

THE IMPACT OF THE FUR TRADE ON THE TLINGIT
DURING THE LATE-EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES

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By

William L. Ostenstad

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ABSTRACT

Anthropologists have assumed that during the fur trade period there was only minimal change in the social and political organization of the Indians of the Northwest Coast. This view is challenged by reconstructing change processes among the Tlingit from the time of first contact, in 1775, to circa 1880. The analysis relied heavily on primary historical sources, such as explorers and fur traders accounts, to interpret the existing ethnographic record. This is, then, a study in ethnohistory.

The thesis begins by presenting a broad overview of Tlingit culture, then examines the history of Tlingit involvement in the fur trade. After providing this background, it is shown that anthropologists have presented contradictory interpretations of Tlingit sociopolitical organization. By considering these contradictions in light of early historical sources, it is demonstrated that during the early contact period most wealth was owned by clans and lineage-based house groups. Social status relationships, other than those patterned by sex and personality, were largely determined by age differences. The oldest man in a house group acted as a redistributor of collectively owned wealth and as a spokesman in political affairs. The aboriginal Tlingit were thus organized into a Rank Society.

Whereas subsistence wealth was collectively owned, wealth derived in the fur trade was individually owned. This change

in property relations was of vital importance. Individuals who enriched themselves in the fur trade were able to achieve positions of social eminence by distributing wealth at potlatches. Thus, wealth replaced age as the prime determinant of social status.

However, individuals were able to use wealth for more than simply elevating their social status. Gift-giving at potlatches laid the basis for kinship or partnership relationships between wealthy individuals living in distant communities. These social alliances granted hunting rights on exclusive hunting territory, allowed travel over exclusive trade routes, and/or led to the establishment of remunerative middleman trading relationships. Wealth was also used to purchase slaves, which increased the productive capability of the owner. By these means, some individuals were able to gain a larger stake than others in the fur trade economy. A rudimentary form of economic stratification had developed.

During the fur trade period, the population became concentrated in a few large villages, which resulted in the development of more complex political forms. Rather than acting merely as spokesmen for their kinship groups, wealthy men began to assert themselves as village or territorial leaders. The Tlingit were developing the political attributes of a Stratified Society, once again in a rudimentary way.

The thesis concludes by considering the relevance of Northwest coast studies to social evolutionary theory.

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W.L.O.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

...the moment when Europeans communicate, for the first time, with newly-discovered people is that for studying them: at a later period, the intercourse of strangers produces changes in the natural habits of these people, presently the primitive features confounded with the new, and adulterated by this mixture, become imperceptible, and end by escaping observation (Fleurieu 1801:258).

Problems in Northwest Coast Ethnology

The first anthropologists who visited the Northwest Coast of America around the turn of this century made discoveries which helped to alter the course of anthropological thought. They encountered Indians who possessed only a simple fishing, hunting, and gathering technology but whose social organization was of a kind that is usually associated with a higher level of economic development. The rich ceremonial life and the complex and unequal division of wealth and social status among these Indians was reminiscent of agrarian societies. This ethnographic evidence contradicted contemporary theories of human evolution which postulated a correspondence between foraging economies and egalitarian clan organizations. The early Northwest Coast studies thus contributed to the decline of materialist and evolutionist traditions in anthropology which had flourished during the late nineteenth century and which have been only recently revived (see Harris 1968:302, *passim*).

It must be considered, though, that by the time Franz Boas inaugurated professional anthropological research on the Northwest Coast in 1886 the Indians living there had experienced roughly a century of sustained contact with European and American fur traders. This thesis will examine the importance of this period in the culture history of the Tlingit, who inhabit the northern sector of the Northwest Coast culture area.

Anthropologists have generally argued that major social change among the coastal Indians only began during the last few decades of the nineteenth century, a period that was characterized by large-scale white settlement, diversified economic development, and the establishment of complex government institutions. Ronald L. Olson (1967:v) is one anthropologist who has expressed this view:

The undermining of Tlingit culture had been slow up to the time of the gold rush [of the 1890s] but the boom was now on and the native way of life began to disintegrate rapidly.

