

Indians wish to see the Potlatch abolished.

10. And now we come to what is generally known as the Potlatch, but which is no more potlatch than any one of those functions I have already mentioned. The Nishga term is Yuqu, i.e., a *holding*, and the ceremony is performed in connection with the death of a chief or other individual of rank for the purpose of continuing his name and position in the clan by his heir. It differs in no way from Oisk or Oiaq—a feast and distribution of property, after which the defunct chief's nephew is acknowledged as chief. It is also considered necessary for a chief to present himself every four or five years in this manner in order to continue the holding of his chieftainship by a renewal of the public expression of assent.

The building or rebuilding of a house is also considered a necessary occasion for making a potlatch, because it entails the holding of a public position. There is no such thing as giving a potlatch, as a white man gives a dinner or a ball just because he wishes to be sociable. A potlatch must be for a purpose, and if there be no legal reason (according to Indian law) for giving it it cannot be given. Only as a candidate for some public position can an Indian appear before the electorate of the Confederacy by making a potlatch.

11. There is another formality connected with the Yuqu called Hōōks. A chief usually gives a Hōōks a year before his potlatch comes off, but as far as I can see it has no special significance except, perhaps, that of putting the electorate in a good humour. There is generally a good deal of folly indulged in at a Hōōks. There is also liable to be considerable wanton (from our point of view) destruction of property if the friends of the chief giving the Hōōks take it into their heads to do him honour. This they do by making him presents of articles of clothing &c., but instead of putting them in his hand they put them in the fire where they are quickly consumed. The chief then and there makes return presents also putting them in the fire amid rounds of applause. To the Indian mind this is all *comme il faut*.

Having thus touched upon the various ins and outs of the Potlatch system let us consider its influence upon the Indians.

Among those who practise it its influence is baneful in the last degree; it puffs up while exhausting, and its victims while being destroyed think they are being established: it presents an outward altruistic appearance, but is essentially egotistic; those who practise it think they are the pick of benevolence whereas in reality they are most selfish; it is fatal to all idea of thrift and comfort in family life—to be thrifty is to be bad, to be economical is criminal; it is destructive of individual liberty and, consequently, of the development of the race; it is inimical to all social progress and education; although not a religious system it is intensely repugnant to religion, and the civilization of the Indian is an abomination to it; it produces such a strange condition of society that if we can get in five years' work among the people in twenty years we may claim to do well; it places our best actions in a false light—while we think we are showing kindness and charity to the poor and needy we are in reality paying homage to exalted personages: our greetings, salutations and smiles very often appear in the same light; our efforts for the salvation of souls are nothing less than a hunt for men of title with which to adorn our missions while everything containing the element of a free gift—and much of our work is of that nature—is liable to appear in the light of a "bid" for favour.

To a people socially organized on potlatch principles

it would seem that everything should be presented upside down from our point of view in order to appear right side up to them—refuse a thing, and it at once becomes an object of desire, offer it freely and it is worthless, or you have an ulterior motive in offering it.

As to the Nishgas themselves, divest their minds of this way of thinking and you have really the nicest and best natured people imaginable.

I must now say a few words about the effect of the potlatch system upon those Indians who have come out on the side of religion and civilization.

If after an Indian leaves the Confederacy to join a mission the potlatch would let him alone all would be well. But it does no such thing. If the man be a chief the potlatch immediately usurps his chieftainship, promotes another chief in his place, takes away his name and title, and ignores him. This is very hard for some men to bear, not so much because of the humiliation as because of the injustice.

If when a Christian Indian dies the potlatch would leave the matter alone much heart-burning would be avoided. But it does no such thing. If the deceased has been a person of any social position some heathen clansman is sure to make a potlatch for the corpse in order to take that position, thus raising trouble among the Christian relatives.

If the potlatch would leave their young men alone the Christian Indians would not be very much opposed to it. But it will not leave them alone; it inveigles them back into heathenism, helps them to go through with the Halaid or Llin, and ties them up to debts from which they may not be able to get free for years.

The civilized Indian occupies a strange position. As far as his affairs are concerned the white men—missionaries, Government officials and others think of him and act towards him as being one with them in their laws and in the rights emanating from those laws (cf. The Indian Act), but with the Indian himself it is different. He can only conceive of himself in his new estate according as he finds himself supported for or against what he considers to be his rights and wrongs. If when he is made to writhe under a sense of injustice, and complains to us only to be snubbed or to have his grievances made light of from our failure to comprehend them, is it to be wondered at that he feels we have no interest in his welfare? The civilized Indian finds himself in a majority of two to one on the Naus, and yet he cannot get a hearing. He has appealed vainly to the Authorities to be relieved from the tyranny of the potlatch, but he has not been understood, and it has not been thought advisable to give him relief, hence it is that the potlatch in a modernized, though no less injurious form is now becoming as it were a necessity among the civilized Nishgas.

I do not mean to say the Government has made no attempt to help in this matter: it has done so, but in the most deplorable manner possible. It has passed a law (49V., c.43, s.114.) prohibiting the Potlatch on pain of six months imprisonment, but this law has never been enforced, and this has had a very demoralizing effect upon the Indians both Christian and heathen. This is where my personal protest comes in.

As to the law in question forbidding Indians to tear up blankets and distribute property, it should never have been passed; first, because there is really no moral harm in tearing up a blanket; secondly, because tearing up blankets and giving away presents are not the disturbing factor of the potlatch; and thirdly, because tearing up blankets and distributing property