

Acts of Unlimited Greed in Modern Society: Perverted Forms of Kwakiutl Custom of Potlatches

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POTLATCH, A CEREMONIAL DISPLAY OF WEALTH AND STATUS

ABSTRACT The Kwakiutl Indians, the aboriginal inhabitants of the Northwest Pacific coast region, are better known in the ethnographic analysis of native cultures world over, for their peculiar life style, known as 'Potlatch'. It refers to a ceremony in which, one chief and his followers arranges a grand feast and give away goods to a rival chief and his followers. Ruth Benedict who made this custom famous, through her book *Patterns of Culture*, argued that it was caused by an obsessive status hunger of the Kwakiutl chiefs and conceived it as an unabashed megalomania. However, a closer anthropological analysis of the custom revealed that it had its own economic and social functions and also served as an adaptive mechanism to the changing eco-cultural conditions. Looking at the custom in its evolutionary perspective, the present paper identifies its existence in the contemporary society in general, and in the Indian context in particular, and views the acts of greed in contemporary society, as perverted expressions of the native potlatches.

The Kwakiutl Indians, the aboriginal inhabitants of the North-West Pacific coast region, are better known in the ethnographic analysis of native cultures, world over, for their peculiar life style, known as 'Potlatch'. Ruth Benedict who made this custom famous, through her book, *Patterns of Culture*, argued that it was caused by an obsessive status hunger of the Kwakiutl chiefs. Finding it difficult to explain such lifestyle in terms of practical and mundane factors, she conceived it as an unabashed megalomania. However, a closer anthropological analysis of the custom revealed that it was not as simple as it had been conceived initially and the custom had its own economic and social functions and also served as an adaptive mechanism to the changing eco-cultural conditions. The present paper looks into the custom of potlatch, as practised by the Kwakiutl Indians, analyses its differential manifestations in evolutionary perspective, and views the acts of greed in contemporary society, as perverted expressions of the native potlatches.

In the Chinook Jargon, a widely used trade language of the north Pacific coast, the term 'potlatch' simply means 'giving'. According to Miller, it is a ceremonial feast, at which, a chief gives away goods to another chief in order to gain prestige (1979: 371). Keesing conceives potlatch as a feast marked by distribution and destruction of valuables, as a demonstration of wealth and status (1975: 516). Hardesty understands it as a ritual in which valuables are given away or destroyed in exchange for prestige (1977: 298). Murphy looks at potlatch as a ceremonial feasting and gift-giving between rival groups to validate rank (1989: 260). All these definitions on potlatch highlight the aspects of ceremonial feasting, distribution, destruction, and demonstration of wealth, and gaining, establishing, or validating one's rank, status, and prestige. Potlatch also involved a conspicuous consumption and a conspicuous waste.

The Kwakiutl Indians used to live in villages close to the sea-shore, amidst the cedar and fir rain forests. The main sources of their livelihood came from hunting and fishing. Attracting the traders were the carved tree-trunks along the beach, conceived by early ethnographers like Franz Boas, as 'totem poles'. The carvings symbolised the ancestral titles to which the village chiefs laid claim. For them, wealth constituted not merely the economic goods but even more characteristically, the prerogatives such as songs, myths, names of chiefs' house-posts, of their dogs, of their canoes, and even the valued privileges such as, to tie a dancer to a post, or to bring in tallow for the dancers to rub on their faces, etc., which obviously had no economic functions but passed down in family lines.

