Tlingit and Haida

Southeast Coastal Indians

Tlingit and Haidas began adapting white construction methods in the 1880s but the killer whale crest above the door indicates that this was a clan house rather than a private home. (Anchorage Museum of History and Art)

CHAPTER 7

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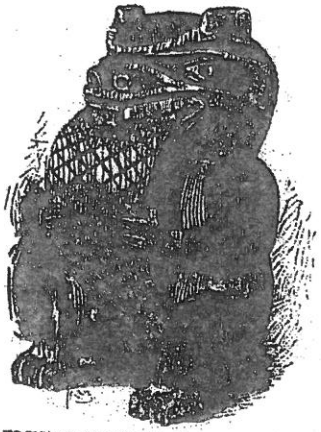
Southeast Coastal Indians



TLINKIT CARVING REPRESENTING BEAVER.

Occupying the islands and mainland of southeast Alaska are the northernmost groups of the Northwest Coast cultural region—the Tlingit and Haida Indians. They are well-known for their distinctive art represented in totem poles and other elegantly-carved objects.

The Tlingit and Haida are more similar to Indians along the coast of present-day British Columbia than to other Alaskan groups. The Tlingit occupied nearly all the islands of southeast Alaska and the mainland shore to the Coastal Mountains from Yakutat Bay to the Portland Canal. The Kaigani Haida, whose relatives occupy the Queen Charlotte Islands off the north coast of British Columbia, controlled the southern half of the Prince of Wales archipelago.

The two groups share many similar social and cultural patterns; however, their languages are unrelated and they have distinct ethnic identities.

Archaeology

While much of the broad interior of Alaska was ice-free 20,000 ya (years ago), the mainland and islands of southeast Alaska were covered with glaciers. Paleo-Arctic-bearing people migrated to the coast by 10,000ya. The oldest human remains in Alaska, dated to 9,300 ya, have been recovered from a cave site on northern Prince of Wales Island.

Archaeological evidence indicates that by 8,200ya, residents had developed a sophisticated maritime adaptation including the harvest of halibut, cod and sea mammals, and long distance trade of obsidian obtained from sources accessible only by boat.

Tlingit legends speak of migrations into the area from two directions. Some groups have legends of traveling down the Skeena River in north British Columbia and then migrating by boat northward into southeast Alaska. Other groups tell of travel over the coastal mountains or down the river valleys to the coast. The Kaigani Haida are much more recent

immigrants to southeast Alaska having invaded the southern portion of the Prince of Wales archipelago probably less than 200 years before European contact.

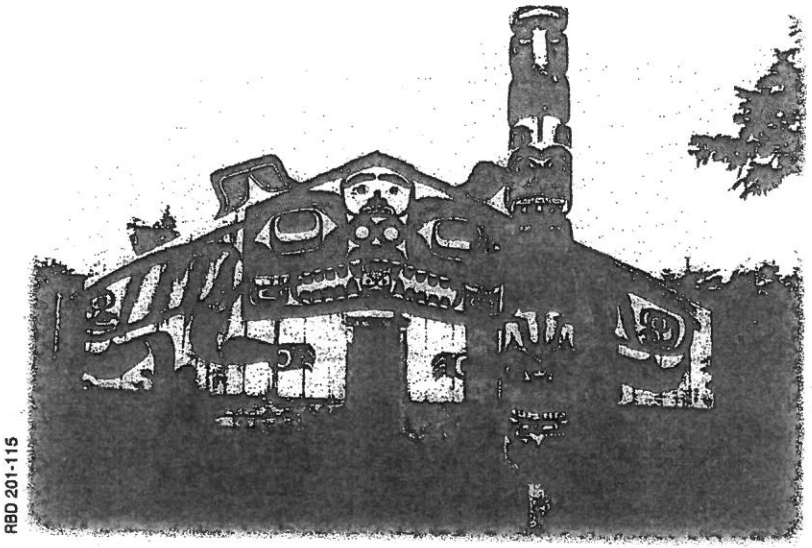
It is likely that the distinctive elements of Northwest Coast culture—emphasis on woodworking, relatively permanent settlement, primary dependence on salmon, social stratification, wealth and art emerged between 2,000 to 4,000 ya in southeast Alaska.

