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# “It Is a Strict Law That Bids Us Dance”: Cosmologies, Colonialism, Death, and Ritual Authority in the Kwakwaka’wakw Potlatch, 1849 to 1922

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In the century since Franz Boas began his field work on the Northwest Coast, the Kwakwaka’wakw<sup>1</sup> potlatch has proved irresistible to the anthropological imagination. It has been variously interpreted as an interest-bearing investment of property (Boas 1897), as a demonstration of a paranoid, megalomaniacal personality (Benedict 1934), as a substitution for warfare (Codere 1950), as a means of distributing food (Piddcocke 1965; Vayda 1961), as a phenomenon of social morphology (Lèvi-Strauss 1969; Rosman and Rubel 1971), and as a religious event (Goldman 1975; Walens 1981). Indeed, an intellectual history of anthropology can now be written simply by examining how the Kwakwaka’wakw potlatch has served the various theoretical schools (see Michaelson 1979). If anything unites such disparate accounts, however, I suggest it is an underestimation of the impact of European colonization on Kwakwaka’wakw society.<sup>2</sup> Our understanding of the nineteenth-century pot-

For their critical readings of various drafts of this essay, I would like to offer my sincere thanks to F. G. Bailey, John Borneman, Ramon Gutierrez, Nancy Hynes, Mark Jenkins, Tanya Luhrmann, Andrew Wilford, and two anonymous reviewers of *CSSH*. Special thanks to Stanley Walens for a conversation several years ago that ultimately provoked this article and to Shawn Smith for her multiple readings and relentless encouragement.

<sup>1</sup> The tribes historically known as the “(Southern) Kwakiutl” are today more properly referred to as Kwakwaka’wakw, or “those who speak Kwak’wala” (Macnair 1986). “Kwakiutl” was originally an attempt to render “Kwagu’l”, the name of a specific tribe at Fort Rupert which was subsequently used by Indians and non-Indians alike to depict the total Kwak’wala-speaking population. Current usage still varies somewhat, but Kwakwaka’wakw is the more inclusive term. Additionally, I use the collective singular (*i.e.*, “the Kwakwaka’wakw”) in this essay solely for rhetorical convenience. As I hope this essay demonstrates, Kwakwaka’wakw experience varied dramatically by age, gender, and social class during the nineteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> See Bruner (1986) for a perceptive analysis of how the narrative structures used by different generations of anthropologists have affected their perceptions and portrayals of Native American cultural change. Recent work by Kwakwaka’wakw intellectuals Gloria Cranmer Webster (1990,

latch has been limited by a tendency to exclude Kwakwaka'wakw cosmology from the colonial power dynamic.<sup>3</sup> This study contributes, then, to the long-running, and at times vociferous, scholarly discourse on the potlatch by focusing directly on the cultural repercussions of the colonial experience.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, it is not an analysis simply of the funding or logistics of exchange: This essay attempts to situate the cosmologies behind the gift in their changing historical context in order to assess the socio-cultural impact of the colonial encounter on native systems of belief.

Among the fundamental questions that remain about the historical development of Kwakwaka'wakw society, the explosion in the size and frequency of Kwakwaka'wakw potlatches following the British colonization of Vancouver Island in 1849 is of particular interest. I argue here that the dramatic changes in Kwakwaka'wakw ritual forms during the second half of the nineteenth century can only be understood in light of the huge socio-cultural transformations that the colonial encounter initiated: most notably, the impact of capitalism and the catastrophic effects of disease. Moreover, I maintain that an understanding of the Kwakwaka'wakw symbolic world is essential to any explanation of their response to these challenges. We need to acknowledge that the reproduction of Kwakwaka'wakw culture during the nineteenth century involved an engagement not only between everyday practices and socio-

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1991) and Daisy Sewid-Smith (1979) have begun to challenge the historical discourse on Kwakwaka'wakw society; see also Clifford (1991) on the politics of representing Kwakwaka'wakw history in British Columbian history museums and Cole (1985) on the nature of the Northwest Coast art trade.

<sup>3</sup> For example, in the preface to her influential book, *Fighting With Property: A Study of Kwakiutl Potlatching and Warfare, 1792–1939*, Helen Codere states: “with the desire to present the material in the most explicit and uncontroversial way possible, little concern has been given to the ‘psychology’ of the people (1950:v).” In doing so, she also eliminates Kwakwaka'wakw cosmology, and thus a primary means for understanding Kwakwaka'wakw action in the world, from her analysis. Codere provides a brilliant statistical portrait of Kwakwaka'wakw society, and her work is a foundational for any analysis of nineteenth-century Kwakiutl society. However, her argument that the potlatch became a substitution for warfare and that natives “fought” with property mistakes a ritualized aggression for the real thing and privileges a specific ceremony in the ritual economy, the rivalry potlatch, over the more common and central exchanges that enhanced solidarity (see Drucker and Heizer 1967; Goldman 1975:170–6; and Michaelson 1979:57–68).

<sup>4</sup> “Potlatch” is a Chinook term meaning “to give away” that has been applied to a variety of gift exchange systems on the Northwest Coast and an array of Kwakwaka'wakw ceremonials. The Kwakwaka'wakw distributed property at every major event in the life cycle from a birth or marriage to the completion of a house or the sale of a copper (Barnett 1968). Boas' original description of the potlatch as an “interest bearing investment of property” (1897), refuted by his later work but never officially retracted (Goldman 1975:163), led to a body of literature devoted to explaining how a mythical cycle of 100 percent interest transactions could be realized. In 1915, Edward Curtis, fresh from the field, might have settled the question once and for all: “A Kwakiutl would subject himself to ridicule by demanding interest when he received a gift in requital on one of like amount made by him . . . to demand interest on a potlatch gift is unheard of” (1915:143). For recent literature on the Kwakwaka'wakw potlatch, see the essays in Joniatus (1991), Cole and Chaikin's history of the Potlatch Law (1990); and two invaluable films available through the U'mista Cultural Centre (Box 253, Alert Bay, B.C. VON 1A0, Canada)—“Potlatch . . . a strict law bids us dance” and “Box of Treasures”).

cultural constraints but also between colonizer and colonized.<sup>5</sup> To do so allows us to see that the energetic potlatching of the late nineteenth century was not an arbitrary phenomenon but a logical cultural response to the colonial encounter: Enabled by new economic resources, the expanding ritualism played an essential role in a ritual calculus for restoring the souls of the dead and represents a vigorous Kwakwaka'wakw attempt to overcome the social and spiritual consequences of the colonial situation through traditional religious understandings.

Within the historical discourse on Northwest Coast ritualism, Marcel Mauss's ([1925]) description of the potlatch as a “total prestation”—a transaction with legal, economic, socio-structural, and religious dimensions—remains the best single description of the institution. He recognized that gift exchange performed, through an orchestration of religious symbolism, what Bourdieu would call a “social alchemy,” a transformation of arbitrary relations into meaningfully structured social ones, in which the distribution of social power is veiled as a “moral” universe. Accordingly, by focusing on the cosmology supporting the potlatch, we can, I suggest, gain insight into not only the economic mechanisms and legal consequences of exchange but also into its motivating logics. Joyce Wike noted, in a brief but ground-breaking 1952 essay, the important role of the dead in the Kwakwaka'wakw potlatch (see also Kan 1989). However, the only substantive explorations of Kwakwaka'wakw religious thought are Goldman (1975) and Walens (1981). Relying on the Boas-Hunt texts, both Goldman and Walens search somewhat problematically for a “pre-contact” Kwakwaka'wakw universe. Nonetheless, each makes an important contribution by acknowledging Kwakwaka'wakw religious thought as a sophisticated philosophical system. Both recognize that the ultimate aim of pre-colonial Kwakwaka'wakw cosmology was the regeneration of the natural world and show Kwakwaka'wakw ritual forms to be aspects of a cosmogonic scheme. Specific interpretations in both works have been rightly challenged<sup>6</sup>; nevertheless, these texts provide important insights into the basic

<sup>5</sup> See Comaroff (1985), Sahlins (1981), and Todorov (1984); similarly, Maurice Bloch's (1986) historical analysis of the Merina circumcision ritual is an important demonstration of how ritual forms can adapt to changing socio-economic conditions while retaining an essential “core structure” that dictates how the rituals are performed and understood over time.

<sup>6</sup> Goldman (1975) has been criticized for overstating the rigidity of Kwakwaka'wakw class structures (Reid 1977) and for misinterpreting certain Kwak'wala terms (Holm 1976; Suttles 1979; see also Walens 1977 and 1979). Walens (1981) has been criticized for trying to limit Kwakwaka'wakw symbolism to a singleminded concern with orality (Goldman 1983) and for inadequately documenting the source material for his interpretations (Powers 1983; Adams 1984). Despite these shortcomings, however, each text provides important, if not final, insight into pre-colonial Kwakwaka'wakw cosmology. Goldman's exploration of the cosmological referents of gift exchange, for example, is an major corrective to the economic determinism that has dominated anthropological studies of the potlatch. *The Mouth of Heaven* remains, quite simply, the most detailed analysis of the Boas-Hunt texts. Similarly, Walens' analysis of Kwakwaka'wakw ideas about food delves into the philosophical complexity of the pre-colonial Kwakwaka'wakw universe and provides valuable insight into its cosmogonic referents.

assumptions of early-nineteenth-century Kwakwaka'wakw cosmology and offer useful frames of reference for thinking about the events of the late nineteenth century. My interest here is less in debating the intricacies of Kwakwaka'wakw symbolic forms prior to European expansion than it is in exploring how the Kwakwaka'wakw engaged in the colonial encounter and, more specifically, how changes in the gift economy illustrate corresponding changes in Kwakwaka'wakw world view.

The potlatch provides an ideal vehicle for an analysis of Kwakwaka'wakw cultural change because one of its primary functions was to synchronize social history with cosmology. Nineteenth-century Kwakwaka'wakw society was organized around ranked nobility who were believed to be reincarnations of the tribe's supernatural founding ancestors. By distributing property the Kwakwaka'wakw noble showed himself to be a worthy vehicle for the soul of an ancestor-spirit and thereby validated both his social status and his claim on supernatural powers believed to be essential for the regeneration of the natural realm. The perpetuation of the ranking system achieved through the potlatch was thus of central importance not only to the economic and political stability of the Kwak'waka speaking groups but also to their spiritual security. An individual's achievement of rank, however, involved a direct negotiation between cultural structure and historical circumstance; therefore, rank was always an evolving practice, open to debate, innovation, and reinterpretation. As we shall see, one consequence of the social disruptions caused by the colonial intrusion was a condensation of ritual energies into the gift economy in the late nineteenth century which led to a critical re-structuring of Kwakwaka'wakw mytho-social practice.