The Kwakiutl Indians seem to be constantly

preoccupied in the game of validating and exercising these prerogatives and titles that could be acquired from one's forebears, or by gift or by marriage. Life was a ladder for them, the rungs symbolising the titular names with the owned prerogatives vested in them, each new step upwards on the ladder calling for the distribution of great amounts of wealth. Each individual, according to one's means, constantly vied with all others to outdo them in distributions of property. The boy who had just received his first gift of property selects another youth, for offering a gift, who could not refuse without admitting defeat at the outset. He, in turn, would have to repay in double the original gift including the interest in time, lest he was shamed and demoted while the rival's prestige correspondingly increased. The contest begun thus continued throughout life. The successful ones would continue to increase the amount of property, vying with increasingly formidable rivals. Further, the Kwakiutl chief was always insecure about his status but never satisfied with the respect he received from his followers and from the neighbouring chiefs. In addition, many contenders would vie with him for the ancestral titles and for recognition as chief. So, there was also a need for every chief to justify and validate one's chiefly pretensions. All these were made possible through potlatches, which served the purpose of validating one's title to a particular status and his exalted position over his rival. During the potlatch ceremony, large quantities of valuable gifts were given to the rival guests who vowed, in turn to hold a return potlatch by giving even larger quantities of valuable gifts to prove his own superior status over his former host.

The preparation for potlatches started long before the actual event. Fresh and dried fish, fish oil, berries, animal skins, blankets and other valuables were accumulated for the great event. Invitations were despatched to the villages of the guests. At the potlatch, the guests were seated, in the order of precedence, corresponding to their respective ranks. While the guests gorged themselves on salmon and wild berries, the masked beaver dancers entertained them. Meanwhile, the piles of wealth to be given away to the hosts were neatly arranged and displayed. The host

would boast of his wealth and comment derisively on the poverty of his rivals. The guest and his followers would vow to get even. At some potlatches, blankets and other valuables were destroyed. Sometimes an entire house became a potlatch offering, by burning down his own house.

Thus, the success at a potlatch was achieved either by shaming one's rival by presenting with more property than one could return with the required interest, or by destroying the property. In both cases, the offering implied a return, the difference being that the givers' wealth was augmented in the first case while the giver was stripped oneself of one's goods in the second case. The rival feast givers judged each other for approval by the amount of food given and the valuable gifts offered. The feast was considered a success, only when the guests could eat until they were stupefied, rushed into the bushes, stuck their fingers down their throats, vomited and came back for more.

In great potlatches, which would turn out to be the contests of demolition, the hosts who sat near the fire of destruction, had to lie unmoved and exhibit the most complete indifference to the threatened destruction, in order to save themselves from shame. If the 'oil feast' surpassed that of the guest chief, he should leave the house and start preparing for a return feast that would outstrip that of his rival. If it did not, he would heap insults upon his rival host, who would look for further means to establish his own greatness. Thus, the potlatch stimulated a ceaseless flow of prestige and valuables moving in opposite directions. Even if a chief managed to get the better of his rivals in one place, he still had to confront his adversaries in another.

At the potlatch, the host chief would boast of himself with hymns of self glorification, motivated around their will to superiority, involving ridicule and scorn, heaping publicly upon their own opponents who were also their invited guests. These resemble the following:

*I am the great chief who makes ashamed.
I am the only great tree, I the chief! You are
my subordinate, tribes.
I am the first to give you property, tribes; I
am your Eagle, tribes!
I am great Only One, and I am smoke Owner,*

*and I am Great Inviter.
These are the names, which I obtained as
marriage gifts
Therefore, I feel like laughing
Only the chief my ancestor gave away prop-
erty in a great feast,
And all the rest can only try to imitate me.
I search among all the invited chiefs for
greatness like mine.
I cannot find one chief among the guests.
They never return feasts, the orphans, poor
people, chiefs of the tribes!
They disgrace themselves.*

The host chief would also sing songs, hold-
ing the guests up to contempt:
*Wa, out of the way, turn your faces that I
may give way to my anger
They only pretend; they only sell one copper
again and again.
Ah, do not ask for mercy, I only laugh at him
I am the great chief who vanquishes.
I am the great chief who makes people
ashamed.*

His followers singing songs of praise for their
chief, warn the rivalries:

*Bring your Counter of Property, tribes,
That he may try in vain to count the property
That is to be given by the great copper maker,
the chief.
Go on, raise the unattainable potlatch-pole,
For this is the only thick tree, the only thick
root of the tribes.
Now our chief will become angry in the
house,
He will perform the dance of anger.*

