

Potlatch and Kula  
The ethnographic reality behind these concepts

**Potlatch**

1. The Culture
  - a. North West coast cultural area is mostly in Canada
  - b. Whole series of related groups all the way up to Alaska
  - c. Fascinating area
    - i. Agricultural is not possible under primitive conditions
    - ii. Rely on hunting and gathering, very abundant
      1. Salmon
      2. Olachen – oily fish
      3. Sea mammals: whales, seals
      4. Shell fish
    - iii. Unusual that these hunter-gatherers are sedentary.
  - d. Many of the groups are famous in anthropology.
  - e. The names we use are not necessarily the names the people use for themselves
  - f. Most famous is the Kwakiutl
  - g. Had an unusual amount of art
    - i. Many decorated columns that have come to be called totem poles
    - ii. Woven blankets
    - iii. Canoes
    - iv. Painted elaborate murals on their homes
      1. Homes designed for rituals
      2. Wooden A-frame houses
    - v. People started collecting their art, but not always legitimately.
    - vi. Some would be stolen, or tribe members would sell them, even though they had no individual rights to sell the art.

- vii. Many collections are now giving the art back in recent years,  
compelled by law
    - h. Environmentally rich area
    - i. They were not egalitarian
      - i. Had a whole social hierarchy
        - 1. Chiefs
        - 2. Gradations of aristocrats
        - 3. Commoners
        - 4. Slaves
    - j. Many different colonial powers came through this area
      - i. Meeting ground of colonial powers
        - 1. Capt. Cook visited the NW Coast.
        - 2. Lewis and Clark
        - 3. Russians from Bering Straits
        - 4. Spanish from CA
        - 5. Later Americans and Canadians
    - k. Heavily involved in the fur trade
      - i. Sea otter

## 2. The Practice

- a. Extensively observed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century
- b. Gave away
  - i. Native blankets
  - ii. Hudson bay blankets
  - iii. Coppers – natively mined copper hammered into specific shapes.
- c. The Canadian govt. tried to stop this project
  - i. Law stated: You could not have exchange of gifts with 5 or more people in a single place.
  - ii. Groups got around the law

1. They then started walking potlatches would go from house to house, with never more than 5 people in one place at a time.

### 3. Understanding the Potlatch

- a. Mauss and many others have tried to make sense of this
- b. Info comes from a variety of sources
- c. Much of it came from Franz Boas-
  - i. His methods of fieldwork heavily dependant on taking texts
  - ii. Had people write down essays on how they did certain things, like hunting or cooking
  - iii. People feel he didn't give enough credit to his assistants
  - iv. Sometimes he used this method to the detriment of observation
- d. Missionaries were also making observations
- e. Since then, a whole bunch of people took a stab at explaining the potlatch
- f. In 1934 Ruth Benedict, a student of Boas, best seller book called "Patterns of Culture"
  - i. Said cultures are essentially personality types blown up into larger dimensions of a society.
    1. 3 cases:
      - a. Pueblo Indians of American SW were "Apollonian": were restrained, admired harmony
        - i. Opposite was Dionysian: Given to excess
      - b. Dobuans are all paranoid, hugely suspicious
      - c. Kwakiutl = megalomaniacs, did everything to excess, say the potlatch as an example of this
        - i. Have very elaborate ceremonies
- g. Problem: Helen Codere, Benedict's student
  - i. Published an essay "An Amiable Side of Kwakiutl Life" saying that the Kwakiutl were actually very nice and not megalomaniacal
  - ii. Ceremonies and potlatches are not evidence of their everyday behavior and personality.

- iii. People also contradicted assumptions of the Pueblo Indians as being peaceful and reserved.
- h. What are the alternatives?
  - i. It helps environmental adaptation
  - ii. Rich environments with uneven distribution of resources. Potlatch helps spread the wealth. More wealthy groups would throw potlatches and in exchange the receiving groups would acknowledge their inferiority.
  - iii. Problem: That's not actually what the potlatch did. It wasn't about food, mainly. Investigations showed that it didn't distribute wealth or food to those who needed it most
- i. This is one example of a functional explanation
  - i. Looking for ways that practices and institutions in a society fulfill certain needs in a society. Seems intuitively obvious, but not always
  - ii. i.e. witchcraft and warfare
- j. 1920-1950 the Functionalist Anthropology was very popular.
  - i. If you break certain social rules, you may be accused of being a witch
  - ii. In other cultures the people likely of being accused of witchcraft were overly ambitious shamans or medicine men.
  - iii. Thought that witchcraft was a way of maintaining social conventions
  - iv. Warfare is more difficult to explain as advantageous.
    - 1. Increases solidarity of the group (i.e. Hating the Yankee's makes Boston hang together more)
- k. Functionalism is mostly a game: in what way can something be functional. You look at the phenomenon and try and speculate what could have caused it, instead of going to look for its source.
- l. Assume that societies are in some sort of equilibrium. That notion is dubious.