Population and distribution

The Tlingit were divided into 13 units, sometimes erroneously labelled "tribes" (they were not tribes because there was no political unity at this level) to which the suffix *kwaan* was applied. This terminology defines a group of people who lived in a region, shared residence in several communities, intermarried, engaged in joint ceremonies and were at peace.

The total Tlingit population was about 15,000 at the time of contact. The most numerous groups were those living on the Stikine and Chilkat rivers. The Kaigani Haida population was about 1,800 people at the time of European contact.

The Tlingit and Haida had similar settlement patterns which included relatively permanent winter villages occupied from October or November to March. From these villages, groups traveled by canoe to separate seasonal camps where resources were harvested, processed and stored during the spring, summer and fall.



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Cape Fox Village, 1899. (E. H. HARRIMAN COLLECTION, ARCHIVES, ALASKA AND POLAR REGIONS DEPARTMENT, UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA-FAIRBANKS.)

Food and diet

Seasonal food-gathering activities differed somewhat for groups who lived on the mainland from those who occupied the outer islands.

On the mainland, rivers with large runs of salmon allowed the people to remain in their villages longer. In the spring, eulachon were caught, rendered to an oil and then congealed into a grease which was a highly-desired condiment eaten with dried salmon or herring eggs. Moose and mountain goat were also available on the mainland and hunted in the fall.

On the islands, streams with smaller runs of salmon required greater dispersion of the population. Marine resources were more important. In the spring, people began by taking herring and bird eggs, followed by seaweed and then halibut. Seals were hunted at rookeries at various times. In the fall, deer were hunted on the islands.

An important backup food supply used in winter by almost all groups were intertidal resources such as clams, cockles and chitons. Whales and sea lions apparently were not hunted by either Tlingit or Haida prior to contact although both groups occasionally used beached specimens.

Food from plants were also an important part of the Tlingit and Haida diet. In the spring, early growth from a variety of beach greens was acquired and consumed fresh. Spring was also the time when women carefully pealed off cedar bark to make baskets, hats and dresses. They would also collect spruce roots for baskets and hats. In the late summer, abundant quantities of salmonberries, blueberries, cranberries, huckleberries and other delicacies were picked.

Many resources such as seal meat, deer meat, and berries were preserved in seal oil in bentwood boxes.

Tools

Major Tlingit and Haida woodworking tools included adzes, mauls and wedges. Carvers crafted sharp points and cutting edges from stone, bone and shell allowing them to skillfully fashion red cedar into everything from spoons to houses.

Hunting and fishing

Hunters used bows, arrows and spears for land animals and clubs or harbor seals (which were usually taken on land). On the outer lands, migrating king salmon feeding on herring were taken by trolling technique involving dragging a baited hook through the water to catch e fish).

Elaborate devices were constructed to harvest salmon. Semicircu-

lar intertidal stone traps were used to take advantage of tidal action; salmon would come in at high tide only to be caught behind the stone walls as the tide receded. A combination of ingenious wooden weirs and traps caught the salmon in the steams and rivers. Other techniques used to capture salmon included dip nets, spears and gaffhooks, the latter being preferred in the swift, turbid waters of mainland rivers. Men were responsible for catching and women and children for processing.

For ocean species such as halibut, cod and red snapper (a type of rockfish), the Tlingit and Haida used a composite hook consisting of two pieces of wood, yellow cedar and yew. They lashed a bone barb with cedar withes to the harder yew arm, then attached the hook to lines of processed kelp or spruce root and dropped it to the bottom of the ocean. A wooden or sealskin float bobbed at the surface when a fish bit the hook. Halibut hooks were carved with representations of powerful spirits

A strong spirit was needed to overcome the strength of the halibut. Tlingit composite hooks were carved to attract power that would assist the fishermen. Lines were made of spruce root or kelp and floats were made from seal bladders or wood. (ANCHORAGE MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND ART)

called upon by the fishermen to assist their efforts. The hooks were designed to take medium-size fish, resulting in maintenance of the large fish for reproduction and avoiding capture of small, immature fish. Special clubs were made for dispatching the powerful halibut when brought to the surface where they were ceremoniously greeted and thanked.

