

Committee 2
Symmetry In Its Various Aspects:
Search for Order in the Universe

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SYMMETRY AND SOCIAL ORDER:
THE TLINGIT INDIANS OF SOUTHERN ALASKA

by

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If we take a rectangle and bisect it we have an elementary symmetrical form (Fig. 1).

Elaboration such that any change on one side is carried out on the other reiterates the original balance: one side repeats or mirrors the other, and the two become interchangeable.

In the material culture of the Tlingit Indians of Alaska and British Columbia this program finds abundant expression. The simplest physical representation of their social structure is a bisected regular figure--the rectangle is conventionally selected; all their cultural elaborations reiterate this elementary dualism. The art with which they covered¹ almost every surface, including their own persons, most commonly takes the form of a bilateral symmetry, the left half mirroring the right (see Fig. 2). The plan of the Tlingit house displays a similar structure (see Fig. 3). Like their carvings and paintings, the house displays a bilateral but not a quadripartite symmetry; the back of the house is more honorable than the front, and the carved screen that separates the living spaces for the highest-ranking persons from the common area in the middle of the house is not duplicated at the front. Slaves slept on the floor at the very front of the house, the place of lowest honor.

As Lewis Henry Morgan observed over a century ago, the architecture found among American Indians reflects very exactly their social organization (Morgan 1965). The Tlingit winter house is no exception to this astute observation. De Laguna says,

The house of the Tlingit, that is, the real house usually occupied only during the late fall and winter, was more than a solidly built shelter against the cold. It symbolized for the inhabitant the whole social order, his place in lineage and sib, and his family

ties with those of the oposite moiety (de Laguna 1972:294).

It thus provides us with a good introduction to Tlingit social organisation, the topic of this paper. Like their houses and their art, the society itself was a symmetrical structure whose component halves, in their various activities, endlessly re-presented their mutual relationship.

The Tlingit are an Athapaskan-speaking group, numbering just under 7,000 in 1880 (Krause 1956:63), who have for several centuries inhabited what we call the Panhandle of Alaska and the very northernmost part of the coast of British Columbia (see Map). As such they form one of the great Northwest Coast Indian cultures, along with the Haida, Tsimshian, Bella Coola, Kwakiutl, and Nootka, to name only those best-known to non-Indians. As the term "Northwest Coast" suggests, they lived between the western mountain ranges and the sea, a remarkably contorted coast characterised by fjords, rocky islands, and strong tides. The waters are dangerous, but--at least until Europeans became a serious presence in the area--teeming with fish and sea mammals. The land, though unsuited to agriculture, nevertheless offered an enormous amount in the way of resources: a variety of game animals, equally varied berry bushes, giant cedars for construction, and copper. The Indians here became expert fishers, hunters, and gatherers, relying little if at all on domesticated foods for subsistence. The year was divided into two seasons: the summer, when people lived in fishing camps and concentrated on subsistence activities; and the winter, when they moved to their substantial winter houses and devoted themselves to rituals. The best-known of these, and the most important too, is the potlatch, which I consider in detail below.

The diagram of the winter house shows that this was a communal house, several closely-related families living together under one roof. Tlingit kinship was based on

matrilineal descent, that is, reckoned through women rather than through men or through both sexes equally. The resident owners of the house were most usually a group of men descended from the same mother or mother's mother. Their sisters, resident elsewhere, were also considered owners of the house although they rarely lived there. Besides these matrilineally-related brothers (and it must be remembered that to the Tlingit the child of one's mother's mother's daughter, what we would call a first cousin, was equally a "brother" or a "sister"), resident owners could include the son or sons of their sister or sisters, who were the heirs and successors to the older generation. (In matrilineal descent property and status as well as kin designations descend through the female line; thus a man's heir is his sister's son and never his own.) In addition, the owners' wives and children, including unmarried daughters, lived in the house; and one or more of their widowed mothers might live there too. A household of wealth and status had one or more slaves as well, acquired in the course of warfare (de Laguna 1972:294).

Figure 3 identifies, at the back of the winter house, a "chief's apartment" or room; as I mentioned above, the back of the house was the place of highest honor, the door the place of no honor at all. The spatial ranking reflects not just the social ranking of Tlingit individuals, but a pervasive idea that similar things must be ranked against each other. Thus not only were men ranked against other men, and women against women, but also house against house, lineage against lineage, clan against clan, village against village, and tribe against tribe. Only the two halves of the society, the moieties, were regarded as equal. What rank might mean in any circumstance, and how it was determined for any individual or group, are fascinating questions which are, however, pretty much beyond the scope of this paper. The important point for us here is that each house had a head, the highest-ranking man in the

household. His duties included managing the economic resources of the group and maintaining its equally important ritual paraphernalia: the masks, rattles, dishes, costumes, and so on that represented the group's crest.

