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The Indian Potlatch

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When this paper was read at our Annual Conference a resolution was passed asking me to have it published. I now, in a way, comply with that request by printing it in the *Interchange*, together with other matter tending to throw light upon the subject.—E.S.

THE Indian Potlatch presents a most difficult problem, not only to solve for the betterment of the race, but even to understand. Indeed no one who has not been born and reared as an Indian among Indians practising it can rightly comprehend what it all means. Though I cannot lay claim to this privilege (!), yet I have had the Potlatch under close observation for sixteen years, and have studied it on the spot, both in theory and practice, as far as one may do so without actually making one.

But while considering myself thus qualified to speak on the subject, I cannot say that I have completely exhausted it, for there are ramifications connected with it which, I must confess, seem to baffle all effort at investigation.

I think it important, however, to lay before you as much as I know concerning this custom, for it seems to me that upon the thorough eradication of its principles from the Indian mind depends, humanly speaking, the permanency of the results of our work. This I hope to make evident as I proceed.

I would first of all say what the Potlatch is not. It is generally described as a custom, but it is not a custom in the ordinary sense of the word, it is much more. We cannot label it as a habit or usage, it is something quite different; it is very far from being a festival, although to the outsider it may appear as such; it is not a religious rite or ceremony, even though there may seem to be a strain of ancestral worship in it; it is neither an amusement nor an entertainment, however much those who practice it may seek to represent it in that light.

Now, if it may not be classed as a custom, practice or habit; if it may not be regarded as a festival, religious rite or ceremony; if it be neither an amusement nor an entertainment, what is it? I reply it is a systematized form of tribal government based upon the united suffrages of the clans.

Potlatch is not merely the making of a feast where a dance is given and presents made to those attending. If that were all it would be harmless enough, but that is only the outward expression of it. The Potlatch is political as far as this life and this world concern the Indian, and the

event seen by the public is in reality an election.

The articles distributed with so much display as free gifts (with the exception of blankets and calico torn up into small strips) are all returnable within a year or two. They are not gifts, as many people imagine, but vote-acknowledgments — a public recognition of the rank or social status of the voter (who records his vote by his presence) by the Potlatcher who is a candidate for some position, favor or honor in his clan.

But before proceeding further it is necessary to offer some information as to the constitution of Indian society. You are all aware that it consists of three classes—the nobility, gentry, and common people. These are organized into families (or houses), clan-sections, clans, tribes (communities or villages), and confederacies.

A *family* or *house* is a portion or branch of a clan-section. It has its own crest and sub-chief, subordinate to the clan totem and clan-sectional chief, and of itself or in combination with other kindred families forms a complete clan-section.

A *clan-section* is a company of one or more families having the same totem and totemic name, and forming one division of a tribe.

A *clan* is the aggregate of kindred clan-sections having the same totem and totemic name.

A *tribe* is a community of two or more different clan-sections residing in one place bearing a common territorial name, and

governed by the chiefs of the clan-sections in council assembled.

A *confederacy* is an alliance of several tribes for offensive and defensive purposes, and is governed by the united suffrages of the clans in public assembled.

The principal clans of the Nishga Confederacy are the Lak-Gibu (*Lupians*), the Ganhada (*Ranians*), the Lak-Shkik (*Aquilians*), and the Gishgahas (*Cannabians*).

Each tribe on the Naas is composed of a clan-section from each of the above-named clans, so that for the transaction of business (which is chiefly dynastic) in any tribe on the river, it is necessary to summon the other tribes and thus bring together all the clan-sections of each clan in public assembly. And this is the *raison d'etre* of the Potlatch.

Indian affairs are, as I have said, principally dynastic, that is, they have to do with hereditary rights and titles, successions to chieftainships among the chiefs, to a higher social standing among the gentry, and to the "going up one" in the family circle among the common people, for everyone is somebody's junior, and wants to become somebody's senior.

These successions often carry with them substantial emoluments in the way of hunting and fishing rights over certain lands and streams, and are not infrequently a bone of serious contention, sometimes ending in bloodshed.

