and the *San Carlos* commanded by José Martínez, to meet with the Russians and inform them of the Spanish plans to establish an outpost at Nootka Bay on Vancouver Island. In spite of foreign opposition, Spain established the post and occupied the area from 1789 to 1793. While there they collected excellent data on the Nootka and made many excellent drawings showing the interior of the house with carved house posts. Much of this information is now to be found in the Museo Naval in Madrid, Spain.

The Alejandro Malaspina expedition sailed from Cádiz, Spain on 29 July 1789 to continue the search for the Northwest Passage and explore the Northwest Coast of America, and then follow the route of the Spanish galleons to the Philippines. Malaspina was in command of the flagship *Descubierta* and José Bustamante y Guerra in command of the accompanying vessel *La Atrevida*. This was the fifth Spanish voyage to the Northwest Coast. In late June 1791 they approached Port Mulgrave, now known as Yakutat, and were met by two canoe loads of Tlingit men who

came along the side of the ship singing. “They swayed back and forth, dropped their oars as they clapped bands in rhythm to their songs and led the two ships to Port Mulgrave” (Rey, 1996: 54).

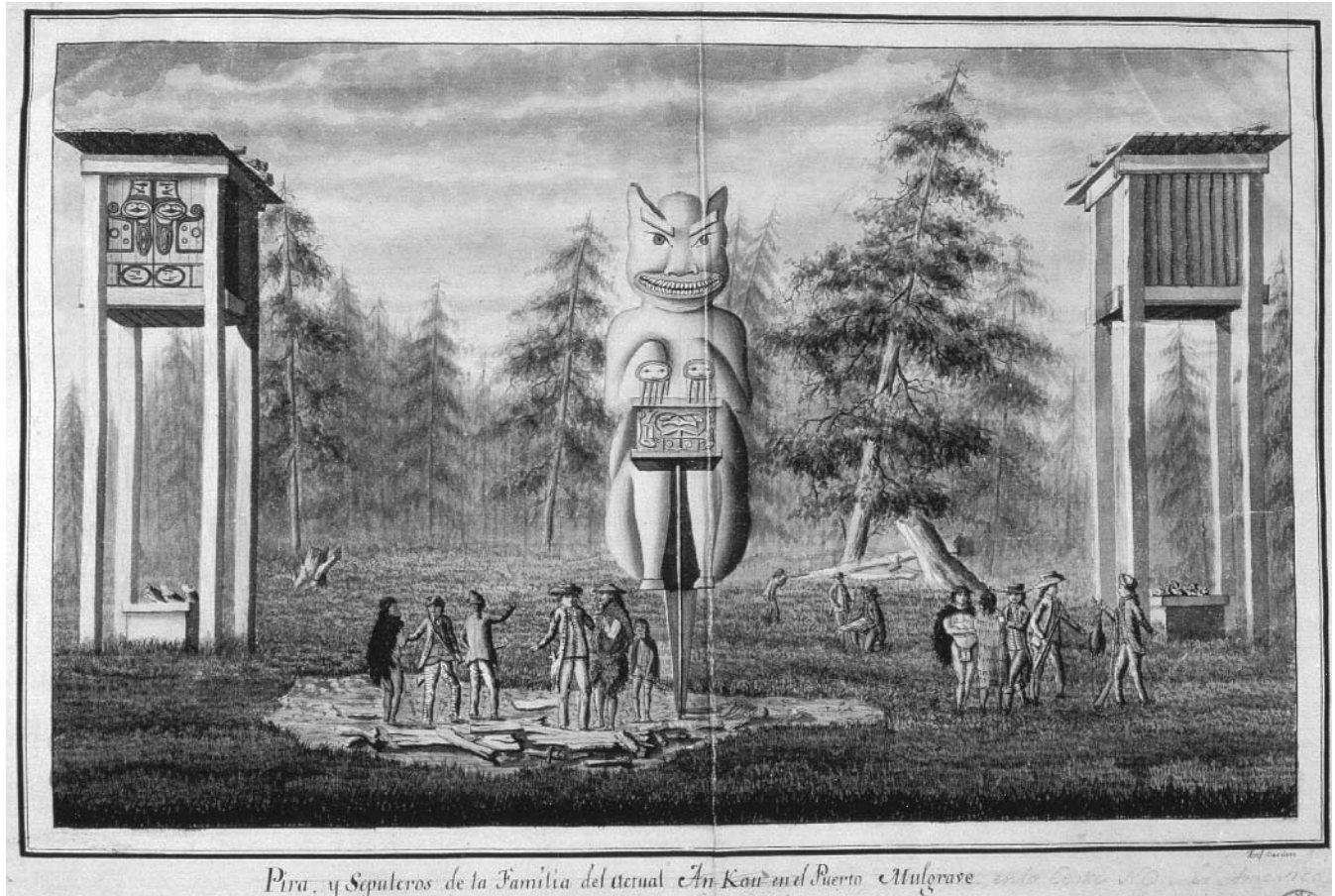
The expedition spent about ten days there, some of them in rather precarious circumstances as there were some difficult moments with the Indians. Several times they were forced to threaten harm to the Indian hostages if peace was not restored. (All foreign ships practiced keeping a few Indians on the ships to be used as hostages should the situation arise.) Always on guard, they did manage to trade, communicate, and make some interesting observations.

