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The Totem Poles of the Upper Skeena

Introduction

The famous totem pole, uniquely a product of coastal British Columbia and adjacent areas, has long been recognized and appreciated as a distinctive part of the past and present culture of this region. In the last few years this appreciation has sharply increased. Artists now see totem poles as examples of a great art style which is just beginning to receive full recognition. Business men and ordinary citizens of British Columbia see them as distinctive and colorful tourist attractions and trade marks.

But coupled with this growing appreciation has come a shocking realization that most of the good totem poles in the Province are already in advanced stages of decay, and in their present locations, cannot last more than a very few decades.

The present situation can be stated very simply. The finest totem poles, with few exceptions, were carved between fifty and one hundred years ago, in tribal art styles that are now dead. They were carved in wood. Left outdoors, wood decays, and wood decay, once it becomes deep-seated, cannot be halted in a moist climate. In practically all good poles now standing outdoors the decay has passed the point at which it can be halted. Attempts at preservation have been at best stop-gap measures; notwithstanding paint and surface preservatives, decay goes on. The only practicable way of halting decay now is to permanently lower the moisture content of the wood below the amount needed by the decay organisms (19%). This can best be done by moving the poles indoors. If future generations are to

see authentic totem poles, we must move the best examples indoors, and use only replicas (which would be permanent because they are of new wood in which decay can now be prevented from starting) for outdoor display.

This unfortunate situation has not gone unnoticed. Among others, officials of the Provincial Museum in Victoria and the University of British Columbia are aware of its existence and its urgency. Programs are already in progress to preserve and perpetuate at least a good sample of these objects of native art. In Victoria, for example, a three-year program was begun this spring. Briefly, the purpose of this program is to make copies of a selection of the finest existing totem poles, both those already in Victoria and others to be obtained from their native locations, for outdoor display in Thunderbird Park. Mr. Mungo Martin, a highly-skilled Kwakiutl carver, is in charge of making the replicas, and is teaching his skills to younger carvers.

It was as a part of this program that the present study was undertaken, but it is also hoped that the findings will help to chart the way for other totem pole restoration programs elsewhere.

The five Upper Skeena villages of Hazelton, Kispiox, Kitsegukla, Kitwanga and Kitwancool contain the largest number of totem poles to be found in their native setting anywhere. These villages were visited during the period July 1 to 15, 1952, by a Provincial Museum field party consisting of Wilson Duff, museum anthropologist, and George A. Cheney, graduate student in anthropology, University of Washington. The purposes of the study were to discover the present state of preservation of the poles and their present place in the native culture, to investigate problems involved in preserving the poles both in situ and elsewhere, to photograph all the poles, and to purchase a small number to be taken to Victoria. Each village was visited several times.

In addition, since most of the people were away fishing, a visit was made to the canneries at the mouth of the Skeena and key persons were met. Several native informants were interviewed to obtain a picture of the present social organization, to determine present ownership of and attitudes towards totem poles, and to obtain accounts of recent activities involving totem poles. With this information as a background, it was possible to open tactful and exploratory conversations regarding sale and preservation of poles. No attempts were made to purchase standing poles, as such purchases would do too much violence to native attitudes, but at Kitsegukla two fallen poles were purchased.

Sincere thanks should be acknowledged here for hospitality and assistance to Indian Superintendents M. Jutras at Hazelton and F.E. Anfield at Prince Rupert, to Mr. Walter Douse at Kitwancool, and to others, native and white, too numerous to name. Especially, the writer wishes to thank George Cheney, whose presence as volunteer assistant helped very greatly to make the trip a pleasure and a success.

Present Social Organization

The problems involved in preserving the upper Skeena poles can only be understood against a background of present social customs and attitudes. This section attempts to outline the present picture.

To a surprising degree the old social organization of the Gitksan persists in the present day. The people of the five villages studied still cling to a sharply defined matrilineal exogamous phratry organization. Despite a few statements that "the young people don't care about the old customs any more", it was evident that young people do know that they belong to their mother's phratry and not their father's, and that they are not allowed to marry someone in the same phratry. These rules are still inflexible.

The phratry-clan system remains substantially the same as it was described by Barbeau a quarter century ago, except that much of the detail of organization and traditions has been forgotten. Important names still pass on in the maternal line, and are taken with ceremony and held with pride. Gatherings and feasts still mark important social events: funerals, the raising of a headstone or totem pole in memory of a predecessor, etc. At these affairs the old pattern of reciprocal functions among the phratries still operates. Rank is still respected. Native concepts of ownership of territories are still strong, although they are in conflict with those which are being imposed on them.

Marine Barbeau. Totem Poles of the Kitksan. National Museum
of Canada, 1929.