Many anthropologists have maintained that there was sociocultural change during the fur trade period of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but there was no sharp break with the aboriginal culture. Philip Drucker has been a major proponent of this interpretation. Referring to the Northwest Coast in general, he concluded that the fur trade brought a major influx of wealth which was incorporated into existing cultural forms:

Far reaching culture change may originate in such eras of prosperity, but it is likely to be a gradual development deriving from elaboration of existing culture

patterns and hence in accord with their fundamental principles, with the pre-existing ideals and culturally approved attitude patterns (Drucker 1965:190).

Thus, according to Drucker, the fur trade period was a time of quantitative rather than qualitative change.¹

This assessment of the impact of the fur trade must be regarded with caution. As Drucker himself conceded (1965:190), there has been no thorough analysis of post-contact sociocultural change among any of the major "tribal" groupings living on the Northwest Coast. Furthermore, the work that has been done on post-contact change has relied heavily on information which has been gathered in the field from native informants (e.g., Drucker and Heizer 1967; Collins 1950). This type of research is important but is not sufficient by itself. An informant who was born around the turn of this century obviously cannot give a thorough account of roughly two centuries of contact. This methodological consideration aside, anthropologists must also face the problem of having fewer opportunities to do fieldwork as Indians become more politicized and are less willing to give social scientists a carte blanche to do research in their communities (see Duff 1973:vi-vii; Suttles 1973:623).

Here, the Tlingit will be studied by using primary historical sources, both as a source of original ethnographic information and to lend time depth to the existing ethnographic literature.

It must be emphasized, however, that the fur trade period cannot be understood simply by applying new methods of data collection. The results of any inquiry are, of course, to a large extent determined by the questions which the researcher initially asks. Anthropologists studying the Northwest Coast as well as other areas too often begin by dismissing the possibility of major social change. There has been a tendency for many to fall victim to what M. G. Smith (1962) called "the fallacy of the ethnographic present".² Smith saw this fallacy, which involves the distortion of history, as being a characteristic of the functionalist approach to anthropology which draws analogies between human societies and the biological organisms studied by natural science. According to Smith, the premises of functionalism lead to the exclusion of change or at least to the minimizing of its importance. His comments are worth quoting at length:

In this type of functionalist theory, closure and fixity of the social system are essential assumptions without which analysis is hardly possible. Such a theoretical scheme rests on a basic fallacy, which I propose to label the fallacy of the ethnographic present. By means of this fallacy the initial exclusion of change, whether current or historical, is taken as proof that change does not occur; and current processes of change and development are either ignored where recognized, or where unrecognized, as often happens, they are represented as contributions to the maintenance of changeless conditions (Smith 1962:77; his emphasis).

It should be recalled that functionalism has had a pervasive and long-standing influence on both the British and American schools of

anthropology (see Murphy 1971).

Rather than dismissing out of hand the possibility that there was major social change during the fur trade period, I began by asking whether the aboriginal Tlingit had actually been like most other fishing, hunting, and gathering societies; perhaps, I thought, they had been a relatively egalitarian people whose culture had been drastically changed by the fur trade experience. Ethnohistorical research soon showed that this was not the case; but it also showed that the existing ethnography does not accurately represent the Tlingit as they were before the time of the fur trade.

Broadly speaking, during the first years of contact, before the fur trade was fully developed, the Tlingit were organized into a Rank Society. Most property was collectively owned by corporate kinship groups, and the leaders of those groups played a redistributive role in the economy and acted as spokesmen for their kinsmen in political affairs. After only a few years of involvement in the fur trade, the complexion of Tlingit social life radically changed. New measures of individual social and political status developed; there was a shift in the structure and meaning of the potlatch; some individuals acquired economic privileges that were not shared by their consanguinal kinsmen; and a few high status individuals became prominent in legal and economic decision-making. In brief, the Tlingit were developing some of the attributes of a Stratified Society.