The diaries of Tomás de Suria (who was held captive in the chief’s house for a brief time) and Captain Esteban Tova contain many interesting details of Indian life. An entry in Malaspina’s diary dated June 1791 mentions their first encounter with a grave at Puerto Mulgrave.

We came upon the grave of an individual, who the Indians said was killed in their last war. The grave was indicated by a small pole that had been dug in the ground. A woven grass mat covered the grave, and was held down by rocks. The Indians showed great reluctance about getting close to the area, and indicated by signals and signs that we should not go near it either. We took it to mean they were afraid we would interrupt a peaceful sleep. (Malaspina, 1885: 308)

One pauses to wonder if the Spaniards were not mistaken, and it was the new grave of a shaman or some other person about which there was great controversy. A few days later Malaspina, Suria, and Captain Tova came upon another burial site. They were walking along the banks of a river, and found what they described as an old sepulcher. Malaspina gave the following description.

There were posts and beams that encircled a large room covered with a roof probably to offer protection from inclement winters. Four Indians were gathering berries nearby; but they did not intrude upon us. We occupied ourselves a long time studying the burial objects, and desired to take some of them, but feared that the nearby Indians would not look favorably on it. We experienced a strange admiration for the place, and a haunting respect for the people who had created it. Finally we offered pres-



ents to the men, and seeing that they were content with our presents, I took out a box from the old sepulcher as a specimen for the Royal Cabinet in Madrid. It was adorned with sea shells and inside was a smaller box in which were burned bones wrapped in a cloth along with dust. I understood from the Indians that this tomb was for ruling family. (Malaspina, 1885: 313)

José Cardero, the ship's other artist, made a drawing of this. Suria, also, described the site as, "Two large square boxes raised about 2 1/2 yards off the ground and held up by four pillars, also perfectly square. Of these large boxes the one on the left had several designs on the frontispiece, and other signs whose meanings we ignored at the foot of the large boxes (at ground level)" (Rey, 1993: 73).

On 5 July, one of the officers was dismantling the observatory set up on the land when some difficulty arose with the Indians over the theft of ships' maps and navigational instruments. Malaspina had to fire a cannon without the ball to frighten them into returning the articles. Peace was made, and in celebration the Tlingits came out to the ships

From Malaspina's voyage  
 "Viaje Alrededor del Mundo"  
 1791; Yakutat. Drawing by José  
 Cordero. A.M.N. 1726/50 2926.

Courtesy of El Museo Naval, Madrid, Spain



dancing and singing, incorporating the name of the ship *Atrevida* in their songs. Later during the event, the chief, to whom the Spaniards referred to as Ankau, led them to the third sepulcher of his family, and Malaspina wrote of it in detail.

We do not know whether the colossal monster which occupies the foreground is an idol or merely a frightful record of the destructive nature of death. Its height is not less than ten and one half feet. In a casket which lay beneath its claws or hands was a bowl shaped basket, and in it was a European type of hat, shells and a piece of board. The whole thing was of pine wood and the ornaments on the caskets were of shell embedded in the same wood. The coloring was red ochre with the exception of the teeth, claws and the upper part of the sepulchral deposits were baskets, one greater than the other, containing calcified bones. The monster's significance was unknown. It faced eastward and some of the Naturales (natives) that accompanied us said his name was 'Inkitchetch'. Hairs hung from the ends of both high posts, and the boxes were carved with strange symbols. There was a shelf with circular rings above the two lateral posts. We had no doubt of the burning of corpses. Around the figure we saw three or four trenches, the size of a man, covered with stone, boards and coals were obviously used to make a fire. (Malaspina, 1885: 313) (Sketch by José Cardero is seen on pages 53 & 74.)

The *Atrevida* sailed to the nearby Pineda Island leaving the other ship, the *Descubierta*, in Puerto Mulgrave. There Malaspina noted "We saw again the absolutely same kind of sepulchers as in Puerto Mulgrave" (Malaspina, 1885: 319). Dr. de Laguna acknowledged, "I believe that the Bear and Killerwhale grave monuments seen by Malaspina were associated with the T'é'q e'dí. This Tlingit clan was recognized as having originated among the Tongass, and members had moved north to Sitka and eventually to Yakutat. It is reasonable to suppose that the leading aristocrats of that clan were of Tongass descent and that the immigrants had brought to Yakutat the typically Tlingit heraldry and the totem pole" (Emmons, 1991: 195).

During the time of Malaspina's voyage Spain was experiencing international challenges regarding its settlement at Nootka. France was unable to assist Spain because of the impending French revolution, but felt compelled to have at least a presence there. Captain Etienne Marchand sailed from Marseilles in 1791 on the *Solide*, and spent some time near Sitka in 1792, writing some of the finest accounts of the Northwest Coast at that time. "Indeed, Marchand's voyage because of the publicity given it by his four volume work was better known than any of the other expeditions that preceded it" (Hully, 1970: 110).