The term crest, or crest object, is applied to these representations by de Laguna (1972:451) in preference to the more widely-known term "totem." Tlingit histories--for each kin group had its own particular history--are almost entirely accounts of how they came to acquire these crests in the remote past, and thus why they are entitled to display them today. The stories are numerous but the themes are few: the privileged ancestor had an "adventure or encounter of a remarkable nature" with some bird, animal, fish, or other being, of which the crest is a representation. De Laguna lists, for the Yakutat Tlingit, the coho salmon, the raven, the frog, the humpback salmon, the moon, the bear, golden eagle, wolf, thunderbird, and killer whale, among many other crests (1972:425). The ancestor may simply have discovered the original of the crest, or killed it, married it, rescued it, or become its friend; he may be the transformation of the being, or vice-versa (de Laguna 1972:453-4). Regardless of the details, the result of such meetings was the right to represent the being in paintings, carvings, songs, and dances. It is important to remember that the Tlingit regarded such rights as exclusive to a particular kin-group, because rivalry between clans claiming the same crest or crests was an important aspect of the mutual relationship between the two halves of the society.

According to de Laguna, the crests "are, from the native point of view, the most important feature of the matrilineal [clan] or lineage..." (1972:451).² These descent groups were the most significant social groups among the Tlingit, owning not only their specific crest objects but also tracts of land and seacoast, to which they had exclusive rights of fishing,

hunting, gathering, and so on (Kan 1989:23). In addition each clan had a single and common name by which its members identified themselves to each other and to others. Clan affiliation was important both economically and spiritually as well as socially. But the most important political group--that is, the one that acted together consistently in opposition to other, similar groups, and acknowledged the authority of a single man--was the lineage.

The lineage was "like a [clan] in miniature" (de Laguna 1972:451; also 212; Krause 1956:77; Kan 1989:23). They usually acted independently in matters of marriage, display of ceremonial privileges, and economy at the same time as they claimed clan crests in common and recognised obligations of hospitality or help when called upon (de Laguna 1972:295; Kan 1989:23). A lineage was a co-residential group associated with a specific named house, a physical entity as well as a social one which was prized because it represented an unbroken link with the original ancestor.

A lineage might live in that one house, but more commonly it occupied several adjacent houses in a village which was home to a lineage of at least one other clan as well. The line of houses faced the beach; those of one clan were grouped together, with that of the highest-ranking lineage or lineage segment in the center (de Laguna 1972:212, 294). In addition to the large communal winter houses there were smaller storage houses here and there, and behind all these the menstrual and birth huts of the women. Behind these again one found the cemeteries of the lineages, in essence houses for the deceased, a material counterpart to the spiritual land of the dead in which part, at least, of the non-material essence of the person lived out eternity after death (de Laguna 1972:294; Kan 1989:35, 42, 117).

Several such villages made up a tribe, a very loose political group in which the

possibility of social solidarity was considerably diminished by the overriding claims of matrilineal loyalty (de Laguna 1972:212; Kan 1989:23). Even so, persons in one's own village or the other villages of the locale assisted in such activities as putting on the important potlatch signifying the end of mourning (de Laguna 1972:606).

The most inclusive social grouping among the Tlingit was the moiety. As the term suggests, there were necessarily two, one called the Ravens and the other variously the Wolves or the Eagles (de Laguna 1972:450; Kan 1989:24). Each Tlingit clan belonged to one of these but never both, and some of its crests reflected its moiety association. The moiety was not in any sense a unified group, much less a political body. It owned no land, held no ceremonies, organised no projects, sought no vengeance. Its major function was to regulate marriage and the mutual ceremonial services that were the consequence of the marital alliance. Marriage within the moiety was prohibited (de Laguna 1972:490; Kan 1989:24). Thus every person's spouse came not only from a different clan but also from the opposite moiety. Likewise, because the rule of descent was matrilineal, one's father was also from the opposite moiety or, put another way, a man's children never belonged to his own moiety, but they did belong to that of his father (see Fig. 4).³

The result was a system of marriage known in anthropology as bilateral cross-cousin marriage, or sister-exchange. (Cross cousins are the children of siblings of opposite sex. In a system such as the Tlingit, where kinship is reckoned through only one sex, such cousins necessarily belong to a clan other than one's own--in this case, to the opposite moiety--and are very commonly favored as spouses.) As Fig. 4 shows, in every generation each descent group both loses a woman to the other group and receives one of *their* women in return: the sisters of each line become the wives of the opposite line.⁴ One consequence of this pattern is

that every person marries someone who stands in the relation of both mother's brother's child and father's sister's child to him- or herself, since, in the previous generation, the mother's brother has married the father's sister (see Kan 1989:24). In doing so the spouses of any generation replicate the relationship established in the previous generation; their children, in turn, replicate it again, and so on.