Arjun Appadurai (1986) has suggested that in studying economic systems we follow the "social biography" of specific things, in time, in an effort to trace their ideological formation through "regimes of value" and "commodity phases," rather than assume fixed structures of meaning or value.<sup>7</sup> Rank represents the ultimate possession for the nineteenth-century Kwakwaka'wakw: Embodied in their nobility, it was zealously pursued, protected, and carefully passed from generation to generation. As such, rank was not just a possession but also a practice, requiring the Kwakwaka'wakw noble to offer a lifelong series of potlatches to validate his (and later, her) ritual standing. By expanding Appadurai's approach to include "symbolic property," this essay treats rank as a historical artifact. I trace the (re)articulations of rank from the founding of Fort Rupert in 1849 to the Alert Bay trials of 1922 and ask how the vicissitudes of the colonial encounter contributed to the refashioning of this central Kwakwaka'wakw practice. In working to construct such a biography,

<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, Parry and Bloch (1989) have argued that exchange is always historically specific and culturally defined. They refute the notion of a unidirectional "evolutionary" model of economic development and show that hybrid economies (those combining capitalist and noncapitalist practices) exist and are not inevitably reduced to simple commodity logic.

I hope to underscore the interconnectedness of cosmology, economic exchange, history, and social identity in Kwakwaka'wakw life and to reveal the creativity and resistance inherent in Kwakwaka'wakw responses to colonial power. A reading of Kwakwaka'wakw history through a theory of practice allows us to see the agency and resistance in the minutiae of everyday life so brilliantly recorded by Franz Boas and George Hunt and allows us to think with more complexity about the evolution of Kwakwaka'wakw socio-religious forms.<sup>8</sup>

I begin with a brief exegesis of pre-colonial Kwakwaka'wakw cosmology reconstructed from the published Boas-Hunt texts. Pre-colonial refers here to the general period of the fur trade (1792 to 1848), a time of increasing Kwakwaka'wakw-contact and trade with Europeans but also of relative cultural autonomy. This brief sketch of the pre-colonial order is necessary to demonstrate the profound changes witnessed during the colonial period. In presenting such a condensed picture of a complicated reality, however, I must underscore that Kwakwaka'wakw social forms (even during the pre-colonial period) have never been a "static" proposition.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, one of the goals of this essay is to demonstrate how rank has been a consistently evolving practice in Kwakwaka'wakw life. I then conclude the essay with an exploration of how early-nineteenth-century practices of rank and reciprocity were effected in the late nineteenth century by their engagement with colonial capitalism and the consequences of epidemic disease.

#### THE PRACTICE OF COSMOLOGY

To appreciate the complexity of pre-colonial Kwakwaka'wakw cosmology, we must begin by distancing ourselves from a set of eurocentric analytic categories which have limited utility on the Northwest Coast. These categories involve the assumption of a natural opposition between secular and sacred activity and the uncritical application of particularly capitalist definitions of economic property. An understanding of the total value of material goods in pre-colonial Kwakwaka'wakw society is contingent on recognizing the role that they play within a symbolic economy which employs material items as

<sup>8</sup> Boas and Hunt collected the huge corpus of Kwakwaka'wakw materials (close to 5,000 published pages) over a forty-five year period beginning in 1886. These texts are both idiosyncratic and ethnographically unparalleled in the level of detail they provide. However, it should be noted that they present backward-looking narratives, collected during the colonial crackdown on the potlatch when many of the rituals described were under attack or no longer performed. They represent Kwakwaka'wakw collective memory during a specific period of time, a fact which does not diminish their importance but does situate them within the necessary historical frame. Analyzing the Boas-Hunt texts is finally a hermeneutic process which reveals the insights and "prejudices" (Gadamer 1979) of each author and generation. This essay contributes to the ongoing discourse on Kwakwaka'wakw history by attempting a contemporary reading of these texts.

<sup>9</sup> See Michaelson (1979) for an insightful analysis of how the lack of attention to the changing historical context of the Boas-Hunt texts has contributed to the "conflict of interpretations" surrounding the Kwakwaka'wakw potlatch.

metaphor for spiritual wealth. The imposition of secular and sacred distinctions within Kwakwaka'wakw practice obfuscates the totalizing influence of this symbolic economy, which ties together everyday practice with the maintenance of an overarching religious world view.

The pre-colonial Kwakwaka'wakw calendar, for example, is divided into two critical seasons which many scholars have mapped along opposite ends of a secular-sacred axis: the summer Baxus, which Boas glossed as "profane," and the winter Tsetsaeqa, or "secrets" (Boas 1897:418). Kwakwaka'wakw social organization and its primary activities change during the two seasons from an emphasis on harvesting food to a four-month ritual cycle designed to tame supernatural forces which threaten the cosmos. During Baxus, social authority is invested in a hierarchy whose power is inherited from the mythical founding ancestors of the clan. During Tsetsaeqa, the Kwakwaka'wakw divide themselves into dance societies in which each member becomes the literal embodiment of a supernatural spirit. In total, the seasons present a ritual cycle which deconstructs and reinvents the social order: The barren winter months, in which the collective spiritual energy of all the tribes must be focused on regenerating the natural world, are turned into the fecundity of the summer months, when the animal world, placated by continuing ritual, offers itself up for human consumption.

Thus, the Kwakwaka'wakw saw themselves as participants in a universal ecology requiring continuous maintenance. Its root metaphor was that of hunter and hunted: to live means to kill (Goldman 1975:3; Walens 1981:12). The whole of Kwakwaka'wakw religion can be viewed as an elaborate meditation on this most basic of themes, just as the Kwakwaka'wakw's mytho-social organization can be seen as a complex design for conserving the universe's finite resources. In such a scheme the distinction between social and mythological dimensions are collapsed in practice, so that in pursuing daily activities individuals are participating in a social reality which legitimizes the distribution of political power and the organization of labor through a set of religious symbols. The totalizing nature of this scheme is enforced through a sexual division of labor, which exists—on both material and symbolic levels—at all points in Kwakwaka'wakw practice. Baxus, for example, is informed by rights inherited primarily through the male line, while membership in the dance societies of the Tsetsaeqa is acquired via marriage to a woman (Boas 1897:334,421). Similarly, all duties of food gathering and preparation are divided by sex and enforced by ritual protocol, so that individuals are dependent on one another for daily sustenance.<sup>10</sup> In these ways, pre-

<sup>10</sup> The ritual treatment of food reveals that, in Kwakwaka'wakw thought, animals only allow themselves to be killed by spiritually competent individuals. For the proper reincarnation of an animal's soul—and consequently, the perpetuation of the entire species—is believed to be contingent on human action (*e.g.*, see Boas 1930:205–7). The Kwakwaka'wakw recognized an essential consanguinity among all creatures, in that, all living beings inevitably serve as food (Walens 1981:96).

colonial Kwakwaka'wakw cosmology combines symbolic and material practice into a unified scheme, a scheme which requires that the moral action of the entire community work in concert to collect the food and spiritual resources believed necessary to generate another year of life.

#### THE LOGICS OF RANK

Kwakwaka'wakw cosmology grants each individual a distinct place within the total mytho-social scheme. An articulated ranking system places individuals, *numayms*<sup>11</sup>, and tribes into a hierarchically organized system. Each tribe contains a number of numayms, which trace genealogies back to a founding ancestor-spirit. The origin story of each numaym relates how the founding ancestor transformed from an animal into a human being by taking off the mask of its particular species. The founder bestowed spiritual treasures, or *tlogwe*, on his descendents, which are displayed materially in the form of masks, house posts, dishes, and ritual privileges (Boas 1897:328–40). The chief of each numaym is regarded as a reincarnation of the founding ancestor (and thus, possesses special ties to the animal world), just as each ranking member of the numaym represents a member of the founding ancestor's immediate community (Boas 1966:52). The Kwak'waka speaking tribes share a total of 658 ranked seats (Boas 1966:50), which together form a hierarchically ordered ritual congregation (Goldman 1975:31–33).

While the number of commoners and slaves is fluid, the nobility presents a more fixed and fragile system. Ranked seats, if left unoccupied, can be lost; and since each seat was created by a founding ancestor, no new seats can be produced. To lose track of an inherited name is to lose the supernatural power attached to that name, eliminating from human influence a vital means of controlling natural resources and protection against the destructive forces in the universe. Thus, in pre-colonial Kwakwaka'wakw thought, the stability of the ranking system was linked directly to the stability of the cosmos. To combat the dangerous vulnerability of the ranking system, the Kwakwaka'wakw were always on the lookout for ways to supplement their rank by gaining the rights to perform the rituals of neighboring groups. Ceremonial privileges could be legally attained through marriage, vision quest, and warfare (Goldman 1975:71). Individuals were motivated to acquire new ritual prerogatives by the belief that the acquisition of a new dance, mask, or song marked the attainment of new spiritual power. The realization of a new ceremonial privilege transformed the noble's social identity and increased the spiritual power of his numaym during the winter ceremonials. The enriched

<sup>11</sup> Members of a numaym share seasonal residences and ritual obligations. The nobility share genealogical ties, while commoners and slaves are more transient. Each numaym's origin story declares ownership of specific natural resources, names, and supernatural powers (Boas 1966:41–43).



noble then exercised a greater command over protective forces by establishing a more direct relationship with the spiritual realm.

Similarly, the acquisition of names as a means of preserving the spiritual power of the ancestor spirits was a primary concern for a Kwakwaka'wakw noble. The career of a successful chief was based, however, as much on moral action as social position: It was a process of winning names through inheritance, marriage, and warfare, divesting them over the course of his life to his heir and, finally, having preserved all his names for another generation, dying as a commoner (Boas 1925:229–30; Goldman 1975:58–59). As the reincarnation of the lineage founder, the chief was spiritually closest to the animal world and was thus responsible both for persuading the natural world to support human existence (Walens 1981:79) and for keeping the numaym's food stores. Throughout pre-colonial Kwakwaka'wakw thought, physical objects (here, the body of the noble) operate on two levels simultaneously—the cosmic and the social—so that the transfer of material property through gift exchange is both a demonstration of spiritual power and a means of allocating political and material resources. Because the noble was recognized as the literal conduit between the social and spiritual domains, birth right alone was not enough to secure rank: Only individuals displaying the correct moral behavior throughout their life course could maintain ranking status.