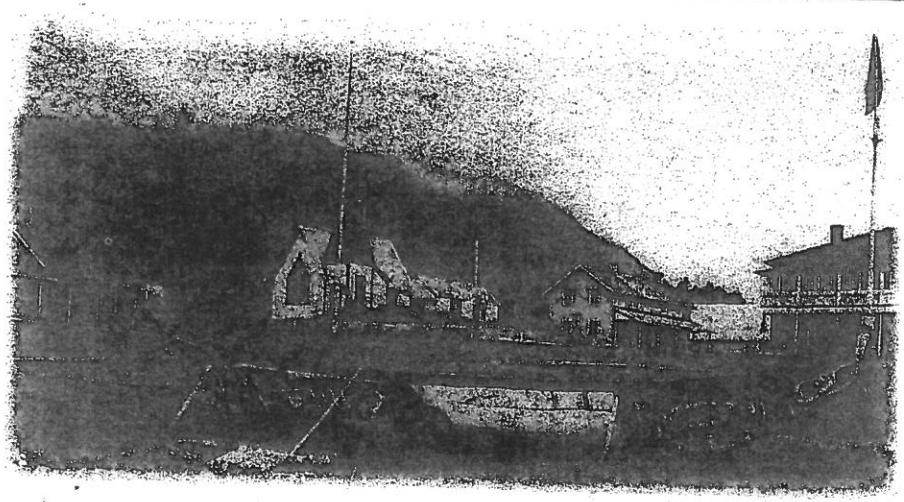
Transportation

Yakutat sealing canoe

The Tlingit and Haida used two basic styles of dugout canoes for transportation. The Haida and southern Tlingit primarily utilized red cedar but in northern southeast Alaska, spruce or cottonwood was used as red cedar is not found in these areas.

A small 10- to 16-foot model with a u-shaped bottom was designed for short, local trips and carried up to five people. Much larger canoes, ranging from 20-to 50 feet in length, were used for long-distance travel, transport, trade and warfare. These were deep draft, v-shaped vessels. Large separate prow and stern pieces were attached to the main body with cedar withes. The prow and occasionally the sides were carved and painted with the clan crests of the owner. Canoes were propelled through the water by diamond-shaped paddles which both men and women could wield superbly. Natives did not use sails prior to contact with Europeans. The Haida of the Queen Charlotte Islands were renowned as the best canoe makers on the coast because these islands had the largest red cedar stands.

Canoe construction was carried out by skilled craftsmen who identified trees with good grain, felled them and stripped the branches in the forest. Special thanks were given to the tree prior to felling and each morning the craftsman prayed that his efforts would be well received. The logs were moved by skids to a beach area where they were carefully hollowed out and kept damp to prevent cracking. The lines of the canoe were wrought by the fine eye of the carver. The final step involved placing water and hot rocks in the cavity and steaming the canoe into its final shape. The elegant lines were held by thwarts inserted at key positions. Canoes were oiled, moistened, and covered with cedar bark mats when brought ashore to preserve and extend their lives. Periodic replacement was necessary.



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Chief Sonihat of Kasaan presented this Haida war canoe to Gov. Brady and Alaska. It now rests on the green at Fort Chilkoot near Haines. Photo taken about 1904. (ANCHORAGE MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND ART)

House types

Tlingit and Haida winter dwellings were impressive structures. Their gabled, nearly square, cedar plank houses were as big as 40 feet by 60 feet, but the more standard size was 20 feet by 30 feet. Typical homes consisted of four large interior house posts, many of which were carved. Grooves on the top seated the massive beams which extended from front to back. Overlapping planks were placed on top of the rafters with a smokehole left in the center.

For most houses, the interior included a central, excavated, rectangular area for a large single hearth. At ground level around the outside of the interior, low-rising platforms served as living quarters. Bark mats provided screening for privacy.

