

Potlatching For Dollars:

Myth As Reality And Reality Does Not Count

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Preface to Reader

I have been given a brief ethnographic description of a small Northern California culture (*SAPHEDSONHIL*) that an anthropologist friend of mine just recently discovered. His discovery of these people is a significant find, if for no other reason than they appear to still possess a ceremonial ritual long thought to have been wiped out years ago when reason was discovered. It is called Potlatching for Dollars and represents the most extreme development of this ceremony that I can cull from the Anthropological literature. For the uninitiated reader I have decided to explain, in the briefest manner, the operation of the potlatch. In this way I believe that a truer comprehension can be drawn between the *SAPHEDSONHIL* and other potlatching societies.

Potlatching was associated with the *Kwakiutl*, *Bella Coola* and *Coast Salish* Native American cultures of the northwest coast of the United States and Canada. Its purported function (it was outlawed by the Canadian Government in the 1950's as being wasteful) was to create a system whereby prospective high status lineage leaders challenged one another for scarce honorific titles in their status system. In order to demonstrate one's "right" to the

The anthropological perspective provides a variety of insights into the human condition throughout the world. An article in the *NACIREMA* (Miner, 1963), pointed out the strange customs and practices of an exotic group here in North America, while the anthropological perspective has been applied to a variety of other "strange" customs such as "rites of passage" ritual and cannibalism to name but two. In anthropology the participants' perspective is stressed and we attempt to show the rationality behind the so-called "exotic." I have, however, recently been exposed to a small population of upwardly mobile specialists who have put their transcendental logic aside and

scarce status position, a potlatcher would accumulate enormous wealth, which he would then destroy in the presence of another potlatcher and before a *Council of Elders*. The conspicuous consumption would demonstrate inherent superiority over his opposition and validate his claim that he could influence the gods and protect his more secular "underlings." The Council would then promote the winning potlatcher to the fixed high status position, while the loser was deemed unworthy and sometimes made a slave to the winner.

As the potlatch became more and more influenced by Anglo values, more and more alterations in the pristine potlatch ceremony occurred. This resulted in inflated and fraudulent wealth being consumed. The "white-man's" banking habits were put to use (bad "checks") and inflated (even non-existent) descriptions of a potlatcher's worth were relied upon as a measurement of one's value. This of course was not, therefore, a true value of one's worth but of only a mythical nature. These people were, after all, inclined towards the practical; but it was all they had, so they used it. This system finally collapsed from within, when it lost its sacred and utilitarian purposes (legitimacy), and its believers could see nothing but the bizarre in their actions.

replaced it with one which works but does not make sense. The anthropologist, Edward Tylor referred to this as the "rationality of stupid minds" (Tylor, 1898, p. 12). This has been described to me as "potlatching for dollars" by my informants.

"Potlatching for dollars" is, as I understand it, an institutionalized form of behavior whereby open status positions are, as in all potlatching situations, scarce. In this system the status is not the primary reason for the subsequent bizarre behavior. Instead it is the dollars associated with these status positions which is its primary *raison d'etre*. Thus, I cannot accept that this is a General Social System, but must argue that it is part of a

General Economic System (Benedict, 1937, p. 164), whereby one individual potlatches another so as to win the coveted dollars. Now, in this situation a potlatcher is not allowed to buy favors in a direct display of dollars (thereby displaying actual wealth). Instead the potlatchers must use symbolic wealth; they must demonstrate that they have travelled far and wide and contacted other specialists so as to demonstrate good intention (here we have an example of *symbolic* worth). In addition, great merit is placed upon the notion that if they can write what people can read, this should constitute a potlatcher's plus. It is not important to distinguish whether one practices one's profession in a superior fashion relevant to another prospective potlatcher, for this has become an indistinguishable trait (primarily because they don't know how to measure what it is that makes a potlatcher good or bad). Accordingly these people have come up with a unique solution which I will now describe in some detail.

Each potlatcher is forced to give information which directly relates to each potlatcher's concept of self (Goffman, 1968). Because each potlatcher understands that *it isn't what is, but what is thought to be*, that govern others' perceptions of one's self, each potlatcher creates an image of one's self through concrete facts which are also meaningless. It is crucial to understand that this is an important part of the potlatching process. To win at potlatching you must impress the significant others (fellow lineage members and the *Clairvoyants*) by creating myths about one's self (its image that counts and not substance) which other people can believe. This verifies Carl Jung's notion that "myth is lived" by primitive peoples (Jung, 1962, p. 147), for once these people have created the myth it then becomes the phenomenological reality to which all other people must respond. Making this more intriguing for the outsider to understand is the fact that lineage members are advisors to this behavior, but once the myth has been created these lineage members then lose their memory, and of all previous knowledge of the potlatchers' true characteristics. Thus, they are unable to distinguish the "truth" about the potlatcher's existential significance as they once knew him; in sum, they cannot distinguish myth from reality and hence myth becomes reality and reality myth. They then, acting rationally, base their perceptions on this new reality which is a mythical one.¹

Being highly specialized in their knowledge, and in the application of this knowledge, these people, in an attempt to assure themselves of the purity of

the potlatcher, have created *Councils of Elders and Not-So-Elders* to evaluate each potlatcher's motivations and actions (based as they are on each potlatcher's own self-descriptive folk-myth), which is a deduction of motivation from action. Lineage members, including brothers and sisters and non-brothers and non-sisters, who know the life habits of each potlatcher as mythically stated, then meet under the aegis of the LITTLE CHIEF. In these meetings each potlatcher's story is told and re-told, and the magic of science is used to discover the truth of each potlatcher's myth. The *Council of Lineage Elders and Not-So-Elders* then throw bones to see how they will fall, which then gives them divine backing in their conclusions. The gods must be benevolent because almost all candidates proceed to the next level of assessment, although I was told of one man who, having been killed by an incensed bison a number of years ago, was in fact (and after much deliberation) denied the right to proceed as a potlatcher.