Gift exchange serves therefore as a mechanism for what Bourdieu has called “symbolic violence” (1977:190), for the obligation to distribute property to validate one's social status implicates each individual within a strict political economy that stratifies society into mutually dependent units. A chief is dependent on the labor of all the non-ranking members of the numaym to produce the furs and other objects to be distributed during a potlatch, just as commoners are dependent on the nobility's symbolic labor to persuade the animal world to support human existence. Thus, in the pre-colonial potlatch the entire numaym's identity and economic strength are validated through the performance of the chief. An important functional effect, however, is to essentialize a hierarchical distribution of social power.<sup>12</sup>

In a universe as highly determined as the Kwakwaka'wakw's—where, for example, human action (or inaction) could cause the salmon not to run, prevent the numaym's reincarnation, or bring down the wrath of fearsome supernatural beings—we should ask how the vicissitudes of the colonial encounter were interpreted. For implicit in such a demanding cosmogonic equation, I would argue, must also have been a notion of catastrophe, of a universe spinning out of control due to human carelessness or greed; a time

<sup>12</sup> In such an overly determined world, individual actions combine in each gift exchange to either reinforce or challenge the social order. The Kwakwaka'wakw tried to overcome the precariousness of practice in two ways: (1) nobles were required to reaffirm their moral standing through a life-long series of gift exchanges (see Boas 1925:77); and (2) a meticulous regard for ritual protocol was achieved by establishing costly penalties—even death—for performance error (Boas 1966:280).

when the salmon disappear and the cycle of human reincarnation is disrupted. This is important because, by any reckoning, the second half of the nineteenth's century produced several potentially apocalyptic moments, from epidemic disease to colonial assaults on Kwakwaka'wakw religious practices, that could easily have been interpreted as fulfilling this implicit threat of catastrophe. We need to ask not only how the Kwakwaka'wakw responded to the new economic resources but also to the dislocations of the colonial encounter; how, in fact, they attempted to integrate such a strictly determined cosmos with the unpredictable actions of Europeans and disease.

#### COLONIZATION AND CAPITAL

The British decision to colonize Vancouver Island in 1849 changed the focus of European interest on the Coast from economic expansion through trade to possession of the land itself. Consequently, native populations were no longer viewed as indigenous labor, vital to the continuance of the fur trade but increasingly as a threat to the full settlement of the island. The fragile cultural autonomy that had existed during the fur trade was destroyed when land became the prized commodity for Europeans and more coercive methods of domination came into play.<sup>13</sup> Quoting from an 1849 House of Commons decree on native land rights, Robin Fisher presents the legal justification for colonization (1977:66):

aborigines had only “qualified Dominion” over their country, consisting of a right of occupancy but not title to the land. Until the “uncivilized inhabitants” of any country established among themselves “a settled form of government and subjugated the ground to their own uses by the cultivation of it,” they could not be said to have individual property in the land.

Having provided themselves with a “just so” legal charter for colonization, the British pursued a peculiar and, given the natural resources of the Northwest Coast, paradoxical vision of an assimilated future: Indigenous groups would become agriculturalists (LaViolette 1961:35). Assimilating native populations to a Protestant understanding of labor and capitalism would prove, however, to be a complicated process requiring an increasing use of force as native groups moved to protect their cultural cohesion. The Kwakwaka'wakw, in particular, were never passive recipients of colonial rule; but as we shall see, their innovative efforts to subvert colonial resources to their own advantage

<sup>13</sup> From the 1790s to the 1840s (the period of the maritime and then land-based fur trade), Indians and Europeans worked vigorously to exploit one another in an expanding market. The sea otter, known as “soft gold” (Vaughan and Holm 1982), was already disappearing by 1800, leading to the establishment of fur-trading operations based on land and an expanding European presence. For the Kwakwaka'wakw, the performance of the ranking chief became more critical during this time, for not only was he responsible for managing the numaym's resources and dealing with European traders but also, on a spiritual level, with negotiating a natural realm increasingly showing the signs of decades of exploitation. Overall, the fur trade produced new structures of cross-cultural engagement while placing native groups in competition with one another for European resources.

would also have unforeseen consequences leading to a crucial restructuring of Kwakwaka'wakw ritual forms.

The first goal of the colonial administration in 1849 was to put a stop to tribal raiding. The expanding European presence during the fur trade had undoubtedly increased the Kwakwaka'wakw need for both trade goods and spiritual protection against hostile neighbors and probably increased the frequency of conflict.<sup>14</sup> Kwakwaka'wakw warriors were headhunters, a practice they pursued resolutely after a member of the numaym was killed by a rival tribe (Curtis 1915:98–99). Kwakwaka'wakw logic in this matter characteristically privileged a symbolic dimension: Retaliatory head-hunting raids were not simply vengeful, as any victim—usually the first person the warrior stumbled upon—would serve to “make a pillow” for the deceased (Boas 1966:109). The loss of a relative to a rival tribe produced not only grief but also a soul loss for the numaym that required recuperation to insure the proper reincarnation of the lineage.<sup>15</sup> Kwakwaka'wakw raiding was, therefore, an important means of acquiring both the material and spiritual wealth believed necessary to secure the future prosperity of the numaym.

After 1848 a Pax Britannia was enforced, with British gunboats shelling the native's beach front villages to drive the point home (Gough 1984). The cessation of warfare in the mid-1860s had important implications: As disease began to decimate the Kwak'wala speaking groups on a hitherto unimaginable scale, a vital means of restoring the soul wealth of the numaym had been eliminated. How was the numaym to insure the balance between souls and bodies without the predatory spoils of headhunting? Additionally, the warrior class, now out of work, had to be reintegrated socially. By the 1880s rivalries between siblings for possession of hereditary privileges had become a common theme, as younger brothers who previously could have gained ritual status through warfare were now solely dependent on inheritance and marriage to advance their careers.

<sup>14</sup> The rewards of raiding should not be underestimated. In a skirmish with the Bella Coola Kwakwaka'wakw warriors seized 400 maren, 400 lynxes, 100 bears, 100 grizzly bears, 200 caribous, 40 marmots, 4 rattles, 10 bark boxes of hemlock bark, and 20 boxes of cinquefoil (Boas and Hunt 1905:223). As the number of fur-bearing animals was depleted on the Coast, such raids were probably increasingly necessary to support the burgeoning trade with Europeans and also the requirements of an expanding gift economy (see Goldman 1975:173–6). A retaliatory raid against the Bella Coola in the mid-1830's netted nine heads, a slave, and a box of ritual paraphernalia, including rights to the cannibalistic Hamatsa ceremony, which was to become the most important dance of the Kwakwaka'wakw's winter ceremonials (Boas 1921:1016–7).

<sup>15</sup> The Kwakwaka'wakw believed the soul is located in the forehead (Boas 1921:715). By decapitating their victims they not only prevented that body from springing back to life (Walens 1981:84) but took back to the numaym the seat of the soul. What happens to the victim's soul is not, to my knowledge, discussed explicitly in the texts; but the fact that the murderer acquired the victim's ritual privileges in the act of killing him suggests that the vital aspect of headhunting was an incorporation of the victim's soul(s) into that of the killer's numaym. This would explain the randomness witnessed in the headhunting motivated by the death of a loved one. By severing the head of the first stranger he saw, the warrior acquired the soul necessary to replenish that lost to the rival tribe. Also, see Rosaldo (1984) on Ilongot headhunting as a response to grief.

Economic advancement by raiding was also finished. A European capitalist economy was now the primary means of economic success, a fact requiring changes in the gift economy as new distributions of economic power came into play. As the colonial pursuit of natural resources (fur, coal, gold, land, and fish) restructured the flow of economic goods on the island, lucrative trade opportunities opened that put tribal groups in competition with one another for the European market. Four Kwakwaka'wakw groups relocated to Fort Rupert in the 1850s to become the wealthiest of the Kwak'wala speaking tribes. The sudden introduction of new wealth into the gift economy caused three fundamental changes in gift exchange practices. First, the reciprocal nature of gift exchange led to an exponential expansion in the wealth distributed at potlatches. Second, although pre-1849 potlatches usually involved only one guest tribe, after 1849 the number of invited groups expanded, and the host gained prestige in proportion to the number of invited parties. Third, individuals were for the first time able to privately amass fortunes large enough to potlatch. Previously, the concerted effort of the entire numaym was necessary to produce enough surplus goods for a major gift exchange, which could only be offered by the ranking chief. After 1849, all ranking members were increasingly concerned with hosting, and personally financing, potlatches. Overall, the post-1849 Kwakwaka'wakw world witnessed a dramatic expansion in the number of people who could host a potlatch, as well as the size, frequency, and wealth of gift exchanges (see Drucker and Heizer 1967:35–52; Codere 1950:89–97 and 1961:467–73).

The startling nature of these changes led Helen Codere to suggest that the entire ranking system might be a post-1849 phenomenon (1961:466):

The groups making up the confederacy were ranked one to four in social greatness and the “Fort Ruperts” as a group were ranked first of all. Before this time there is nothing in the family histories to indicate that there was a Kwakiutl-wide system of socially ranking the various villages, the numayms that made them up, or the individual standing places in the numaym.

This interpretation, however, confuses an increasing Kwakwaka'wakw concern about questions of rank after 1849 with the invention of the ranking system itself. In the pre-colonial era, the Kwakwaka'wakw did mark social standing through different kinds of potlatch gifts (Boas 1921:881). Moreover, commoners fought vigorously to gain access to the ranking system in the early days of the colonial period. As we shall see, the particular nature of this contest demonstrates that rank was not an entirely new social form but one that was being aggressively re-articulated through new discourses in the post-1849 world. In fact, I would argue that the development of Kwakwaka'wakw society in the second half of the nineteenth century gains coherence when we acknowledge that rank was also an organizing principle in pre-colonial Kwakwaka'wakw life. And as such, the continuance—and expansion—of rank offered the Kwakwaka'wakw a direct means of preserv-

ing the integrity of their cultural system in the face of colonial intrusion. From this perspective, the expanding dialogue about ranking order and ritual performance witnessed after 1849 becomes a logical response to the Kwakwaka'wakw's increasingly colonized status, a mobilization of indigenous logics to negotiate the new context of Kwakwaka'wakw life.

The founding of Fort Rupert was merely the first in a series of physical and symbolic assaults on the Kwakwaka'wakw world that promised to undermine the pre-colonial mytho-social order. Access to the European marketplace, for example, produced a relocation of villages and offered new wealth to previously subordinate sectors of the Kwakwaka'wakw population. This threatened the ranking system by destroying the numaym's ties to land, specific natural resources, a ritual division of labor, and more general understandings about the ultimate value of material wealth. I would argue that as the economic foundation of the pre-colonial symbolic order shifted, the maintenance of the ranking system became the most direct means of achieving cultural continuity. As an essential component in a mytho-social machinery for regenerating life and producing a cosmic harmony in nature, the perpetuation of the ranking system also offered a set of logics for combating the social havoc which disease and colonial-capitalist interest wreaked on Kwakwaka'wakw society.

#### EXCHANGE: ANIMAL FURS FOR THE HUDSON'S BAY BLANKET

The most important single development in gift exchange practices during the early years of English colonization was the incorporation of European commodities into the gift economy. The Kwakwaka'wakw showed an immediate passion for European trade goods in 1792.<sup>16</sup> However, until 1849 European objects remained only peripheral items in gift exchanges. We have a record of twenty-nine potlatches from the pre-colonial period (Boas 1921:836–1277; see also Codere 1950:90–94). In these potlatches, animal furs, canoes, mats, meat, and slaves served as the predominant exchange items. With the founding of Fort Rupert in 1849 we have the first recorded gift exchange involving Hudson's Bay blankets and the last recorded commerce in slaves. From 1849 until the suppression of the potlatch in the 1920s, an increasing trade in European goods is evidenced, with the Hudson's Bay blanket becoming the standardized currency for all ritual exchanges. The introduction of the Hudson's Bay blanket caused an explosion in the number of items given away:

<sup>16</sup> Kwakwaka'wakw desire for sheets of copper and blue woolen cloth during their first encounter with Vancouver in 1792 (Vancouver 1984:627) demonstrates an immediate interest in incorporating European resources into their mytho-social order. The copper sheets would be engraved and fashioned into the shield-like forms known as "coppers", becoming the most valued material property in the Kwakwaka'wakw universe (see Goldman 1975:150–158). The centrality of coppers in nineteenth-century Kwakwaka'wakw thought suggests that the availability of copper via the fur trade promoted at the very least a renaissance in the symbolic associations attached to coppers but more likely their invention as a ritual form.