The head of the house generally occupied the quarters along the back wall opposite the entrance. Twenty-to 30 people in four to six families typically occupied such houses and acted as an economic unit. The houses faced the ocean and were usually built in locations that were well protected from storms and had good beaches for landing and launching canoes.

Seasonal dwellings varied from simple lean-tos to small versions of winter homes. Among the Kaigani Haida, planks were transported from winter village dwellings to the important seasonal sites and used with house posts erected there.

Defensive sites, sometimes called forts, were common. These were typically located on steep promontories or islands where a group could

Tlingit houses were used for smoking and drying fish. The lip labret worn by the woman behind the fire was considered unattractive by European standards. (ANCHORAGE MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND ART)

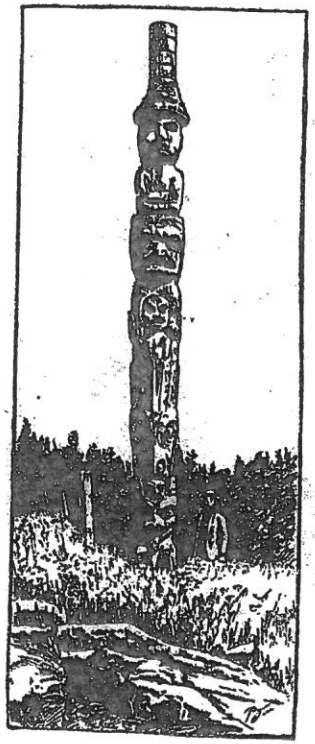
go if they were under attack. *Palisades* (walls of logs) were sometimes erected around these sites to provide further protection. Smaller cedar or spruce houses provided shelter inside the forts. Clothing, tools and other goods were stored in bentwood boxes placed under the platforms and in the back of the house where the most cherished objects were kept by the head family.

Clothing and decoration

Everyday clothing was not particularly elaborate. In most seasons, men wore a deer or caribou skin loincloth. Women wove conical rain hats, often embellished with designs from split spruce roots. Women wore skirts woven from the inner bark of the cedar tree, a remarkably soft and pliant substance when worked by skilled persons. Cloaks made of sea otter fur or cedar bark served as outer garments for men and women, but neither normally wore foot gear of any kind.

Special clothing was worn for ceremony and warfare. A leader's ceremonial garb included a headdress with a frontpiece carved out of wood and decorated with abalone shell, sea lion whiskers and sometimes ermine skin pelts. White pelts flowing down the leader's back gave him an extremely impressive appearance. A small bowl full of white eagle

Totem Poles



TOTEM POLE, WRANGELL.

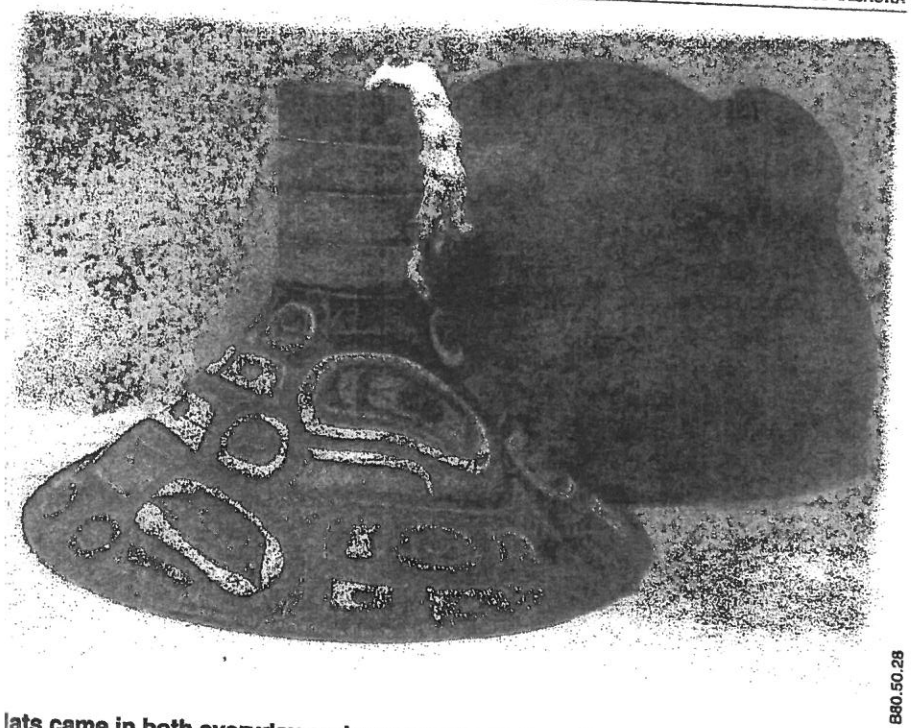
The totem pole has long been used as a striking and bold symbol of Alaska Natives even though they are only found among the Tlingit and Haida. These exquisitely-carved sculptures in red cedar memorialized different events in the history of a person, drawing on the crests and images owned by his clan. They were not images of deities or icons of worship as a number of early missionaries mistakenly thought.