#### 4. Potlatch: A Better Explanation

- a. Helen Codere – why do we assume this system as always been this way?  
This whole area has been in turmoil since the 18<sup>th</sup> century.
- b. The potlatch is not in its original form. Because of all the traders, explorers and colonizers, the modern incarnation of the potlatch is the end point of all these influences
  - i. There was a huge population drop among the native peoples of the NW coast
  - ii. 19<sup>th</sup> century after 1835-37. About an 80% population drop.
  - iii. Each society has a whole series of titles, when the population dropped, there were almost as many titles as there were people.
  - iv. It became very ambiguous who should succeed to the title.
- c. This combined with the fact that as the pop dropped, the people who were left became relatively rich.
  - i. Europeans paid a lot of money for sea otter skins, and these societies were at the heart of this fur trade.
  - ii. Some also started to work in the tanneries and at other jobs
  - iii. They had a lot more wealth to put into potlatches, great multiplication of
- d. Third element: Suppression of warfare.
  - i. People with crappy titles were struggling to keep them, and they had more wealth to throw at the effort and they also no longer had the outlet of warfare for their grudges against others so the potlatch became the arena for that anger.
- e. Other anthropologists added to this:
  - i. Potlatches were relatively rare. Some times only once or twice in a generation
  - ii. The goods for the potlatch were collected and they were not really competitive or unstable, it was more to validate titles:
    1. If there was a transfer of title, a potlatch would be arranged by the new title holder, inviting all the other title holders

from other tribes. The gifts were passed out to the visiting titleholders in order of their title hierarchy. By accepting the gifts, these people were recognizing the new titleholder's claim to his title. And in turn, they were having their own position validated.

2. It was not competitive so much as people were looking for mutual validation.
- f. The potlatches they were observed were not only after these conflating historical factors, but they were also the least typical. They were taking place at trading posts and these areas had the least cultural stability.

## **The Kula Ring**

### 5. The Kula

- a. In New Guinea – Studied by Malinowski
  - i. Tribes exchanging goods over long distances in this group of islands.
  - ii. The goods traded were ceremonial arm shells and necklaces. This was a seeming uneconomic institution, and yet people went to great lengths to engage in the practice.
  - iii. Would sail hundreds of miles in these very well made canoes.
- b. Puzzle: why would people go to these great lengths to trade these valuables?
  - i. The functionalists said that these used the Kula valuables to cover up for real trade. They would actually be trading food while trading the Kula.
  - ii. People found out that that wasn't the case. The Trobriand Islanders had many many forms of trade that went on continuously without the Kula.
  - iii. The Kula permeated many aspects of their lives.
- c. Answer: By participating in this trade you are validating your high status.

- i. If you are lucky enough to be a Kula trading partner, it is a matter of great esteem, making the travel and effort worth it.
  - ii. Each valuable has a unique name and a history.
  - iii. People are competing to get certain valuables.
  - iv. You're only allowed to keep them for a few months at a time.
  - v. The competition is not between the two people who are trading, it is with people who want to take your trading partner away from you.
  - vi. Sometimes people screw each other out of trading partners.
  - vii. The competition is to get as many trading partners.
6. Famous form of exchange in this Trobriand society: Urigubu
  - a. You give yams to the husband of your sister.
  - b. Many yams raised in a special garden.
  - c. People asked why? You come out even if you give and get yams.
    - i. All these exchanges are basically building social ties.
  - d. How does this work?
    - i. What if you have no sisters?
    - ii. What if you have 5 sisters?
  - e. People are aware of this and they all sit down as a group and try and make it work out so that everyone ends up even.
  - f. One exception: The Chief. Since the chief can marry more than one woman he gets much more Urigubu than he gives away.
    - i. This is also a form of tribute to the chief.
  - g. This society was thought to have one or two dozen complex forms of exchange. Until 1970's and 80's when a woman anthropologist went to study the Trobriandians.
    - i. Actually there are many more forms because the women have all sorts of forms of exchange that the male anthropologists never asked about.
  - h. All these exchanges were also involved in the maintenance of social relations.