The largest recorded potlatch prior to 1849 involved 320 furs, 4 slaves, and 4 canoes (Boas 1921:1027); by 1869, 9,000 blankets are given away at a single potlatch (Boas 1921:883).

There are two immediate explanations for this dramatic growth in gift exchanges. First, European traders were blind to the ritual requirements of the traditional economic system; now anybody, regardless of status, could trade for blankets. Coal mining, day labor, and prostitution provided immediate new sources of income that circumvented the pre-colonial socio-economic order, which enforced a strict division of labor. Second, a unified currency made it more difficult to acknowledge the specificities of rank through the innate characteristics of the gift. Prior to 1849, the value of material wealth was determined by its place within a highly articulated symbolic order. Animal fur, for example, was metaphorically linked to the numaym's ancestor-spirits, who in mythic times removed their animal skins to become human. A distribution of fur was therefore a necessary component in every ceremonial change in social status, publicly displaying the host's spiritual ties to the animal world and moral commitment to maintaining the cosmic balance between natural and social realms. Animal species, like human beings, were hierarchically ranked in the Kwakwaka'wakw universe; thus, each gift of fur also carried in its very nature a recognition of status.<sup>17</sup> In fact, pre-colonial Kwakwaka'wakw society differentiated social class by the species of animal used as blankets: Grizzly bear pelts were reserved for chiefs, while lower ranking members used mountain goat, marmot, deerskin or sea otter; commoners were limited to cedar bark blankets (Sewid-Smith 1986:63). Fur was thus a powerful and multivalent symbol, a means of unifying cosmological, socio-structural, and ecological understandings. The Hudson's Bay blanket had no such place within Kwakwaka'wakw cosmology. The adoption of the wool blanket changed the parameters of a dominant gift exchange item from mythological content to bare quantity.<sup>18</sup>

The Hudson's Bay blanket was also a mechanically produced and infinitely reproducible commodity which further separated the gift from its cosmological origins. Each fur, as the skin of a real animal that demanded rites of regeneration, had a unique aura and a literalness to its symbolism that could

<sup>17</sup> Goldman has argued that highest rank was associated with the sea, middle rank with creatures of the forest, and lowest rank with a forest tree, whose "bark is its skin" (1975:136-7).

<sup>18</sup> In an important dissertation (1983), Bruce Mac Lean makes a similar point and concludes that capitalist ideologies spread like a virus through Kwakwaka'wakw cosmology during the colonial period, invariably replacing spiritual content with bare materialism. He does not, however, examine the terrific impact of disease on Kwakwaka'wakw ritualism or acknowledge that the potlatch was a growing institution in the nineteenth century. Consequently, he does not see resistance in the Kwakwaka'wakw response to colonial power or the struggle for control of the economic signifier. Mac Lean makes a significant contribution, however, by historicizing the engagement between Kwakwaka'wakw and English cosmologies and by pursuing the symbolic consequences of the Kwakwaka'wakw shift from a subsistence to a market based economy.

not be duplicated by manufactured goods.<sup>19</sup> Each European blanket, on the other hand, was exactly the same and, as it was produced by outsiders, needed no rituals of regeneration to preserve it over time, only cash. The Kwakwaka'wakw, however, were nothing if not brilliant innovators, displaying a remarkable ability to adapt foreign objects and ideas to their ritual needs. Their response to this reduction in the symbolic value of one of their dominant ritual items was a beautiful new art form: the button blanket. Made of European wool, pearl buttons and applique, button blankets display family crests and state the owner's hereditary rights, becoming, as Jensen and Sargent succinctly put it, "totem poles on cloth" (1986).<sup>20</sup> In the button blanket we can see the Kwakwaka'wakw reinvesting European goods with mythological significance, returning the aura of the ancestor-spirits. However, while this new ancestral "skin" might allow more precise statements of individual status, it still could not reproduce the ecological referent of animal fur (that is, the specific animal). Thus, while we marvel at the renaissance in Kwakwaka'wakw symbolic forms in the late nineteenth century produced as a result of European tools and materials, we should also acknowledge that these new forms could not easily reproduce certain symbolic meanings inherent in the pre-colonial objects of exchange. Here, for example, the direct spiritual ties to the animal world were de-emphasized in favor of displaying family crests.

Because the Kwakwaka'wakw could have adopted British currency as the central exchange good and thereby completely integrated European and ceremonial economies, it is fascinating that instead they chose the one British commodity analogically linked to the traditional fur blanket.<sup>21</sup> Once accepted, all Kwakwaka'wakw exchanges, including transactions involving British currency, were first converted into the equivalent value in blankets. The exchange rate for a Hudson's Bay blanket was set at 50 cents for a single blanket and \$1.50 for a double blanket (Boas 1897:341), a rate which continued through Curtis's field work in 1914, despite inflation in the Hudson's Bay Company's retail price (Curtis 1915:142). The ritual currency was obviously not responsive to European market forces, which, considering the size of the blanket economy, is significant. It shows that the Kwakwaka'wakw were

<sup>19</sup> See Walter Benjamin (1968) for more on the "shattering of tradition" produced by the shift to mechanical reproduction.

<sup>20</sup> Kwakwaka'wakw historian Daisy Sewid Smith informs us that the inspiration for the button blanket came from the sight of a "Cockney Pearlie," one of the Englishmen famous for wearing suits completely covered in pearl buttons (1986:63). Here, in typical fashion, the Kwakwaka'wakw appropriated an European image and made it uniquely their own. The button blanket took on important ritual significance, playing prominently, for example, in the taming of the Hamatsa dancer in the winter ceremonials. I would suggest, however, that, while European goods saturated Kwakwaka'wakw society in the late nineteenth century, they had to be reinvested with a mythological context through surface decoration or design to have a ritual function.

<sup>21</sup> Sewid-Smith attributes the idea of exchanging furs for blankets to the Hudson's Bay Company, which sought exclusive command of furs on the Coast (1986:63).

attempting to participate in two separate economies: a capitalist economy in which all labor and material items could be incrementally valued in dollars and a traditional economy in which material items, now procured through capitalism, continued to be used to demonstrate and validate inherited mytho-social power.

We can see in this adaptation to the European market place a Kwakwaka'wakw attempt to maintain the mytho-social order while simultaneously realizing the new economic possibilities. However, as the modes of colonial domination became more overt (government officials and missionaries would eventually target Kwakwaka'wakw religion as the main obstacle to assimilation), this appropriation of the capitalist metaphor would prove increasingly problematic for the traditional ritual leaders; for, tied to the proper maintenance of the ranking system must also have been a set of expectations about the physical and spiritual prosperity of the numaym. The obligation to display hereditary powers involved ranking members in a strict morality, a morality that linked human action directly to the perpetuation of the natural realm and, ultimately, to the stability of the cosmos. The ritual evolutions of the 1850s were met by increasingly ominous signs: An expanding human death rate, a reduction in the number of fur-bearing animals, and a seemingly endless flow of Europeans. We must ask how the Kwakwaka'wakw—whose theology placed responsibility for regenerating the natural order in human hands—interpreted these signs if we are to begin to understand the heightened ritual activity of the late nineteenth century.

#### DEATH AND THE REGENERATION OF LIFE

The discovery of gold along the Fraser River in 1857 brought a massive new wave of fortune seekers to the Coast, swelling the population of Victoria alone from 500 to over 25,000 in just two years (Codere 1961:457). The indigenous populations in, and around, Vancouver Island were now suddenly a minority at home. In April 1862, a prospector carried smallpox into the native ghetto surrounding Victoria, infecting its inhabitants and setting off a city-wide panic. Fearful of the native presence to begin with and now terrified of an epidemic, European settlers set fire to the shanty town, driving its infected inhabitants out of Victoria and back to tribal villages. This spread the disease like wild fire up the Coast. Within three years, two-thirds of the total indigenous population on the Northwest Coast were obliterated. By 1865 the death toll had reached over 20,000 (Duff 1964:42–43; Boyd 1990:144).

The Kwakwaka'wakw were among the hardest hit. Robert Boyd has estimated that nearly 70 percent of the Kwakwaka'wakw population died during the 1862 epidemic, a decline from 7,650 to 2,370 (Boyd 1990).<sup>22</sup> The Kwak-

<sup>22</sup> The first Kwakwaka'wakw census was taken in 1882 and recorded a population of 2,264 (Boyd 1990:144). The best estimates of the pre-contact population range between 15,000 and



*waka'wakw* population decline continued into the twentieth century, reaching its nadir in 1929 with a population of just 1,088 (Codere 1950:52). Conservative estimates of the pre-colonial population place its size between 8,500 and 10,000 (Boyd 1990:144), which means that within three generations the *Kwakwaka'wakw* suffered a minimum loss of between 80 to 90 percent of their total population.<sup>23</sup> The impact of the 1862 epidemic and the continuing death rate must have effected the ethos of *Kwakwaka'wakw* daily life, marking it with a relentless sickness and death.<sup>24</sup> Such devastation must also have put new pressures on *Kwakwaka'wakw* ritual structures already strained by the merging of ceremonial and European economies. The increasing ritual activity of the late nineteenth century should be examined in light of these historical realities, a combination of global and local forces mounting a multifaceted attack on a restructured socio-religious order.

As Sergei Kan has argued in his trenchant study of the nineteenth-century Tlingit potlatch (1989), the anthropological tendency to focus on structure has limited our attention to the equally important emotional, psychological, and spiritual contexts of gift exchange. Certainly, the social context of late-nineteenth-century *Kwakwaka'wakw* society must have referenced the psychological and emotional costs of epidemic disease. As Walens reminds us here (n.d.:336):

It is extremely likely that by 1850, before the first large influx of whites in British Columbia, there was not a single native Northwest Coast Indian whose family had been untouched by epidemic or chronic disease introduced by Westerners, who had not had to mourn for a close relative who had died from a disease the shamans had never seen before, and thus there was probably no Northwest Coast Indian in 1865 who was living free from the psychological effects of grief.