My analysis of these changes is by no means definitive.

There are many years that are poorly accounted for in the historical record. Also, early documents seldom give a well-rounded portrait of Indian life. For instance, there is good information, covering a long time span, about social and political status relationships but almost nothing about the potlatch, even though that institution was central to Tlingit social organization. When the documents are silent, I have chosen to rely on inference or speculation to provide an analysis that is systematic rather than piecemeal. I have tried to indicate in the text when I have taken these liberties. This practice is, I believe, scientifically justifiable in that it provides hypotheses that can be tested by future documentary and/or field research.

This is not, however, an exercise in surmise. There is, for example, good evidence that individual social status became tied to personal wealth during the fur trade period rather than in the distant prehistoric past. This runs against our current understanding of Northwest Coast social organization, and demonstrates the importance of ethnohistorical analysis.

Sources

The primary sources that this study is based on can be broken down into three broad categories, each one pertaining to a different time period. The earliest sources are the journals of the first

Spanish, British, French, and Russian naval and commercial expeditions that explored the Northwest Coast by sea during the late eighteenth century, a time which I often refer to here as the "early contact period". Since most of these expeditions were pressed by the need to discover and explore as much territory as possible, their visits among the Indians were usually brief; they seldom remained in one area long enough to gain an in-depth knowledge of its inhabitants. However, these explorers were visiting the coast at a time when the Tlingit were not actively involved in the fur trade. In fact, they were gathering the geographical knowledge which later made large-scale trade possible. Since the early explorers met Indians who were living close to an aboriginal condition, their ethnographic descriptions warrant serious consideration.

Documents dealing with the affairs of the Russian American Company and Hudson's Bay Company are a second important source of information. Between them, these two large companies dominated trade with the Tlingit for a major part of the fur trade period. Also, since they conducted their trade from land-based establishments or by regularly sending out trading ships, they had sustained contact with the Tlingit. Unfortunately, many documents that would be relevant to the history of Russian and British trade with the Tlingit have not survived. Post journals and trade books have been particularly valuable in ethnohistorical studies of Indian cultures in other regions, but it appears that these and other specialized

records of the Russian American Company have been lost; correspondence books between the General Manager and the head office constitute most of the remaining collection (Sarafian 1971:10). To understand the Russian trade and to acquire early ethnographic data, I have placed considerable reliance on the Bancroft Library's "Pacific Manuscripts" collection, which consists of manuscript translations of the reports made by Russian naval officers, government officials, and missionaries who visited Russian America before 1867.

There are also serious gaps in the Hudson's Bay Company records. The one surviving Fort Stikine post journal provided a valuable glimpse at the daily affairs of a Tlingit village during the years 1840-1842. Also valuable were the post journals from Fort Simpson, which was located inside the territory of the neighbouring Tsimshian but which was regularly visited by the southern Tlingit.

The published observations of missionaries, military personnel, and tourists who met the Tlingit in the 1870s and 1880s, when the Americans were consolidating their hold on Alaska, comprise a third category of sources. Perhaps the most notable visitor during these years was the German geographer Aurel Krause, who spent six months among the Tlingit in 1881-1882, preparing an ethnographic account which compares favourably with later studies conducted by professional anthropologists. However, sources dating from the American period have been used with some caution, for the varied backgrounds and interests of these observers reflect the varied

forces of change which were bringing the fur trade period to a close.

These different types of primary sources have been used to supplement and interpret the ethnographic material collected in the field by John Swanton, who studied the Tlingit in 1904, and by Kalvero Oberg, Frederica de Laguna, and Ronald L. Olson, who did major anthropological studies between the 1930s and the 1950s.

Notes

¹Ruyle (1973:esp.608) is a recent example of a writer who has taken this position.

²Bishop (1975:150-51), for instance, has noted the same problem in Cree and Ojibwa studies.