Precise and standard principles such as split representations of animals, form lines and ovoids created a unique art considered by the famous French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss to rival that of Greece and Egypt. The art form was also expressed in a variety of other objects such as masks, bowls, boxes, spoons and hats.

The earliest carved poles were probably *house posts* (the main interior supporting posts around which the wooden plank houses were built) or *mortuary posts* (erected in memory of a deceased clan head often having a niche carved in the back for placement of ashes of the deceased). These poles were usually simple, with only one or two images.

Metal tools and wealth obtained through trade with Europeans led to a proliferation of poles in the 19th century. *Free standing poles* and *portal poles* (forming the door to a house) with interlocking images and greater complexity soon became commonplace. New themes appeared too. Free-standing poles were erected to shame another person or group for actions like failure to pay debts. Even Europeans and Americans came to appear on some totem poles. For example, Chief Skowl, a Kaigani Haida, erected a pole with carved images of Russian Orthodox priests to memorialize his opposition to Christian beliefs.

The explosion of totem pole building ceased in the late a 19th century when the Tlingit and Haida came under the influence of missionaries. Many poles were destroyed or abandoned as groups left their old villages to consolidate in larger communities. In the 1930s a number of Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian men were hired by the Civilian Conservation Corps to move and renovate some of the older poles. Totem parks were established at Saxman (outside Ketchikan), Klawock, Hydaburg and elsewhere. In the 1970s, the largest pole ever raised was erected in Kake symbolizing the resurgence of interest in traditional art by the Tlingit and Haida.



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lats came in both everyday and ceremonial styles. The circles and ermine skin n top of the decorated hat indicate that it belonged to a chief who gave four otlaches in his life. (ANCHORAGE MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND ART)

own was seated in the top of the head gear. The feathers would fly up nd drift down during quick dancing motions of the wearer and was nsidered a sign of welcome and peaceful intent.

One of the most distinctive items of Tlingit and Haida garb was the *hilkat robe*. This was a garment woven by women based on a totemic sign drawn by men. It was made from mountain goat wool and cedar rk strips. Fringed strands of wool dangled from the bottom of the anket and dyes produced the standard yellow and black coloration. bes were worn or displayed on ceremonial occasions and demon- rated the great wealth of the owner. Although originally developed by e Tsimshian, the Chilkat Tlingit paid for the right to weave the blankets d became specialists in their production. They were highly valued ng the Northwest Coast and were a major trade item.

Special garments were used by both the Tlingit and Haida for rfare. Armor constructed of slat rods woven together or thick moose elk hide were worn as chest protectors. Wooden helmets were also rn by the Tlingit. Principal weapons included thrusting spears, ggers, clubs, axes, and bows andarrows.

Personal adornment for both groups included facial painting for both men and women, and labrets and nose pins for women. Body tattooing was common among the Haida, especially for high status women.