*Kwakwaka'wakw* responses to disease, like the new economic possibilities, were framed by cultural logics that implicated them in a cosmogonic scheme. The energetic potlatching of the late nineteenth century was not simply a

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20,000 (see Boyd 1990:144; Codere 1950:52; Duff 1964:39). Although the exact numbers are beyond reach, it seems irrefutable now that the *Kwakwaka'wakw* were a dying population throughout the nineteenth century and that they experienced an precipitous decline following the 1862 smallpox epidemic.

<sup>23</sup> The sudden arrival of the world's communities onto the Northwest Coast brought with it the possibility of transmitted disease from literally every corner of the globe (see Quimby 1948). As early as May 1792, Vancouver discovered an abandoned village scattered with unburied smallpox victims at Hood's Canal (Vancouver 1984:540). During the next century, smallpox was simply the most lethal in an ensemble of deadly diseases. Measles, tuberculosis, venereal disease, and influenza each took a share of the *Kwakwaka'wakw* population (see Codere 1950:51–61; Duff 1964:40–44).

<sup>24</sup> In this regard, the dream of Emaxulagilis, recorded by George Hunt, suggests the emotional cost of epidemic disease (Boas 1925:33):

I dreamed of many men who were sitting in a house. I entered but I was not welcome to the chief who was very angry against me. Then I was addressed by another man who said to me: "We are the diseases, every one of us men who are assembled here, and we are discussing where we shall go next summer. Now go out!" said the man to me. When I was about to go out of the door of the large house the man who had talked to me came and pinched me with his right hand in my right side, saying "you are going to die of the sickness which has taken hold of you now." And then I awoke.

“megalomaniacal paranoid” society’s reaction to new wealth (Benedict 1934:205); it was the effort of a dying people—who saw themselves as active participants in a cosmic regenerative cycle—to regain control of their lives through culturally proscribed means. In this regard, the sudden fixation on maintaining rank and displaying crests that we see in the late nineteenth century was a logical response to dissonance at many different levels of Kwakwaka’wakw experience. Sander Gilman, in an insightful analysis of the contemporary social costs of AIDS and syphilis, has recently argued that “it is in the world of representations that we manage our fear of disease” (1987). Correspondingly, I suggest that we too need to explore Kwakwaka’wakw conceptions of sickness and death to grasp the full impact of the epidemic and their response to it.

The Kwakwaka’wakw had two explanations for illness in the nineteenth century: soul loss (a condition caused by supernaturals) and witchcraft (Boas 1966:141). Thus, sickness was always motivated, the willful action of a human or a supernatural being. How the Kwakwaka’wakw interpreted the results of epidemic disease is not, to my knowledge, revealed directly in the source texts. However, we do have a vibrant record of shamanic practices, including curative procedures, accusations of witchcraft, and shamanic rites of passage continuing into the twentieth century (Boas 1930; 1921:707–41; 1966:120–55; Curtis 1915:63–99; Ford 1941:96–100). Because the source of shamanic power for all Northwest Coast groups was spiritual, a failed healer demonstrated a lack, or a loss, of supernatural assistance, which led some groups decimated by smallpox to turn to Christianity in search of a more powerful protective force. In fact, epidemics would place the Northwest Coast shaman and his magic song in competition with missionaries, now armed with the smallpox vaccine, for the religious loyalty of native populations, creating a serious challenge to the traditional socio-religious order of some native groups (for example, see Miller 1984). The Kwakwaka’wakw were, however, extremely resistant to missionaries until Alert Bay was founded in 1882 (Duff 1964:91). This tenacious belief in their spiritual order, though, put Kwakwaka’wakw shamans, as healers, in an increasingly vulnerable position.

Shaman and noble both draw their spiritual efficacy from the supernatural power *nawalak* (Goldman 1975:179–82; see Boas 1966:165–8). But while the ranking chief’s power is inherited and validated through correct ritual performance, shamans are usually commoners who are given the gift of *nawalak* directly from the spirit world. Curative power comes after a prolonged illness, during which the incipient shaman “dies” and receives in a vision a magic song (Boas 1930:46–50). The gift of *nawalak* allows the shaman to perform healing ceremonies, commit destructive acts of sorcery, and to give potlatches (Goldman 1975:206).<sup>25</sup> Thus, any individual who

<sup>25</sup> That shamans could also host potlatches is important because it underscores that the essen-

recovered from a serious illness could claim supernatural power. Indeed, during an epidemic, recovered health would most likely be interpreted as the result of either specific supernatural protection or a successful shamanic curative.<sup>26</sup> Charlatans would begin to call into question the efficacy of the traditional healer—and by extension the entire spiritually sanctioned ritual order—by claiming the gift of *nawalak* and attempting to use the status of shaman for material gain (Curtis 1915:89–90).

Acknowledged shamans, however, faced two more serious challenges during the epidemic. First, despite shamanic treatment, people were dying. The texts are replete with accounts of failed healers (Boas 1930; Curtis 1915:96–99). The only recourse available for an unsuccessful healer was to argue that the illness was caused by witchcraft. And indeed the texts also are filled with accusations of witchcraft and of shamans who were killed for practicing sorcery (for example, Ford 1941:96–99). This demonstrates an antagonism that on one level references the infra-social frustrations of a society which is no longer receiving adequate physical and spiritual support from its technology or theology and, on another level, demonstrates the true arena for antagonistic status rivalries, where individuals secreted away the personal articles and bodily wastes of their rivals to use in casting malicious spells. Second, because shamans were in close contact with the dead and dying, as a group they must have had one of the highest rates of infection.

Since the *Kwakwaka'wakw* believed that illness was directed by either spiritual or human agency, the death of a shaman demonstrated the presence of a superior and a lethally vindictive supernatural force.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the *Kwakwaka'wakw* believed that the spirit world only revoked the (protective) gift of *nawalak* when a spiritually sanctioned person has acted immorally (Boas 1935:96). The ethos of *Kwakwaka'wakw* life in the late nineteenth century may well have registered not only the increasing rate of death but also an increasing self-reproach and a feeling of spiritual impotence. The disfiguring nature of the disease would have presented visual evidence of a lack of supernatural protection, for smallpox mounted a pustulant attack on the *Kwakwaka'wakw*'s "house of the soul" (Boas 1921:724). Thus, smallpox

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tial feature that validated gift exchange performance was not rank per se but the possession of a spiritual sanction (Goldman 1975:206). Possession of spiritual power was demonstrated by an ability to heal or provide for the *numaym* in some special manner.

<sup>26</sup> *Kwakwaka'wakw* distinguished four grades of shamans (Boas 1966:120–48). The highest degree belongs to a person who had "gone through," meaning one who had experienced death and visited the spirit world. These shamans worked closely with the ranking chief and could both cure and throw disease. Second-degree shamans could heal but not throw disease. Third-degree shamans could locate a disease in the human body but not cure it; and fourth-degree shamans had been cured by a supernatural power but were not granted the gift of healing.

<sup>27</sup> In nineteenth-century *Kwakwaka'wakw* society, a personal failure or accident demonstrated a lack of supernatural protection. During the winter ceremonials, for example, "the falling of a *hamatsa* or of another dancer is an indication of either ill will on the part of the spirit or as a defeat of their spirit by that of a rival tribe" (Boas 1897:435).

promised to fulfill what, I would argue, was the implicit consequence of immoral action within pre-colonial Kwakwaka'wakw cosmology—a death without the possibility of reincarnation and an entropic descent into universal chaos. Although we have no direct textual evidence of how the Kwakwaka'wakw interpreted the epidemic in 1865, the increasing ritual activity after the epidemic suggests the possibility of a religious response to the devastation. An examination of Kwakwaka'wakw eschatology is, therefore, not only advisory for a basic understanding of the potlatch but is also directly relevant to our analysis of the evolutions in late-nineteenth-century Kwakwaka'wakw ritual performance.

In the Kwakwaka'wakw universe, all beings have souls (Boas 1921:1220). However, the number of souls is finite, making each soul a precious possession that must be managed with care to insure its proper reincarnation. Souls are unevenly distributed among the creatures of the sky, ocean, earth, and forest (see Boas 1935:125–33); and they can be both lost and stolen (Boas 1921:714). Thus, all creatures must work conscientiously to perpetuate their species by ensuring that souls are properly reincarnated within their own domain of existence. This can only be achieved if all beings act morally by performing rituals of regeneration for those creatures taken as prey (see Boas 1930:205–7; Goldman 1975; Walens 1981). The Kwakwaka'wakw's preservation of inherited names was but one aspect of this intricate ritual calculus for restoring the souls of the dead to their initial positions within the cosmic scheme.

Every Kwakwaka'wakw possesses a personal soul, and ranking individuals possess two additional souls inherited from the numaym's founding ancestor: what Goldman has called a "name soul" (meaning the ranking name itself) and a "form soul" or ancestral crest, most powerfully manifested in dance masks and feast bowls (Goldman 1975:63). The nobility ensures the perpetuation of the ranking system by divesting their titles before death. The personal soul, however, is more difficult to control.<sup>28</sup> At bodily death the personal soul goes to the spirit world for one generation before returning to earth (Boas 1921:727). Only if the way has been successfully prepared<sup>29</sup> will the soul be reincarnated into the body of the deceased person's grandchild, to whom Kwakwaka'wakw refer as "the means of life" (Boas 1930:181; Ford 1941:166; Walens 1981:17).<sup>30</sup> Thus, the death of a child is really a double

<sup>28</sup> The personal soul is also associated with owls. Every individual is believed to be linked to an owl who lives deep in the forest. If either entity dies, its counterpart also dies (Boas 1932:221).

<sup>29</sup> During a child's first year of life, he receives four names at four separate ceremonies, each involving gift exchange. At ten months the infant is painted with red ochre, the "symbol of aliveness" (Goldman 1975:59). These rites of passage ritually prepare the child's body (the "house of the soul") to receive the soul of the deceased grandparent, making the child's body an attractive place for the soul to begin a new life.

<sup>30</sup> For similar beliefs among the Tlinget, see Kan (1989:109); among the Haida, Boelscher (1988:154).

death—a loss of not only that individual but also the means of reincarnating the numaym's elders.<sup>31</sup> The personal soul is a motivated being in and of itself; it travels as individuals sleep and can get lost, resulting in that person's death (Boas 1921:715). When an individual dies, the immediate family must perform a number of rituals to ensure that his or her soul will travel to the spirit realm and not remain to haunt the village. These rituals include giving away that person's property and kicking the corpse (Boas 1932:212–6). One essential aspect of the Kwakwaka'wakw's ritualization of everyday life was this concern with managing the noncorporeal travel of human and animal souls between the spiritual and bodily domains.

The sudden loss of 70 percent of the Kwakwaka'wakw population during the 1862 epidemic must have seriously complicated the ritual logistics for managing the travel of souls between domains. Additionally, the dislocation of many numayms from traditional village sites demanded new rituals to ensure the proper reincarnation of Kwakwaka'wakw souls. Within the pre-colonial scheme, village sites were believed to have been chosen by the numaym's founding ancestor, who granted the nobility control over specific natural resources at the moment of creation (Boas 1921:1345–8). The relocation of villages not only displaced numayms economically but also held dire consequences for the system of reincarnation, for the Kwakwaka'wakw believed that if their souls were unable to find their respective numayms on their return from the spirit world, the Kwak'wala speaking people would die out. In fact, from the perspective of pre-colonial Kwakwaka'wakw religious thought, an increasing Kwakwaka'wakw death rate in the face of an exponentially expanding European population demonstrated an inability to manage the reincarnation of Kwakwaka'wakw souls within exclusively Kwakwaka'wakw bodies.