Social Divisions:

Three phratries, Fireweed (also called Grouse or Whale), Frog, and Wolf are represented in all the villages. A fourth, Eagle, is represented only at Kitwanga, which is nearest to the coast with its four-phratry system. Within each phratry are many smaller units, now called "houses" from the fact that they formerly consisted of the kinship group which owned and lived in a communal house. These "houses" are named after their chief. Barbeau also distinguished "clans", which are groupings of houses within the phratries, units based on common traditions and often bearing geographic names. At present the clans are difficult to detect. The houses in each phratry and the phratries in each village are loosely ordered in a scale of rank.

Names:

Each phratry has its own stock of "chiefs' names", which are ranked in importance. These names are more correctly regarded as titles, since they carry with them positions of leadership, control over territories, and social prestige and privileges. Most of these important names are names of house chiefs, and are passed on within the house where possible, in the maternal line, the new holder of the name becoming the house chief. There is considerable pressure on a young person to take a name for which he becomes eligible, and assume the concomitant social position. In this way young people are drawn into the old culture.

Names are taken at feasts, which are given whenever the candidate can afford the costs involved. Important persons are invited from other villages, their travelling expenses are usually paid, and gifts of money and food in proportion to their rank are given

them for witnessing the event. Often, too, the host raises a headstone or a new or restored totem pole in memory of his predecessor, although this may be done at any time. Because of the lack of totem pole carvers and a strong feeling that the raising of poles is frowned upon by Indian agents and others, tombstones are steadily replacing totem poles as memorials, and this trend can be expected to continue.

The functions of the houses and of house chiefs have dwindled as a result of changing conditions of life. In former times the house owned its own territories, dwelling, and totem poles, as well as non-material property such as traditions, songs, and dances, and the house chief had the greatest voice in their control. Today the traditions, songs and dances are forgotten by all but a few. The communal houses have been replaced by single family dwellings, most of which are personal rather than house property. Totem poles, in a sense remnants of the old communal houses, are still house property, although the house chief may now claim personal ownership. To the natives, trapping territories are still the property of the phratries and houses, but the administration of present game regulations, particularly in regard to individual traplines, has prevented the old system of control and descent of territories from operating, causing confusion and bitterness. Despite the dwindling of prerogatives of house chiefs, however, the names have by no means become just hollow and meaningless titles. Important names still carry much prestige, which is expressed in seating and gift giving at feasts.

Positions of rank are clearly shown in the seating arrangements at feasts, in fact the position is spoken of as the "seat". Chiefs of the phratry sit together, the first chief in the centre, the second on his right, third on his left, and so on. The amounts given to chiefs at feasts are proportional to their rank. If a chief is absent his seat is left vacant, and the gifts that are his due are placed there despite his absence. The highest house chief in the phratry is regarded as the phratry chief.

In a few cases an important name is held by someone outside the village. Usually the reason is that no logical descendant could be found in the village, and the candidate living elsewhere, though rich and ambitious enough to take the name, is unwilling to change his place of residence. This is one way in which many names have left their village of origin. In many cases the outsider takes his "seat" in the village anyway; in some cases the seats have been filled by others within the village.

As an aside, an interesting situation has arisen out of the simultaneous operation of the old and new systems of naming. A couple of generations ago, men holding chief's names began to use them as surnames in white fashion, passing them on to sons and daughters as surnames. At the same time, as chief's names, the names continued to be passed on to one person at a time in the maternal line. Thus a man's nephew succeeded to his Indian name and his sons, in another phratry, used the same name as a surname, and thus important Indian names of one phratry may appear as surnames in another. Muldo, Wiget, Malkin, Haizimsqu, Wilitz, and Cogag are names of this sort.

There still exists a strong feeling that high chiefs should be wiser, more peaceful, more sober and more industrious than others, hence that only worthy persons should take high names. This feeling

has in more than one case helped to alter the character of a person taking a name. The head Frog chief at Hazelton, for example, broke sharply from the old culture in his youth. He travelled widely and drank heavily. But he was logical successor to the name, and yielded to the pressure to assume it; then, conscious of the respect his predecessors had brought to the name and of the good example expected of his position, he stopped drinking and has attempted to set a good example to the younger people.

Present social structure

The following is a list of the phratries and present high-ranking persons of each of the villages. As closely as possible, the phratries and individuals are given in order of rank. Because of the hurried nature of the study, the lists are no doubt incomplete, uneven, and sometimes inaccurate in order or spelling of names. The Gitksan names, though obtained, are not given because of the inability of our alphabets and typewriters to reproduce them adequately.

1. Hazelton (Gitanmaks)

Two phratries, Frog and Wolf, are strongly represented at Hazelton. The third, Fireweed, was represented by only one "house", consisting of individuals who moved down from Kispiox in recent traditional times.