POTLATCH AS RECIPROCITY, REDISTRIBUTION AND RANKING

Ruth Benedict, in her cultural configuration-
ist approach, conceived the occurrence of pot-
latch as nothing but a craving for prestige by
obsessive status-hungry men, manifested in an
unabashed megalomaniac display, in line with
the Dionysian life style of the North-west Coast
tribes. She found it wanting to explain, in terms
of practical and mundane factors. However, a
deeper look at the custom has lead the Anthro-
pologists, among whom Marvin Harris is in the
forefront, to understand that potlatch is an adap-

tive mechanism within the existing economic and
ecological conditions and is subjected to evolu-
tionary changes along with changes in condi-
tions. Stripped down to its elementary core, ex-
cept for its destructive aspects, Harris (1984: 98-
104) considers potlatch as a competitive feast-
ing and a form of redistributive and a nearly
universal mechanism for assuring the produc-
tion and distribution of wealth among peoples
who have not yet fully acquired a ruling class.

As for the destructive aspects of the potlatch,
Harris conceives it only as a latter development,
or as a result of the native contacts with the
Whites, leading to the drastic fall in the popula-
tion of the natives due to epidemics, and the ex-
cess flow of wealth in to the potlatch network.
In other words, the observed forms of potlatches
were likely to have been only the aberrant ver-
sions of the original potlatches, resulting out of
the unsolicited contacts with the modern cultures
in the form of the White intruders. For the na-
tives, the destructive element of the potlatch,
along with enhancing the status of the chiefs,
was also to serve as a demonstration of their
wealth, which was excessively available with
them so that it would attract more people to their
empty villages. For Harris, these were only the
signs of a dying culture struggling to adapt them-
selves to a new set of political and economic
conditions.

Looking at competitive feasting itself from
the evolutionary perspective, Harris provides the
example of the big man of the Melanesian tribes
as a worker-entrepreneur, who himself works
hard along with his own people and produces
more food and valuables for redistribution, as a
result of his craving for status. Thus, the big men
are usually hard working, more worrisome, and
less consuming than anyone, all these, only to
enhance their prestige. For Harris, the Kwakiutl
chiefs are, in fact, conceived as semi-hereditary
and an offshoot in the evolutionary line, from
the impoverished, worker-entrepreneur big man
of the Melanesian society.

Going further down, in the evolutionary line,
what is discerned is not the redistributive mecha-
nism, aimed at increased production and distri-
bution, but an economic exchange of reciproc-
ity with subsistence production, adapted by hunt-
ers and gatherers like the Eskimo and Bushman,

whose survival, according to Harris, depends entirely on the vigour of natural resources. In such societies, over-working is an offence and the highest prestige falls to the quietly dependable hunter who never boasts or makes a hint of giving, when he shares his game with others. Further, in their lifestyle, the most successful must be the least conspicuous. In a truly egalitarian society, it is rude even to be openly grateful for the receipt of material goods or services lest one is led to feel superior of one's success and generosity.

Harris asserts that competitive feasting and other forms of redistribution replacing the reciprocal exchange system, resulted, only when there was a certainty that over-working was not going to inflict an irreversible damage to the carrying capacity of one's habitat. This also seems to have coincided with the beginning of domesticating plants and animals except in cases of abundant availability of natural resources, as in the case of Kwakiutl Indians. Moreover, while redistribution led to the intensive exploitation of available resources and increased production, and thereby taking care of the lean months and of the resource-crunch people on certain periods, it also became a tool in the hands of the 'prestige-hungry' and 'over-zealous' producers to enhance their status and wealth and also expand their political base. Thus, the potlatch was at once having a social, political and economic functions, and also a source of excitement for the people of the area.