In the photographs of Kwakwaka'wakw villages built in the 1880s and 1890s, we can see an ingenious native response to the new obstacles in soul trafficking—the totem pole (see Barbeau 1950). Totem poles recapitulate the founding myth of the numaym, standing as visual markers of family histories, displaying their crests and spiritual powers. A remarkably late cultural development for the Kwakwaka'wakw, the first record we have of a totem pole standing in a Kwakwaka'wakw village is in 1873 (Holm 1983:38). The dislocations caused by European colonization removed Kwakwaka'wakw societies from the natural landmarks that could guide disembodied souls back to their numayms, replacing them with mythologically empty sites. Totem poles re-invested the village geography with mythological significance; we might

<sup>31</sup> In fact, children may have suffered most during epidemics. The 1881–83 reports of George Blenkinsop, a Kwakwaka'wakw agent, reveal a high rate of disease among Kwakwaka'wakw children and a disproportionate death rate for children compared to adults (quoted in Codere 1950:53–54). The smallpox epidemic may have had a similar effect, killing infants and children more frequently than adults.

think of them as forty-foot beacons designed to direct the travel of noncorporeal souls to the right location for reincarnation within the proper family line (Walens 1981:105). As the death rate began to complicate an already intricate ranking system, totem poles also became politicized statements, allowing individuals to publicly declare their hold on certain crests by inscribing in wood a specific mytho-social family history.

NEW RANKINGS: THE STRUGGLE FOR POWER

The need to recognize the dead ceremonially and transfer their ranking privileges was an important factor behind the increasing number of potlatches in the late nineteenth century. In addition to the logistical complexities of the mortuary cycle,<sup>32</sup> the post-1865 population had difficulty producing enough males to fill the 658 ranking seats (Codere 1950:97). Noble families had to scramble to find new methods of preserving both their titles and winter ceremonial dance privileges. Previously, inheritance followed a strict rule of male primogeniture; in 1865, however, with a decimated population, a first-born woman was allowed to hold a ranking seat in abeyance for her son. This change brought new social power to a group of women and foretold inheritance struggles between first-born daughters and their younger brothers for possession of the ranking seat. Moreover, it became possible for the first time for individuals to inherit ranking seats from both parents, leading to marriages that were strategically aimed not only at gaining winter ceremonial privileges but also at accumulating new rankings (Boas 1966:53). These new possibilities for social advancement were countered by ingenious defensive strategies. Sham marriages were conducted to keep crests alive when no successor was available and to protect against the loss of ceremonial privileges (Boas 1897:359). Thus, one long-term consequence of the death rate was that systems of inheritance were de-stabilized, allowing some individuals previously denied all but supporting roles in the gift economy to claim ritual powers primarily by virtue of their sustained health.

If we accept the most conservative estimate that at mid-century the Kwakwaka'wakw population neared 8,500 (Boyd 1990:144), then the 658 permanent ranking seats granted ritual privilege to less than 10 percent of the total

<sup>32</sup> The burial of a chief was a multi-step process involving the wake, the burial, and the annual memorial, each step involving the appropriate gift exchange. The complexity of the mortuary process served to overcome a basic contradiction within Kwakwaka'wakw socio-religious thought: Although the ranking system is believed fixed and eternal, its membership is transitory. This paradox is overcome by a subsuming of individual identity to the titles themselves; that is, ritual attention is paid to the seat, not the individual inhabiting it (see Boas 1966:50). Maurice Bloch has examined a similar “denial of history” in Merina mortuary rites. He argues that beliefs about the spiritual pollution of the corpse serve as a means of psychologically distancing society from the individuality of the deceased, allowing an incorporation of the individual into the “eternal authority.” The first step in a mortuary rite, thus, “is associated with the time-bound individual and the polluting aspects of death, and the second with the regenerative aspects which recreate the permanent order on which traditional authority is based” (Bloch and Parry 1982:11).

population. By the late nineteenth century, at least 80 percent of the Kwakwaka'wakw population was gone, demanding a new distribution of ancestral names and forcing the noble class into a frantic accumulation of crests to prevent the ranking system from collapse. Here, Boas recognizes the outcome of such practices but not the motivating rationale (1966:55):

The advance in social rank arising from the potlatch features of the marriage often overshadows entirely the primary object of a marriage, namely, the establishment of a family. Instead of this, the transfer of names and privileges becomes the primary consideration, and fictitious marriages are performed, the sole object of which is the transfer of names, privileges, and property previously described.

As the decades of defensive inheritance strategies took their toll, the ranking system grew more complicated, making the ownership of some titles contestable for the first time.<sup>33</sup> In all, the general movement in the late nineteenth century was towards an increasing complexity in the ranking system, as fewer individuals held more statuses, requiring more frequent gift exchanges to legitimate newly acquired ritual prerogatives.

An underlying problem facing Kwakwaka'wakw society in the first decades of capitalism, however, was in distinguishing an economic from a spiritual legitimacy. The pre-colonial order gave ultimate authority for the numaym's collective wealth to the ranking chief, whose spiritual powers convinced animals to give themselves up as food. After 1849, capitalism allowed individuals for the first time to amass wealth through private industry, allowing commoners to attempt to break into the gift economy as full players. Economically, the commoner was now on equal footing with the nobility and perhaps even at an advantage, as chiefs might be unwilling to support their claims by working in mines or as day laborers or pushing their wives and daughters into prostitution.<sup>34</sup> Competition between commoners and chiefs

<sup>33</sup> The famous Kwakwaka'wakw rivalry potlatch was a response to this historical crisis in the ranking system. A response to the ritual consequences of a sudden population decline, the rivalry potlatch involved two individuals with competing claims on a ranked seat that was without an obvious heir (Drucker and Heizer 1967:99). The intensities of these contests demonstrate a Kwakwaka'wakw commitment, through the turn of the century, to maintain the proper ranking order. In 1914, this concern for the legitimacy of the ranking order remained strong. Curtis reports that:

rank is so firmly fixed that the people rarely consent to a change in the relative position of any two chiefs. In some instances a gens low in the scale has usurped the place of a higher one, but this has always resulted in long continued strife and dispute throughout the tribe; in other words, the procedure does not meet with the undivided public approval and hence is to be regarded as an exception to the rule (1915:141).

<sup>34</sup> One example is provided by George Hunt, who recorded the life history of Hawaselal, a commoner of the Mamaleleqala tribe. Hawaselal forced his wife and three step-daughters into prostitution in order to buy the copper, "Dry-Mouth-Maker-Cause-of-Shame." Soon after purchasing the copper, all three step-daughters became sick and died. These deaths were attributed to Hawaselal's illegitimate purchase of the copper and improper self-importance. Soon Hawaselal fell ill and gave away Dry-Mouth-Maker-Cause-of-Shame to a proper ranking member of the tribe (Boas 1925:93-5).

drove up the size of gift exchanges, as each fought to distinguish themselves in an economically unified social arena.

The life history of Teqwap, a Kwakwaka'wakw commoner, illustrates the nature of this challenge (adapted from Boas 1925:97-8):

Teqwap was the second son of commoner parents of the Mamaleleqala tribe. He never married but was able to amass a personal fortune large enough to host feasts and potlatches for the tribe. He owned a copper named Crow and a potlatch name, Wamis. He was hated by the chiefs because "when one of the chiefs gave away property then Wamis also gave away blankets, just as if he were making fun of the chief in doing so." Teqwap became afraid of the chiefs of his tribe after they threatened to kill him and, calling the tribe together for a feast, announced: "Now listen to what I say to you, my tribe, on account of the way your hearts are all against me, for you wish me to disappear from the world, you chiefs. Now your wish is good." After giving the copper and his potlatch name to a ranked friend, Ewalas Kwaxilanokume, Teqwap faced his tribe and declared: "Now, tribe, now I am dead, according to your wish, tribe. Now I take this chief here, this Wamis, to go to my seat." Teqwap died that same winter. George Hunt states that Teqwap and Ewalas Kwaxilanokume were not related. Teqwap chose his heir simply because "Ewalas Kwaxilanokume did not hurt [him] with words."

Teqwap's career demonstrates the problem that a market economy posed for the pre-colonial social order. As a commoner, he had no inherited right to distribute property. As an unmarried commoner, he had no rights in the winter Tsetsaeqa; and since he was childless, his soul would die with him. Although he had no legitimate authority to do so, Teqwap's wealth enabled him to mimic the role of a ranking member of the tribe by distributing property alongside the recognized chiefs and by buying coppers (the shield-like metal objects that were the Kwakwaka'wakw's preeminent markers of social status). In fact, his career posed the ultimate challenge to the ranking system, as he performed the duties of a chief without the spiritual sanction to do so. He gave feasts, distributed blankets, and right before death, gave away the copper and his name, just as a chief would divest himself of all his spiritual properties before dying. However, Teqwap's motivations were perceived as self-aggrandizement and not directed towards the spiritual benefit of the numaym. In the end, his career was an unsuccessful attempt to convert material wealth into legitimate symbolic capital; others, however, would be more successful in this aim.

Nouveau riche eventually compromised the immutability of the ritual hierarchy with the formation of a new set of ranked seats called the Eagles. A total of twelve Eagle positions were created, introducing commoners, low-ranking individuals, two women, and even a non-Kwakwaka'wakw into the primary seats in the ranking order (Drucker and Heizer 1967:88-97). The positions became hereditary but were always distinguished from the mythologically sanctioned "real chiefs" (Boas 1966:50-5; 1921:820-3). The eagle crest reveals the symbolic relationship between these nouveau riche and the ranking chiefs, as eagles are physically powerful birds who steal carrion from other animals and leave behind only scraps for other birds to eat (Boas 1921:784). Similarly, these economically powerful, human Eagles had stolen their posi-



tions within the ranking order by displacing the spiritually legitimated chiefs and had left for the traditional nobility only the remnants of their conquest by seizing the first position within the hierarchy. Though ultimately restricted to twelve positions, the long-term symbolic power of the Eagle seats can be measured by the fact that by the turn of the century, the Eagle seats were desired even by the mythologically sanctioned chiefs. Chief Billy Assu of Cape Mudge, for example, gained the Eagle seat of the We-Wai-Kai with a huge potlatch in 1911, an achievement still prized by his son and heir, Harry Assu, seventy-five years later (Assu with Inglis 1989:39).