Social organization

Social organization among the Tlingit and Haida was the most formal and structured of any Alaskan Native group. Matrilineal descent determined group membership, inheritance of leadership and wealth. Both societies were divided into two matrilineal moieties, Raven and Eagle or Wolf. An individual was a member of one or the other "side" and had to obtain a marriage partner from the opposite side; to marry or have sexual relations with a member of one's own moiety was considered incestuous.

Martrilineal *clans* were found in both groups; there were about 70-80 Tlingit clans and eight to ten Kaigani Haida clans at the time of contact. Individuals were born into these totemic corporate groups

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Tlingit and Haida artisans worked a variety of materials to craft a wide range of eleborate goods including baskets, bracelets, bowls, spoons, rattles, daggers, masks, paddles, hats, drums, dolls and Chilkat robes. The miniature canoes and totems were made for the tourist trade.
(ANCHORAGE MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND ART)

which traced their origins from mythical or legendary incidents.

The clans were typically named after an animal or mythical being. For example the Kiksadi, a important clan among the Sitka people, claimed the frog as its major symbol or crest. This symbol was used on clothing, blankets, poles, bowls, spoons and other property of members of the clan and was not to be used by people belonging to other clans. Appropriation of crests and symbols were considered thefts and could result in violence between groups.

Clans were the most crucial units in Tlingit and Haida society since they held ownership to property—houses, fishing grounds, canoes, crests, ceremonial garments, dances, songs and stories. Property concepts were highly developed and respected in both Tlingit and Haida society.

In some communities, clans grew so large that all their members could not live in a single dwelling; in such cases, multiple houses of a single clan came to exist. In these cases, each house was given a special

rior to contact, Tlingit and Haida winter villages typically were composed of vo to ten houses of the same clan fronting the ocean on sandy beaches rotected from southeast and northwest winds.

ape Fox Village, shown above in 1899, was an amalgamated village composed houses from several clans. Changes seen from Euro-American influences clude free-standing multi-figured poles, house-front totemic paintings, milled mber and pillar-and-lintel doorways.

. H. HARRIMAN COLLECTION, ARCHIVES, ALASKA AND POLAR REGIONS DEPARTMENT, IIVERSITY OF ALASKA-FAIRBANKS)

name, and the *house group* became the primary social unit in a person's life. The head of a Tlingit house was called the *hitsati* and was responsible for the well-being of all those living in the house.

Tlingit and Haida societies were stratified, meaning that there were clearly identifiable classes of people. Classes are usually divided into the nobles or aristocracy (*aanyadi* among the Tlingit), the commoners and the slaves.

Members of the aristocracy were the leaders of the clans and houses and acted as trustees over clan property for the other members. Young men and women of this class were taught special lore and behavior concerning ceremonial activities and their ancestral heritage. Typically long-standing relationships were established between two clans in opposite moieties who would intermarry over generations. This served to concentrate the wealth of both groups into a small group. For this reason, marriages, particularly among the nobles, were arranged by the mother and her brother for the woman's children.

One of the results of matrilineal descent combined with male leadership was the practice known as the *avunculate*. At marriage, a woman went to live in her husband's home. Her offspring, however, would move back to live with her brother in mid-childhood because the mother's brother (uncle) was primarily responsible for the upbringing of the children with the assistance of his mother. High status eldest nephews would likely inherit the position of their *hitsati* uncle unless they showed an inability to cope with the knowledge or organizational and leadership demands of the position during training. Eventually the younger brothers and sisters became the commoner class.

Slaves were fairly numerous and were important in both trade and providing labor. They drew water, hauled wood, repaired fish traps, caught and put up fish and otherwise carried out many of the drudgeries of daily life. They were also important at potlatches when they might be either killed or released.

Ceremonies

The major ceremonial institution among the Tlingit and Haida was the *potlatch*. This was staged with great pomp and ceremony, primarily to honor a deceased person but also to demonstrate the clan's status and the competence of the heir. Due to a combination of grieving and fear of the corpse, Tlingit clansmen did not handle arrangements for the interment of their dead. Rather the members of the opposite moiety, typically those of the clan with which the long-established ties existed, would take care of the body and details of the burial or cremation, depending on the status of the dead person's position. Most were cremated but shamans would be interred in coffins away from the community.