Then in each clan-section there are many vacant places, filled by men of renown in the good old times when the Indians were

numerous, but now retaining only the name. To fill these vacant places and revive the old names is the one ambition of the surviving members of the clan-section families, and this, like other successions, can only be accomplished by obtaining the united assent of the clans.

Thus there is only one topic of interest in life to these people, only one object for which to live and only one scope for their natural activity, viz., the glorification of self. In each Indian town you will find the clan-sections living together on apparently very good terms, but in reality holding each other down or staving each other off with all the cunning imaginable. Jealousy of one another is the characteristic feature of Indian life, and so socialistic are their ideas that no individual dare improve his condition above the general average, while at the same time each clan-section is consumed with a burning desire to make a better show than any other.

You are all of course aware that members of the same clan may not intermarry. Such a thing, according to Indian ideas, would be an abomination. But it may not have become evident to all of you that notwithstanding this law the majority of Indian marriages are very close as to family affinity. In most families I find it has been the custom of the men for generations to select their wives from one particular clan-section of another but still the same clan, because of equality in rank or from other social considerations. And this may be one reason why the Indians do not increase.

Marriage never unites the man and the woman ; from first to last the parties belong to different clans, and maintain respectively their own social positions. Children are counted in on the mother's side as her elder brother's family, belonging, of course, to her clan. And all rights, titles and property descend from uncle to nephew or niece, and not from father to son. The idea of a widow laying claim to her late husband's property or a son to his father's, would be absurd to the Indian mind. But it is very hard to suppress nature, especially when it is human ; for, in spite of all, the paternal or filial instinct crops out at times and sets up serious complications in this social machinery.

No better description could be given of the Indian people than that supplied by the name they give themselves—*Alu-gigiat*. Truly they are a *Public-people*, for they have no private business, no private rights and no domestic privacy. Every right is *holden* (that is the meaning of the word YUQU, which the White-man, judging from outward appearance, calls Potlatch, (*i.e.*, *giving*)) and every matter regulated by a public manifestation of assent on the part of the united clans. And this public expression of assent, made by the clans and acknowledged by the individual is what we call Potlatch. Even babies are legitimized, so to speak, in this way, the naming of children recorded, and their admission to tribal privileges signaled by the same means.

You will observe, therefore, that according to the constitution of the tribes and the distribution of clans, Potlatch, or a system analogous to it, is a necessity, from an Indian point of view, in order to preserve the unity, distinctions and traditions of the race; for one clan-section may not assent to an act except in concert with the other sections; if it do, the act in question is only recognized within that section. And if an individual assumes any right to which he may be entitled, without a public manifestation of assent on the part of the clans, he finds himself in the position of a miner who stakes off a claim without recording it; the next individual in the line of succession may, on going through the usual formalities, jump the other's claim. Sometimes the rightful claimant of a privilege is too poor to call the clans together for their assent, in which case some one else of kin who is better off asserts a counter claim, sends out a runner, calls the clans, and so takes the other's place. When you hear of Indians killing each other, or attempting to do so, it is because of some such reason as this. There lies extant in this system an unlimited possibility of serious trouble, but it is not to be found in the mere giving of a feast or dance, nor even in the distribution and destruction of property, nor in the eating of dog or human flesh; the evil and the roots lie deeper and quite apart from these things.

You will further notice that, although not an idol itself, the Potlatch puts all the idols of heathendom in the shade, for not only

does it swallow up the sustenance of an entire community but the community itself, and only says "Shimoigit!" (Hail, chief!) in return. It consumes five clear months out of every twelve in simply gorging, sleeping and dancing; the most that any of its votaries can earn is all too little for it; the money that ought to be spent upon the necessaries of life is squandered on this idol, which is feted and glutted to its heart's content, while the poor, the aged, the feeble and the sick lie in poverty, filth and rags—dying for want of a little nourishment.

It is a pitiable sight to behold sick folk, invalids, delicate children and babies traveling to and fro over fifty miles of waste ice and snow, the thermometer perhaps below zero at the time, for the sole purpose of paying and receiving homage before this idol. I have seen dying persons and children suffering from measles hauled about the country in mid-winter on sleds, camping out in the snow at night, in order to be present, or that those on whose tender mercies they were dependent might be present at potlatch; and I have seen them taken back from potlatch in their coffins.