Frog:

1. Charles Clifford - head chief of Frogs and of Hazelton.
2. Frank Wilson - a house chief.
3. William Wale - a chief in F. Wilson's house.
4. Jessie Lum - " " " C. Clifford's "
5. Mrs. Peter Barney (Robinson?)
6. Bob Robinson - a house chief.
7. Joshua Campbell
8. Tommy Dench - in C. Clifford's house.
9. John Smith.

Wolf:

1. Johnson Alexander
2. Tommy Muldo

Fireweed (Grouse):

Donald Moat.

Charles Clifford, head of the largest phratry, is the chief of the village. Johnson Alexander, head Wolf chief, is second in the village.

2. Kispiox

Three phratries were and are strongly represented here: Fireweed, Frog and Wolf. Kispiox was a large village two or three generations ago; one old informant (Albert Johnson) named 15 houses which formerly stood in a line along the road fronting the river bank.

Fireweed (Here called "Whale")

1. Silas Johnson - a house chief, head of Fireweeds and village.
2. Samuel Wesley - a house chief.
3. Moses Morrison " " "
4. Mrs. Jacob Morrison - a house chief.
6. Chris Skulsh.

Frog:

1. Mark Johnson - a house chief, head of Frogs.
2. Jacob Morrison - a house chief.
3. Albert Tait.
4. Albert Johnson.

Wolf:

1. Frank Harris (of Hazelton)
2. Steven Morrison.
3. Jonathon Johnson
4. George Wilson
5. Jeff Harris
6. Mrs. Maggie Huson

3. Kitsegukla

The largest and most important phratry in this village is Fireweed, although Frog is also strongly represented. The smaller Wolf group seems to have strong ties with Kitwancool; some of them are said to have moved to that village.

Fireweed:

1. Arthur McDames - claims to be head of all Fireweeds everywhere.
2. Berty Lawson.
3. Peter Mark.
4. Alfred McDames.
5. Joe Brown.
6. Arthur San Pierre.
7. Solomon Brian.
8. Jeffry Johnson

Frog:

1. Martha Malkin.
2. Annis Dorrick (Haizimsq ?)
3. Wallace Johnson.
4. Moses Jones.
5. David Williams.
6. Samuel Wesley.

Wolf:

1. James Haizimsqu.
2. David Wesley.
3. Maurice Williams

4. Kitwanga

This is the only village in this area in which the fourth Tsimshian phratry, Eagle, is represented, and strangely enough, this phratry, ranks first here. Of the other three, Fireweed seems to be the smallest, and has strong ties - in fact is regarded by some as part of the Kitsegukla Fireweed phratry.

Eagle:

1. David Wales - the head chief of the village.
2. George Moore.
3. Esther Milton.

Frog:

1. Mathias Bright.
2. Johnson Wilitsku.
3. Philip Brian ?

Wolf:

1. Wallace Morgan.
2. Jack Morgan.
3. Joseph Williams.
4. Tommy Harris.

Fireweed:

1. Stanley Williams
2. Jim Fowler
3. Mary Ann Harris.
4. David Smith.

5. Kitwancool

Two phratries, Frog and Wolf, are of about equal importance in Kitwancool. A third, Fireweed, was represented here by two "houses" in earlier times. The names of all the chiefs of these houses have moved to Kitsegukla, but other Fireweed subchiefs of Kitwancool have assumed some of the "seats".

Wolf:

1. Jeff (Andy?) Smith.
2. Douglas Marston (Wesley?)
3. Walter Douse.
4. Fred Good.
5. James Haizimsqu (Kitsegukla)
6. John Robinson.
7. Eddy Russell (Glen Vowell)
8. Rufus Good.

9. Michael Douse.
10. Gordon Robinson.

Frog:

1. Johnny Derrick.
2. Albert Douse.
3. Peter John Derrick has this position; Fred St. Pierre of Kitsegukla has the name.
4. Godfrey Good.
5. Arthur Mathews (Kitwanga)
6. Solomon Good.
7. Edward Tait (Kitwanga)
8. Mrs. Benson (")
9. Jonathon Derrick.

Fireweed:

1. Peter Williams.
2. Miles Gogag.

An usual situation exists with regard to the leadership of the Frog clan. In the previous generation, the name of the head chief (Gamlakyeltkw) was held by Mrs. Douse, mother of Albert Douse and Johnny Derrick. On his mother's death, Johnny Derrick, being the elder, was given the seat or position as leader of the phratry, but Albert Douse, being regarded as better qualified, was given the name, and sits "in front of" Derrick at feasts to show that he is the successor to that position.