The big men of Melanesian tribes or the Kwakiutl chiefs of the North-west Pacific Coast gather together the results of the productive effort of many individuals and then redistribute the same in different quantities to a different set of people. The difference had been that the former worked harder and consumed less, while the latter mainly performed the entrepreneurial and managerial functions, leaving the hardest work to his followers. Murphy asserts that asymmetry in gift giving produces asymmetry in social rank, with the giver taking his return in prestige, and generosity yielding to selfish and even vengeful act (1989: 158). Harris stretches the evolutionary line further up to the state-level hereditary kings who do little in the accumulation of property but keep the most and the best of

everything for themselves. This is extended further to the imperial level divine-right rulers, with their conspicuous palaces and mega monuments, and validating their right to hereditary privileges, not by potlatches but by force of arms.

POTLATCHES IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES

In the capitalistic modern society, with greater individual freedom, the tendency for accumulation and exploitation reaches its peak, at the expense of the pauperised and powerless working commoners, resulting into different forms of more destructive and dangerous potlatches than that of the native Indians of the North-west Pacific Coast.

At the global level, the United States dictating terms to the United Nations, and to the whole world, could only be a kind of modern potlatch if not anything else, in establishing its all powerful dominance. While the United States holds 6,000 and odd nuclear weapons, for nothing but to serve its megalomaniac supremacy, it wants other nations to sign the NPT and CTBT, assuming the mantle of global-inspector for ensuring peace in the world. Again, is not the display of the military might, along with the cultural pageants of every nation on its national day, a kind of modern potlatch? What about the Space Race if not a kind of potlatch on a cosmic scale? (Beattie, 1987: 275). Is not the once-in-four-year mega event Olympics, with its 11,000 athletes from 199 countries vying for about 1,000 medals including 300 gold in 28 events on display in its millennial version, amidst poverty, misery, and militancy in different parts of the world, a kind of modern potlatch? In a pool of medals, even a bronze could bring as much cheers to the one billion strong Indian nationals, as the scores of prize money to the winner. Monetary incentives are more valued than the honours and titles such achievements command, what not with the kind of increasing match-fixers and doping athletes, amidst suffering millions, world over. Are not even the election carnivals, religious processions, grand festivities and pilgrimages, different forms of the modern potlatches?

Looking at the individual level, in 1997, Bill Gates, in his early forties, with the value of his

24 percent stake in the Microsoft, which was started in 1975, reaching a thrilling 101,000 crore, was said to be the richest man on the planet, and so, the most powerful according to some. In its hey days, his earning seems to have been 30 million dollars, every 24 hours. A look at the 25 India's top-earning entertainers in showbiz, sports, arts and the media for the year 1999 shows that their income for 1999 alone ranges from six to 50 crore (Outlook, 13 December, 1999). There is also an impressive list of empire builders from a simple beginning. Ramesh Baheti who, after his Masters in commerce in 1967, took over a sick steel mill, along with his friend, is the owner of a 1,500 crore empire, within a span of 30 years. Abraham Tharakan, who quit his government service, first joined Brooke Bond as a tea taster, and later entered the seafood business in 1977, sets up a target of Rs 500 crore by the end of 2000. Kamal Sarada, son of a hardware shop owner heads a fast growing 200 crore group, built from the scratch in less than two decades. Mahesh Chaturvedi, who struggled in the initial days to buy even a lunch in Mumbai, have moved fast in just two decades; to establish his own empire and vows to take his group to the list of top 50 select Indian companies. D B Gupta who quit his Lecturer's job but failed to get through the final medical test to join the IAF, is the owner of Pharmaceutical firms with a turn over of nearly 1000 crore. R Subramaniam, who lost his father when he was just five, and was worrying about his next meal and his school fees, did have an ambition for a job with a four figure salary and today, makes the same four figure but in crores, as the chief of the Rs 1000 crore and above sterling group. Captain Krishnan Nair, a son of a government peon, who had come under the spell of Gandhi magic, plunged into the Quit India Movement, and even toyed with the idea of becoming a Sanyasin, has set his sight well beyond 1000 crore mark. These are only a few success stories of ordinary starters (The Week, 31 March 1996), who all had encountered their turning points at the right time, combined with their aptitude to make the right moves, making use of the god-sent opportunities. They all belong to the class of modern day potlatch chiefs who had successfully moved up in their ladder.