The next level of scrutiny is at the level of the *Clan*, wherein a *Council of Clan Elders and Not-so-Elders* examine each potlatcher's scratches-on-the-paper-myth-as-reality statements. More bones are cast and further magical incantations are sung by these specialist-specialists. Because the clan organization is more complex, potlatchers are not allowed to be seen or heard by Council members. This is due, I believe, to the distinct possibility that secret magic ritual is used. In any case, if any potlatcher is seen in these religious surroundings, or if any potlatcher communes with a Council member, immediate sacred pollution occurs and the religious process is violated and disrupted. What I have been told by an informant is that candidates actually have advocates on this Council but the illusion of reliance-upon-magical-incantations must be upheld at all costs . . . else the magic will be weakened.

The *Council of Clans* is trying to pass prospective potlatchers up to the next level but must eliminate some claimants as pretenders. This they do by scrutinizing the scratches-on-the-paper-myths-as-reality statements of the claimants, converse for lengthy periods of time, whisper among themselves, talk to deaf specialists and finally pass most everyone along. I believe that the important factor here is that everyone is related consanguinally, for one sagacious informant told me: "All things considered, blood is thicker than some other things." I took this to mean that if things were not as they were, they would be different, which once again reaffirmed *Schneider's Law*, as Law (Schneider, Law, 1973, p. 16).

The prospective potlatcher's life histories and mythical histories (which are compiled in enormous bundles of wood pulp) are then passed onto the *Tribal Council of Elders and Not-so-Elders* who, now twice removed from reality (and thus two steps closer to myth as reality), must now solely rely upon the objective findings of the science of scapulomancy. This is a necessary requirement dictated by the *Law of Scarcity* (Smith, 1776), which is applied to all claimants before they can be considered as eligible for ascendancy. The principle of scarcity does not apply to Peter's Principle (a shaman who never would have made it in this system, principally because he lived in the world of reality and not myth) but is invoked as the *raison d'être* for eliminating the less qualified prospective potlatchers from the most coveted status positions. Because not all potlatchers can ascend to the potlatchers paradise, another precise method (standard deviations) is applied to discern the pretender (reality-believer) from the genuine (myth-maker) candidate.²

The myth which has been made up by each candidate is now scrutinized in detail and the best myths are accorded high marks while the less mystical candidates are laughed at and ridiculed by the *Tribal Council*. Those who fail are told to make better myths next time by making them longer. This seems to indicate that these people are easily bored by short stories and prefer long and intricate myths. This is a humiliating experience for potlatchers who fail and they usually retreat into a shocked state of paranoia. They eventually learn how to create proper myths, and are then passed on into the potlatcher's paradise by the *Council of Clairvoyants*, a council headed by the *Tribal Chief*.

The *Council of Clairvoyants* is not an official organization (indeed, it is officially *not an organization*) but can only be understood as an informal mythical non-organization. It is composed of "good old boys" who sit around the chief's kitchen. Their principal means of ascertaining the true potlatcher from the pretender is to exchange gossip, evaluate the myths as reality and to ascend the sacred Redwood Tree from whence they cast the collected works of the claimant potlatchers to the four winds. Those myths closest to the base of the tree are deemed sacred and those farthest from the base as polluted. While I was told that this was the application of pure science (those myths which weighed the most fell most vertically to the earth, while those lighter in weight were affected by the winds, and thus had a horizontally influenced

descent away from the tree's base), I was not completely convinced, for I noticed that those myths that had the smell of perfume about them were often times placed in close proximity to the tree's roots by the *Council of Clairvoyants*. I was informed that this was indeed a possibility, but that this only reflected past defects in olfactory functions, and that such behavior was reflective of a new matrilineal emphasis in the kinship institutions of these people. The *Council of Clairvoyants* then informed me that there was no such council, which I of course already knew to be only a myth. . . but this confused me until my informant gave me a knowing wink, and then I recalled that, for these people, myth is reality.

I do not pretend to know all there is about this potlatching ritual, but my informants insist that the information they gave me is accurate and complete. I cannot truly believe them, however, because it still doesn't make sense to me. Despite my feelings of disbelief I feel duty-bound to convey this description to the anthropological community in hopes that someone else has heard of similar behavior.

Since gathering this description of these people's bizarre behavior, I have consulted the Human Relations Area File (HRAF), wherein there is catalogued over 3,000 different cultures, in order to ascertain whether or not any other cultures exhibit such behavior. As of the writing of this paper I must admit to the distinct possibility that there is nothing else to which a comparison can be drawn. I am afraid that this might necessitate some radical rethinking by anthropologists regarding the time honored law that, "all people are sapient." We clearly have an exception to that rule when it is applied to these people.³

Bibliography

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¹ In doing so I might point out that they have finally resolved the Cartesian dilemma of the dichotomy of mind and matter by making that dichotomy simply a matter of mind. Thus the syllogism is as follows:

I. A. Myth is not reality,
and

B. Mind does not matter,
therefore,

II. C. Myth is reality,
and

D. Mind is matter,
and

III. E. Introspection is impossible and
can't be measured anyway.

(This reasoning was explained to me by one of the specialist-specialists whose sole function is to think these things out to their logical dead-ends.)

²Perhaps a brief explanation should be included here regarding the meaning of *standard deviation*. *Standard deviation* refers to deviating from the standard.

³Anthropological footnote: Despite their behavior I should like to stress that I love these silly people, who are not really dangerous, and must admit to the fact that they treated me with kindness and tolerance while I lived amongst them.