Captain Vancouver, sailing on a British expedition in the southern area of the Northwest Coast in 1793, reported standing totem poles in front of houses with painted house fronts" (Hully, 1970: 324). Almost a decade later, in 1805, Russian Captain Urey Lesiansky arrived in Sitka on the *Neva* and wrote: "The bodies are burned and the ashes and bones are placed on or in a pillar that has different painted figures on it according to the wealth of the deceased. On taking possession of our new settlement we destroyed, at least, a hundred of them" (Lisiansky, 1914: 200).

The voyage of Juan Pérez in 1774 marks the beginning of the presence of foreign sailing ships in the area. English, French, Russian, American, and Spanish explorers and traders all give detailed accounts of their findings. Many stayed on board ship or stayed near their land-based fortifications. Vancouver, exploring in late 1795, met a hostile reception, and averted trouble by making a hasty retreat. After the Russian occupation and subjugation of the Tlingits in 1805 they continued to be on guard against further attacks. The French ship *Bordelaise*, commanded by Captain de Roquefeuil, was anchored in 1815 on the east side of Prince of Wales Island when it was attacked by the Tlingits. Twenty of his Aleut guides (contracted from the Russians) were killed, and he barely escaped with his life. "The early European explorers and traders on the Northwest Coast of America were united in their testimony as to the warlike character of the Tlingits. They described the natives as courageous, daring, alert and never without their arms in readiness for instant use" (de Laguna, 1972: 101).

The caution of the early explorers is therefore not surprising. They were wary, always on guard, took care never to go far from the shore—and if they did, it was always in groups with ship's cannons well aimed at the landing site—and used hostages when there was trouble. The Russians kept to their forts and left the dangers of Indian contact to their Aleut slaves.

Drucker makes the point that, due to the danger of the hostile Tlingits, the ships' captains did not send crew members far from the ships to explore the area; and furthermore they rarely saw the winter villages (permanent villages) where the totem poles would be standing. He therefore concludes that "Northwest Coast art, and the carving of totem poles themselves antedated all European influences. Presumably the first iron used was obtained from some Asiatic source long before the entry of Europeans or Russians into the North Pacific" (Drucker, 1958: 597).

The ensuing period of early explorations and fur trade introduced new technology, material, and ideas that certainly affected the culture and art. Studies by Wike and Drucker, however, indicate that it was less disruptive to Indian life than previously believed, and was therefore not the disaster it was thought to be. Although the Indians were certainly caught up in the web of international commerce, they did have some control over the situation and could direct the change, inasmuch as they could decide whether or not to accept European goods as they certainly knew how to live without them. Conversely, the ships were halfway around the world and had to depend on the Indians for fresh food. The Europeans had ships laden with cargo that had to be traded in order to obtain the furs and fresh food they wanted, but the Indians had the controlling hand when it came to negotiations. There was always the chance that the Indians would refuse to trade and the ships' captains did not relish the loss of returning their cargos of iron, copper, cloth blankets, and beads to Europe. The Indians were not oblivious to this and were very wily traders, often playing the English, French, Spanish, and Americans against one another. "Although the fur trade clearly brought change to Indian society, it was a change that the Indians directed and therefore their culture remained intact" (Cole and Darling: 119).

The shattering of the Northwest Coast cultures was due to white colonization and settlement that occurred after 1840, causing the entire social order to be engulfed in a multiplicity of overwhelming events. Cataclysmic epidemics eroded old lineage lines, creating a void until new segments developed and encoded the old mores. "Before the arrival of the European in 1774 as many as 200,000 Native Americans inhabited the Northwest Coast culture area, making it one of the most densely populated nonagricultural regions of the world. Within 100 years the aboriginal population had declined by over 80 percent" (Boyd, 1774-1874: 134).

The epidemics came in waves. Smallpox struck first in 1775 and reoccurred in 1836, followed by epidemics of measles and venereal disease. The diseases greatly decimated the population and shattered lineage lines.

The people desperately needed to redefine and confirm their status in order to validate their position within the social group that remained. The United States purchase of Alaska in 1867 was another change that greatly affected the native people. The American occupation and subjugation further disrupted the economic values, and the religious conversion changed the entire dimensions of their once tightly structured society and belief system. They were further victimized and exploited by the federal troops who had been sent to protect the law of the United States government and the newly-arriving settlers. The Tlingits grasped desperately for ways and means to protect their domain and very existence, almost as aliens, in the increasing Western presence. No sooner had they made a tenuous adjustment than they were struck again. The third epidemic, Spanish influenza in 1918-19, killed thousands of native people and was followed by a massive tuberculosis outbreak that began in 1940 and was not fully contained until 1975. Suicides, mental disorders, and alcoholism occurred due to stress.

It was an endless struggle to survive, let alone maintain a cultural identity. The changes in the sculptured totem poles reflect the suffering of the people and their struggle to retain a psychic balance.

**Dancers at Potlatch at Chilkat.**

Photo: Alaska State Library, Winter and Pond  
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