The greatest potlatch chiefs, however, are the so-called political 'servants'. There are no limits to the number of the electoral stunts of the political heroes, only to impress upon the electorate. In the political potlatches of the modern society, it is not uncommon to find an estranged chief in a political outfit, turning to become its number one enemy overnight, and making a bosom friend out of a foe, in the process of one's political survival and identity. Even the frantic efforts to claim for the original name, flag and the emblem at the time of party splits, the toppling games and the tea-party conclaves are all expressions of the modern political potlatches.

Marriages have come to be one of the most expressive occasions to demonstrate one's status, and thus stand out as a form of great potlatches in modern society: Interestingly, it also turns out to be an occasion for status-power demonstrations of the modern political chiefs. One could hardly forget the marriage of the foster son of a political heavyweight, which had been billed in the media as the 'mother of all weddings' for its reported 50 to 100 crore price tag. The leader, though denied of the cost of the wedding, accepted that there was a big pandal to accommodate the large party-cadre as invitations were sent to all, nearing about 65,000 party functionaries right from the state level down to the branch union level, so that the marriage would be an occasion to assemble all of them under one roof, give them a meal and meet them 'in person', as they all would consider this as 'a wedding in their own family' (The Week, 14 July, 1996). All government departments seemed to have pulled out all stops to make the wedding a glittering show, with lavish arrangements. India had also been a witness to the last 'mega marriage of the millennium' in Bihar, with all roads leading to the event, in which the political heavyweights of all hues including the arch-rivals, no matter what their antecedents and precedents were, graced the occasion. True, these did involve a great feasting and a conspicuous consumption that was characteristic of the potlatches of Kwakiutl Indians.

Even more typical of the modern potlatches are the rivalries between political parties striving to prove their one upmanship over the other, and each outdoing the other with their cadres,

lavishing with praises and glorifications on their leaders, and exhibiting self-inflicting displays to prove their blind loyalty. The state conference of the rivalling Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu was typical of a modern potlatch, with due excesses that outdo that of the natives. The description (The Week, 25 Feb. 1996) of the conference of one of these parties goes like this:

It was as if the party was battling second, cashing a stiff target. The other party had just finished its state conference. . . and that too in a creditable fashion. Thus the state conference turned out to be a prestige issue for the party and no effort was spared to make it a show of strength. With about 5 lakhs people participating, in the third day of the other party's conference and the procession going on for 14 hours in the presence of their leader throughout, there was every effort by this party to be one up on its rival, with their procession going on for 20 hours.

The leader of the party was projected as the guardian of Tamil culture... There were also attempts to link their leader with ... the yester year icons of the Dravidian movement. Some of the epithets used for the leader of the party were: 'Idaya Deivame' (Goddess of Heart), 'Kaaval Deivame' (Goddess of Protection), 'Cauvery Thaaye' (Mother Cauvery), ... 'Niranthara Mudalamaicher' (Permanent Chief Minister)... Most of the ministers prostrated before their 'living God'. The procession of the party had a few cadres displaying their pierced cheeks and a few others hanging by the skin of their back from poles, all these, to show their loyalty for their leader who in turn awarded these 'brave' people. One of the highlights of the party's two-day state conference was the mass wedding for 5004 couples... Each couple was given a heavily brocaded silk sari, a specially ordered Kanchipuram silk dhoti, a one sovereign gold thali, a kuthuvilakku (traditional lamp), a silver drum, a silver tray and other utensils. The couples had been given a wedding feast, which had 16 different items including 'payasam'. A rough estimate amounted to about Rs 10 crore on the mass marriages alone.