The creation of the Eagle seats can be seen as an attempt to harmonize the new capitalist base of Kwakwaka'wakw life with the logics of the mytho-social order. In the pre-colonial period, the numaym's material success was attributed to proper ritual performance and the possession of a spiritual sanction. After 1849, however, the original covenant between chiefs and the animal world, which served to legitimate the symbolic domination of the ranking class, was no longer the only means of explaining material success. Now wage labor and a market economy could provide for the numaym, and the symbolic domination inherent in the pre-colonial economy was broken by non-ranking individuals who could now equal, or get the best of, the ranking members in providing for the numaym. By fighting to gain access to the ranking system, wealthy commoners were pursuing a traditional and very powerful logic, as their outstanding material successes could easily have been interpreted as demonstrating a new kind of new spiritual sanction, supplanting that of the traditional chiefs. But by incorporating wealthy commoners into the ritual system the Kwakwaka'wakw risked de-valuing the cosmological relations attached to each seat within the ranking system, jeopardizing the entire mytho-social order. The role of the chief, which had been strengthened during the fur trade because he could marshal the total resources of the numaym, was now undermined by a European economy that did not recognize his social privileges or ritual status. The economic structures supporting the pre-colonial mytho-social system were overturned as commoners entered into an open competition with ranking members for the loyalty of the numaym. What is fascinating, however, is that the chiefs were able to consolidate their position and limit the total number of Eagle positions to twelve. A major factor contributing to the stabilization of the ranking system, I would argue, was the colonial administration's decision to outlaw the potlatch.

#### RESISTANCE AND THE POTLATCH LAW

The provincial government's original policy of pacification and containment had, by 1880, become secondary to a concerted effort to destroy indigenous belief systems and to turn Indians into farmers. Kwakwaka'wakw resistance to the assimilative efforts of the colonial authorities made them an explicit target of the new anti-native legislation. Administrators correctly singled out

the gift economy as the Kwakwaka'wakw's dominant means of maintaining cultural cohesion. The Kwakwaka'wakw nobles who worked so zealously in the summer months to amass the wealth to be given away during the winter rituals were utilizing capitalist practices to support a ritual economy outside of European control. Alienated from this most central native practice, Indian agents and missionaries argued that the potlatch was directly responsible for all the “evils” befalling native groups, a practice preventing them from accepting the “improvements” offered by Christianity and a life of farming. Indians had been officially denied the right to vote by legislative mandates in 1872 and 1874, and on April 19, 1884, the Statutes of Canada were adapted to read<sup>35</sup>:

Every Indian or other person who engages in or assists in celebrating the Indian festival known as the “potlatch” or in the Indian dance known as the “Tamanawas” is guilty of a misdemeanour, and shall be liable to imprisonment for a term of not more than six nor less than two months (quoted in LaViolette 1973:43).

The narrative of an assimilated, agriculturally based native population was fixed in the colonial psyche, and as the demands for new settlement territory expanded, so too did the urgency behind their efforts. Evidence was mounting that native groups were not adhering to the colonial plan. Codere reports that between 1889 and 1932 the Kwakwaka'wakw never had more than twenty-three acres of land under cultivation (1950:25), and initial efforts to eliminate the Kwakwaka'wakw's traditional long house in favor of smaller single family houses were similarly unsuccessful. The Kwakwaka'wakw were actively incorporating the European practices they saw of value into their society without becoming the provisional “whites” the Europeans desired. Even after decades of colonial pressure, the Hamatsa danced on—and at an accelerating pace.

By the mid-1880s, however, the Kwakwaka'wakw universe was being challenged on numerous fronts. It was a time when energies had to be devoted to restoring the souls lost to the epidemic, when the sudden economic power of commoners required a new distribution of ritual authority, when missionaries were actively pursuing converts, and when capitalism was dislocating villages and threatening to destroy traditional community ties. The new anti-potlatching legislation framed these events within a colonial discourse that forced the Kwakwaka'wakw to objectify their ritual practices in a new way. No longer was gift exchange a tacitly accepted way of life. Now it was a practice under attack, requiring both a rationalization and a defense. This change in the Kwakwaka'wakw's cognitive relationship to their own mytho-social practices is what Bourdieu would call an evolution from doxa to ortho-

<sup>35</sup> This first articulation of the Potlatch Law proved too ambiguous to achieve a conviction. It was amended in 1895, and once again in 1918 to give Indian agents the power of summary judgement, making them, in essence, both prosecutor and judge in all potlatch cases. The decade between 1913–1923 saw the most active application of the Potlatch Law (see Cole and Chaikin 1990; Sewid-Smith 1979; LaViolette 1961).

doxy (1977:169). It should be seen, however, not only as a logical product of the effort to restore the balance of souls to bodies but also, in view of the colonial pressure, as an increasingly vocal and impassioned political resistance.

In October of 1886, Franz Boas began his first field work among the Kwakwaka'wakw and reportedly was met by these words (Rohner 1969: 33–3):

We want to know whether you have come to stop our dances and feasts, as the missionaries and agents who live among our neighbors try to do. We do not want to have anybody here who will interfere with our customs. We were told that a man-of-war would come if we should continue to do as our grandfathers and great grandfathers have done. But we do not mind such words. Is this the white man's land? We are told it is the Queen's land; but no! it is mine! Where was the Queen when our God came down from heaven? Where was the Queen when our God gave the land to my grandfather and told him, "this will be thine?" My father owned the land and was a mighty chief; now it is mine. And when your man-of-war comes let him destroy our houses. Do you see yon woods? Do you see yon trees? We shall cut them down and build new houses and live as our fathers did. We will dance when our laws command us to dance, we will feast when our hearts desire to feast. Do we ask the white man, "Do as the Indian does?" No, we do not. Why then do you ask us, "Do as the white man does?" It is a strict law that bids us dance. It is a strict law that bids us distribute our property among our friends and neighbors. It is a good law. Let the white man observe his law, we shall observe ours.

The Kwakwaka'wakw's mytho-social order was now consciously identified with a specific set of ritual practices to be defended against the forces of change. Within the frame of the hostile legislation the potlatch now became a political statement that could be used, presumably by the nobility, to consolidate their position and to halt further changes within the ritual system. By the turn of the century, the number of Eagle seats had been permanently limited to twelve, and Kwakwaka'wakw were referring to the potlatch as a traditional practice.

Adding to the cognitive effects of the Potlatch law for the Kwakwaka'wakw during the 1880s was the literal commodification of their ritual and art forms at the hands of European collectors. This new hunger for indigenous material culture was part of an energetic movement to collect cultures threatened by colonial capitalism. By 1880, emissaries from America, France, Germany, England, Sweden, and Russia were scouring the Coast for items of native manufacture. The wholesale export of Northwest Coast material culture was a burgeoning industry that continued into the next century (see Cole 1985). While a voluminous literature exists on Northwest Coast art, little has been said about the cognitive, psychological, or spiritual consequences of the art trade for native groups. For the Kwakwaka'wakw, many of the items singled out by collectors (dance masks and feast dishes in particular) were considered spiritually animated beings. These items displayed the hereditary crests of the numaym and were, in Goldman's terms, "form souls", one-

half of the spiritual property inherited from the founding ancestor of the numaym (Goldman 1975:63). Dance masks, for example, were important vehicles of transformation which symbolized the essential consanguinity of all living beings beneath the mask of their particular species.<sup>36</sup> The items that were now being exported on a mammoth scale around the globe were not commodities to the traditional Kwakwaka'wakw; they held in their substance the keys to an entire cosmology. Each transaction therefore jeopardized the cognitive integrity of the pre-colonial religious order by threatening to replace it with an increasingly commodified outlook on ritual practices.<sup>37</sup>

A general problem, in fact, facing the Kwakwaka'wakw in the last decades of the nineteenth century was negotiating the contradictory material logics required by capitalist and gift economies. The effort to maintain a separation between economies became increasingly difficult as the Kwakwaka'wakw moved into full-scale commercial industries. Among the first casualties were the Kwakwaka'wakw's pre-colonial notions of time and space, which structured daily life in accordance with an overarching cosmogonic scheme. Prior to 1849, the Kwakwaka'wakw believed that months of winter ritual were necessary for a successful summer hunt. By 1870, many Kwakwaka'wakw were working in canneries; by 1885 commercial fishing and lumbering were also common occupations (Codere 1950:31). The logic supporting the Kwakwaka'wakw's mytho-social order was fundamentally incompatible with this shift from subsistence to commercial production. The mythological covenant with nature, which had provided food in exchange for rites of regeneration, was no longer tenable. The salmon now caught by Canadian boats and exported from British Columbia would not have their skeletons returned to the sea to insure their reincarnation, just as the Kwakwaka'wakw's own regenerative rites, performed during the four-month-long winter, Tsetsaeqa, were increasingly difficult to perform while meeting the daily demands of a commercial livelihood.<sup>38</sup>

The Kwakwaka'wakw's pre-colonial ritualization of everyday life, performed in accordance with a religiously sanctioned concept of nature, was transformed by the homogenizing forces of colonial capitalism. The conceptualization of history and cosmology as a simultaneous process, one indivisible from the other, was set against what Benedict Anderson (following Walter

<sup>36</sup> The dancer gave new life to the ancestor spirit by donning a dance mask. As James Sewid described this relationship between dancer and mask: "After I came out my masks came out and danced" (Spradley 1969:93).

<sup>37</sup> Participation in the art trade can be used as a crude measure of the status of the pre-colonial belief systems of native groups. Johan Jacobsen (a German collector, who was to collect over 7,000 ethnological items for the Berlin Museum) was able to purchase artifacts from the Fort Rupert Kwakwaka'wakw in 1882 after offering them a feast but on the same trip failed to secure ceremonial items from the more isolated Kwakwaka'wakw group, the Newitty (Jacobsen 1977:73). See Cole (1985) for a discussion of the collector's "tactics" in the art trade.

<sup>38</sup> The Lekwiltok tribe at Cape Mudge began performing the First Salmon Ceremony again in 1984 (see Assu, with Inglis 1989:94).

Benjamin) has called “homogeneous empty time.” In this temporality, simultaneity is “transverse, cross-time, marked not by fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar” (Anderson 1983:30). As the legal punishments for potlatching and the dependence on commercial industry expanded, the length of the ritual season contracted from the traditional four months of ritual to two weeks and eventually from two weeks to two days (Holm 1977). By 1900, the first generation of Kwakwaka’wakw would be born who would choose whether or not to participate in the winter ceremonials (see Ford 1941; Spradley 1969:109–10). The potlatch, which could be performed over a weekend, was the pre-colonial religious practice most adaptable to the new socio-economic conditions. Consequently, it became increasingly the focus of Kwakwaka’wakw mytho-social practice. The Kwakwaka’wakw’s remarkable success in reorganizing their ritual order to fit the new demands of a capitalist economy can, however, be measured by the scale and ferocity of the colonial response.