About a year later, the heirs of the deceased would invite those who carried out the burial work and other clan members from the opposite moiety to the potlatch. Goods, wealth and foods which had been accumulated during the intervening year were distributed in memory of the deceased individual and in thanks for the efforts of the other side. This event was usually staged by the heir and symbolized his assumption of the position of the deceased. Clan crests, dances, ceremonial bowls and spoons, and garments (such as Chilkat robes) would be demonstrated showing the group's properties and rights. Perhaps the most important wealth items were *coppers*, pieces of copper pounded flat and engraved with totemic symbols. It is not clear if such objects existed in the pre-contact era, but with the introduction of sheet copper from Europeans, they began to proliferate. Usually a *mortuary pole* was commissioned and raised during the potlatch.

Potlatches expressed strong reciprocal and competitive elements. Those who gave the most attained high status through the lore which recognized their generosity. This was symbolized in special potlatch hats with rings indicating the number of potlatches an individual had sponsored. Those who were invited guests at one potlatch would be hosts later to the same people due to the division of labor between the moieties and the obligations which linked the clans together.

Potlatches were held on other occasions such as naming ceremonies, weddings, house-raising ceremonies (especially among the Haida), raising special totem poles and eradicating shameful or embarrassing incidents.

Tlingit ready for battle, from *Harper's Weekly*, 1869 courtesy Anchorage Museum of History and Art, map 4/4

War and peace

Warfare was a common practice among both Tlingit and Haida. Motivations included obtaining wealth (including slaves) and righting perceived wrongs. Feuding, the perpetuation of multi-generation hostilities between two clan groups, was also well known. Most hostilities took the form of raids and ambushes. The Haida were considered the fiercest raiders of the coast, ranging as far south as Puget Sound in pursuit of slaves and booty, possibly due to population pressures on resources in the Queen Charlotte Islands.

Tlingit warfare was part of a system of justice that sought balance in the costs that conflict inflicted on the parties. A major

mechanism used to restore balance was the *Goacan* (Deer) ceremony. This was a sacred ritual involving among several elements the exchange of high ranking persons from the two clans; their role was to demonstrate the dampening of anger and rise of peaceful feelings. The Goacan was conducted at the conclusion of a negotiated agreement in which lives or goods would be provided by one side to the other to establish equilibrium.

Trade

Trade was highly developed among both groups and was enhanced by the ease of long-distance travel over the relatively well-protected waterways of the coast. The Tlingit obtained caribou skins, clothing and copper from interior Athabaskan groups in exchange for eulachon grease, dried halibut, Chilkat robes and carved cedar objects. Haidas traded their famous canoes as well as slaves and dried halibut. A major event for both groups was the trade fair which occurred each spring at the mouth of the Nass River. Groups from all parts of the Northwest Coast traveled here to trade, put up eulachon grease, gamble and seek marriage partners. June was the time for specialized trading trips either into the interior along the "grease" trails or to other villages where specific desired or requested goods could be obtained.

Beliefs

The belief system of both the Tlingit and Haida were linked to the Raven, a supernatural trickster through whose activities most of the universe's features came to be. Other animals were also important as actors in Tlingit and Haida myths and legends; particularly important were bears, the Thunderbird and a variety of other mythical beings and spirits whose acts influenced human affairs. A distant powerful force of the universe was also recognized and individual Tlingits undertook purification and cleansing by immersion in freshwater to acquire personal guardian spirits to assist them in daily life.

Both cultures had a strong belief in reincarnation which was identified by dreams and physical or behavioral similarities of new born children to some recently deceased person.

The shaman (Tlingit—*ixt*) was a powerful ritualist in both societies who acquired spiritual forces (Tlingit—*yeik*) through fasting, abstinence and retreat to nature to assist in curing, foretelling future events, and of major importance, identifying witches who were damaging other persons.

Shamans were thought to travel great distances to see events in other communities and do battle with other shamans. They were well-paid specialists who had apprentices to assist them. Shamans, unlike other Tlingits who were cremated following death, were buried in boxes