The property of this leader, who claim to be

receiving just Rs 1/- as salary during the chief-ministership, is truly mind-boggling, the list of which, resembling that of a property-counter, in the potlatch of the Kwakiutl Indians. As reported by the vigilance team in its mahazar submitted to the court, the list goes like this (The Week, 5 Jan. 1997): There were about 30 kgs of gold (alone worth Rs 3.5 crore), 400 diamond-studded gold bangles, and other jewellery apart from cash. She had also amassed 7,901 saris, 91 wrist watches (worth Rs 7.6 lakhs), 386 pairs of foot wear, 19 cars (Rs 40 lakhs) and 800 kgs of silver ware. Furniture and other movable property were valued at Rs 50 lakhs, while the 44 air-conditioners were alone worth 13 lakhs, apart from documents relating to immovable property worth Rs 25 crore. The five storied palatial-residence, having more than 50 rooms, was lavishly furnished with exquisitely carved materials. However, unlike the Kwakiutl Indians, who take maximum efforts to exhibit their property, in the modern potlatches, the exploiters hardly make their property conspicuous. It does involve redistribution but only in a small way, in return for an extensive accumulation of material possession and power, true to the exploitative character of the modern potlatches.

What is the other side of the modern day potlatch situations? Examining the case of India, the pathetic sight of a major section of the people struggling for the basics like food and water glares against those floating in gold and riches. In spite being one of the highest food-producing countries in the world, one out of two children in India is malnourished. In the land of many rivers, safe drinking water is a pipe-dream for many. The health record of India is frightening, with India being the highest in the world, in the number of TB patients, malarial deaths, blind people, HIV positive cases, occupational casualties, Hepatitis 'B' patients and infant mortality rates. For many, education means just identifying letters and in most of the villages, many 'literate' do not even seem to manage that, not to talk of almost half the illiterate population. There is a vast child labour force of 44 million (Outlook, 19 October, 1998). About 70 to 100 million children are outside schools, a housing shortage of over 30 million and the registered job seekers inching towards 40 million. Around

300 million, the largest concentration of poor people in the world, live below poverty line. A majority of them are rural Indians, the Dalits and tribals, of whom, around 40 percent are landless labourers, another 45 percent marginal farmers, 7.5 percent rural artisans with the others making up the rest (Outlook, *ibid.*). Are these not the people behind the success stories of all modern potlatches, who do not get their due share, but only continue to suffer a loss in their living standards? Does it not imply a logical extension of the evolutionary process of the early potlatches? The stark reality of extreme riches and extreme poverty existing together can be seen only in situations of modern potlatches.

CONCLUSION

The potlatches of the Kwakiutl Indians, in fact, form a midway between the reciprocal exchange system of the egalitarian societies and the self-centred, egoistic and the so-called advanced modern societies. The fate of the native people seem to have been sealed as soon as any of them crossed the threshold to redistribution from reciprocity, and the subsequent full-scale stratification of classes that lay behind (Harris, 1984: 103). In the contemporary and the so-called free society, every individual at every level is theoretically entitled for making their own potlatches. However, the reality does not stand to favour everyone to success as neither all enjoy an equal freedom nor there is a level-playing field for every one, with an equal access to opportunities and resources, not to talk of the non-proportional distribution of rewards. Amassing of the unlimited material possessions, and thereby augmenting a vast power-base, both of which, once in hand, tend to invari-

ably multiply in non-stop geometric progression, are the motivations of every potlatch of the contemporary society. There is also a striking contradiction between the overt behaviour and the covert calculations among the actors of the modern potlatches.

If the potlatch of the Kwakiutl Indians is megalomaniac, as conceived by Benedict, what would be the potlatches of the contemporary society? Would it be possible to even imagine this to happen in an egalitarian society, in which, people feel repelled and frightened even to a faintest suggestion that some one is generous, or one is better than another? Are not the modern potlatches, then, only stories of destructive and exploitative processes, unthinkable in terms of native socio-cultural framework? One should only remember the dictum of Gandhi that there is enough for everyone's need but not for everyone's greed! Are the modern potlatches also, truly the signs of a dying society, as was the case, as conceived by Harris, with the later potlatches of the Kwakiutl Indians?

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