In the second decade of the twentieth century, H. M. Halliday, the Indian agent in charge of Kwakwaka’wakw territories, was frustrated by the increasing number and scale of Kwakwaka’wakw potlatches at Alert Bay. In response, he undertook a decade-long struggle to destroy the potlatch, in what was the most vigorous prosecution of the Potlatch Law on the Coast (Halliday 1935:188–95). His efforts culminated in the Alert Bay trials of 1922, in which many of the highest-ranking members of the Kwakwaka’wakw tribes were jailed for participating in one of the largest potlatches ever held (80 were arrested, 29 convicted).<sup>39</sup> To avoid prison, individuals were forced to surrender their dance masks and ritual objects to the Canadian authorities (see Sewid-Smith 1979; Assu, with Inglis 1989).<sup>40</sup> In the Alert Bay trials we can see that the Kwakwaka’wakw’s adaptation to capitalism had proved too successful for colonial officials to ignore. Halliday’s all-out legal assault on the potlatch marked the end of an era for the Kwakwaka’wakw, suppressing in a colonial gesture a revitalized and growing gift economy.

An analysis of the gift exchange practices in operation just prior to the crackdown allows us to see how the performance of rank was transformed in the twentieth century, producing an adaptation to capitalism that secured the noble’s social importance and implicated him or her once again in the affairs

<sup>39</sup> See Sewid-Smith 1979; Assu, with Inglis 1989:103–6; Cole and Chaikin 1990:118–21; Halliday 1935:188–95; Drucker and Heizer 1967:50; LaViolette 1961:80.

<sup>40</sup> The items that were confiscated by the Canadian Government were either sold to collectors or sent to museums in Ottawa. A long campaign by the Kwakwaka’wakw for the repatriation of these objects led in 1979 to the opening of the Kwagiulth Museum in Cape Mudge and in 1980 of the U’ mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay. Some of the ritual items that were sold in 1922 are still in the George Heye Foundation collection. On the seizure and repatriation process, see Sewid-Smith (1979); Assu, with Inglis (1989); Webster (1990); and two films made by the U’ mista Cultural Centre (Potlatch . . . A Strict Law Bids Us Dance” and “Box of Treasures”). See Clifford (1991) for an intriguing comparative reading of Kwakwaka’wakw history as presented in Kwakwaka’wakw and British Columbian museums.

of the entire community. The Hudson's Bay blanket was still the primary currency, but a variety of new items were distributed which allowed the gift giver a new means of recognizing status.<sup>41</sup> The gifts were now also a sign of the host's "taste." By 1921, Chief Daniel Cranmer was giving bracelets, gas lights, violins, and guitars to the "more important people" and saving two pool tables and a gas boat for specially honored chiefs (Codere 1961:470). The mytho-social meaning of exchange goods was limited to traditional items: ritual paraphernalia and, now, the "real old" Hudson's Bay blankets. The size of the gift exchange required years of capital accumulation and demonstrated a successful exploitation of the Canadian free market. Overall, these changes demonstrate a new success at harmonizing capitalist practices with the gift economy and suggest that before the governmental crackdown, the Kwakwaka'wakw had successfully re-tooled their ritual economy to reflect their new socio-economic position.

The century-long transformation from subsistence to commercial production changed the central referent of the Kwakwaka'wakw gift economy from food to cash. By 1921, the purchasing power of Canadian dollars was on display, making unmediated capitalism the marker of social success. Community ties were strengthened by the size of gift exchanges, which required that individuals work together to finance each other's ritual efforts (Drucker and Heizer 1967:53).<sup>42</sup> In fact, the complicated system of loans and debts which now supported the gift economy intricately involved the nobility once again in the financial affairs of the entire community.<sup>43</sup> A successful performance of

<sup>41</sup> Here is a list of exchange items at four of the largest and best documented potlatches of their day (see Codere 1950:90-94):

- 1849 20 blankets, 240 animal fur blankets, 4 slaves, 8 canoes (Boas 1921:882).
- 1895 13,450 blankets, 7000 brass bracelets, 240 wash basins, also spoons, abalone shells, and kettels (Boas 1897:621).
- 1909 2,000 blankets, plus canoes, sloops, coppers, and coin worth 9,000 blankets (\$4,500); and the elimination of debts worth 11,000 blankets (\$5,500)(Curtis 1915:145).
- 1921 Daniel Cranmer's potlatch: one of the largest ever, perhaps as much as \$20,000 invested in: 400 blankets (plus uncounted others), 5 gas boats, 2 pool tables, 24 canoes, 300 oak trunks, 1,000 basins, glasses, washtubs, teapots, cups, sewing machines, bracelets, dresses, shawls, sweaters, shirts, gas lights, violins, guitars, gramophones, bedsteads, bureaus, unspecified cash, sugar, and 1,000 sacks of flour (valued at \$3.00 a sack)(Codere 1961:470-1).

<sup>42</sup> Chief Daniel Cranmer's 1921 potlatch, for example, took nearly seven years to finance. Helen Codere reports that his account book for the 1921 potlatch shows three types of accounts: (1) loans of property at interest to individuals financing their own potlatches; (2) loans made to him; and (3) a list declaring who was to be given what at the potlatch. Chief Cranmer also loaned money to individuals seeking to buy a copper and sold options on his own coppers (Codere 1961:468-71).

<sup>43</sup> The suppression of the gift economy was, therefore, a financial disaster for the entire community. The Kwakwaka'wakw, in fact, used this very argument in protest of the Potlatch Law, which led the Provincial Government to briefly consider buying up coppers in an effort to eliminate the inter-community debts (Cole and Chaikin 1990:133; LaViolette 1961:81). The value of just the coppers confiscated in 1922 was estimated by the Kwakwaka'wakw at over \$35,000.

rank had always depended on a combination of social position and personal competence, which was demonstrated in the noble's ability to rally community resources. But unlike in the pre-colonial potlatch, however, where the chief could assume the collective support of his numaym, solidarity was now produced by nobles who had to actively seek out and negotiate a wider field of interpersonal relations. The nobility had always served as a bank for the collective wealth of the tribe, but the type of currency nobles possessed (and converted into social power) had changed dramatically from pre-colonial times.

In the pre-colonial era, the ranking chief's primary strength lay in his symbolic capital—a spiritual connection to the natural realm. This was converted into material wealth through the collective labor of the numaym, whose members validated his ritual standing by providing the furs and goods to be distributed. In the modern period, nobles could only validate their rank through a personal display of material wealth. Gift exchange was no longer an explicit demonstration of the spiritual and economic strength of the entire numaym. The noble's personal productive ability was now on display, and commodity-capitalism was the means of achieving social success. Consequently, potlatch participants now confirmed the noble's status not by providing, but by witnessing and receiving, gifts. Guests now enjoyed symbolic power, forcing nobles to provide material proof of their commitment to the mytho-social order. What for the early-nineteenth-century noble had been a conversion of symbolic into economic capital was inverted into a twentieth-century transformation of individual material success into mytho-social power.<sup>44</sup> To be sure, these early-twentieth-century potlatches were not simply mechanical exchanges of wealth for social standing. People of rank were still judged on the morality of their performance, but the secularization of everyday life had significantly shifted the context of gift exchange.

Rank was still hereditary and obliged the nobility to provide for the community, but the means of securing that prosperity had changed from a religious covenant with nature to the capitalist free market, an evolution with profound cosmological impact. Gone was the ritualization of everyday life which linked individual and group morality to the stability of the physical universe in a totalizing symbolic scheme. Now a spiritual emphasis on an all-too-fragile human universe prevailed. By distributing property (now primarily in the form of commodities, not religious symbols), the noble demonstrated a continuing moral commitment to the whole of Kwakwaka'wakw society (by

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With such losses, it is not surprising that after the Alert Bay trials, the gift economy collapsed as individuals increasingly defaulted on their loans (Drucker and Heizer 1967:61).

<sup>44</sup> The notion of "symbolic capital" comes from Bourdieu (1977:171–83). What I am attempting to show here is how the division of material and symbolic properties in Kwakwaka'wakw society evolved during the nineteenth century. My point is not that nobles did not have wealth in the pre-colonial period or prestige in the twentieth century, but that the terms of the negotiation for converting one into the other had significantly shifted.

1921, barely a thousand strong) and allowed ranking and non-ranking members alike to recapitulate their commitment to one another through the ritualized performance of dance and song, and the display of ancestral crests. The practice of rank, which had been evolving in relation to rapidly changing Kwakwaka'wakw social needs throughout the nineteenth century, had been once again transformed, giving the nobility a renewed relevance and influence over Kwakwaka'wakw society, in what was a brief but nonetheless substantial victory over the decades of disease and social upheaval.

After the Alert Bay trials, fear of prison drove the gift economy underground. Utilizing a loophole in the potlatch law which conflated potlatching with “Indian dancing,” the distribution of gifts was divorced from the dances, songs, and rituals which conferred on the event a spiritual sanction (Cole and Chaikin 1990:142). Potlatch goods were now distributed door-to-door and the transactions recorded in account books (Cole and Chaikin 1990:142; Drucker and Heizer 1967:47). But having lost the public visibility needed to implicate the entire community in the validation of a ritual status, the potlatch was increasingly distanced from its mytho-social context. For example, the distribution of gifts by order of rank, the quintessential means of recognizing ritual authority in the nineteenth century, was abandoned as the potlatch became more individualized and mobile (Cole and Chaikin 1990:142). Potlatches continued through the 1930s and 1940s in various forms and were no doubt both socially and spiritually meaningful events but—in light of the legal sanction—could no longer be the most prominent unifying force in Kwakwaka'wakw society. The Potlatch Law was finally taken off the law books in 1951. Two years later, Chief Mungo Martin held the first legal potlatch in almost seventy years; in so doing, he launched a cautious but ultimately successful campaign to reinvigorate the gift economy. His efforts opened merely the latest, and ongoing, chapter in the centuries-long evolution in the conceptualization and performance of rank and demonstrated, once again, the remarkable tenacity of the Kwakwaka'wakw population in regards to their mytho-social order.<sup>45</sup>

This essay has forwarded a particular reading of Kwakwaka'wakw history, emphasizing the symbolic because it is through cosmological understandings that people find orientation in time and space and motivation in everyday life. No single facet of Kwakwaka'wakw experience—religious, economic, socio-structural, or colonial—can adequately explain the dramatic changes in their ritual forms, for Kwakwaka'wakw history is the product of radical change at many levels of Kwakwaka'wakw experience. Framed by a colonial discourse and subjected to shifting definitions of ritual legitimacy and performance, the practice of rank was refigured over a seventy-five-year period to match the changing social context of Kwakwaka'wakw life. Only by historicizing Kwakwaka'wakw cosmology can we see the logic behind these

<sup>45</sup> For description and analysis of the contemporary Kwakwaka'wakw potlatch, see Webster (1991); Assu, with Inglis (1979:109–21).



changes in the ritual order and appreciate their response to colonization. Though dislocated from both a sacred and a physical geography and challenged by epidemic disease, capitalist ideologies, and legal sanction, Kwakwaka'wakw agents worked to preserve the ranking system, and through it, the viability of a uniquely Kwakwaka'wakw universe.

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