The perpetual renewal of these relationships is usually a stated aim of marriage systems such as this, and the Tlingit were no exception (de Laguna 1972:590). The preferred spouse for either a boy or a girl was someone from the father's own clan, specifically the daughter or son, as the case might be, of the father's own sister--what we would call a first cousin (Kan 1989:24). In fact families of high rank tried to increase their influence by marrying into a number of other houses (Kan 1989:24), but with the idea that a satisfactory relationship would be perpetuated in succeeding generations as well. Figure 5 shows in very simple fashion the outcome of such a scheme of marriages.

The Tlingit system is an example of a dual organization, a form of social organisation of which Lévi-Strauss writes,

This term defines a system in which the members of the community, whether it be a tribe or a village, are divided into two parts which maintain complex relationship varying from open hostility to very close intimacy, and with which various forms of rivalry and co-operation are usually associated (1969:69).

Typically the dual social organization reflects a cosmic dual division as well. That is, the collective perception of the world is that it is a whole composed of two parts that are equal in value, if not in size; nothing in the world, therefore, cannot belong to one or the other of these parts. As this is true of natural phenomena it must also be true of social, or cultural,

phenomena, since society is part of this cosmic whole and must therefore be in harmony with what are perceived to be the laws of that whole. The Tlingit associated the Raven moiety with the sea, and the Wolf or Eagle moiety with the land. They regarded both the sea and the inland forest warily, as dangerous places at the periphery of the social world whose core was the village; but they considered the land more comprehensible, and therefore safer, than the sea (Kan 1989:118). To this extent only did they impose any sort of rank on these opposed aspects of their physical world; and none at all on the moieties associated with them.

The universal means by which people express equality is exchange. Giving and receiving are integral to all societies, which is to say that in a very real sense society could not exist without exchange. This conclusion was first articulated by Marcel Mauss, whose *Essai sur le don*, first published in 1925 (Mauss 1990), is not simply the most important work to be published on the sociology of exchange but remains in all important respects unsurpassed nearly three-quarters of a century later. In order to understand the thoroughgoing symmetry of Tlingit moieties a review of Mauss's argument is in order. It will be seen, in particular, that just as the symmetry of the bisected rectangle with which I opened this discussion depends on the mutual relationship of the parts in the whole, so also did Tlingit moieties depend for their definition--indeed, their very existence socially and physically--on each other.

Mauss's most significant observation about gifts is that they are not merely economic.⁵ That is, exchanges between peoples are not to be understood only in utilitarian terms, as the means to the satisfaction of people's material needs or wants, or to the enrichment of one's self, or to the better distribution of unevenly distributed resources. No one can deny that gifts may and do have these consequences; what we cannot then argue is that the

consequences are causes for either the institution of these customs nor their continuation. In particular it is often the case that the completion of a cycle of exchanges leaves the parties materially no better off than they were before.

Socially, however, it may be otherwise. "To give is to show one's superiority, to be more, to be higher in rank, *magister*" (Mauss 1990:74). By the same token, the recipient is placed, or places himself, in a subordinate position; he becomes *minister* to the other. He can rescue himself from his inferior status only by making an at least equivalent return gift. By this means is equality established and, over the long term, maintained despite temporary imbalances of gift-giving, during which one party is in debt (and therefore subordinate) to the other.

To anticipate the more detailed discussion below, Tlingit moieties were in a relationship of balanced reciprocity such that each moiety gave to the other exactly what it got back. This summary remains valid even though the moieties were not, in fact, corporate groups acting in concert in any way. At any particular location in Tlingit territory the lineages of each moiety exchanged things equally with each other, so that neither ever established superiority over the other. The total effect of all these individual, local exchanges was, similarly, the equality of the moieties. The balance in their exchanges both recognised that this was so, and ensured that it was.

We have seen how this worked with marriage: since one's spouse must come from the opposite moiety and never from one's own, each moiety ceded and gained an equal number of people. But one of Mauss' most important insights regarding gifts is that they constitute what he calls a "total social phenomenon." This has two meanings. A gift is total in that it is simultaneously juridical, religious, aesthetic, political, and structural as well as economic

(Mauss 1990:3, 38, 78-9). It is juridical, in that it arises from and imposes obligations on the parties to the exchange; religious, even if not offered to spirits, in that its transfer has an effect on and in the spirit world; aesthetic, in that both the gift and the circumstances of its bestowal should make an appropriate impression on the senses; political, in affecting relations of status and between groups; structural, in expressing and symbolising the connections among significant social groups; economic, in being produced and put to use. But a gift may be "total" in another sense as well, part of what Mauss calls a "*system of total services*". Such a system includes not just material items and conventional services (*e.g.*, helping someone roof a house), but "banquets, rituals, military services, women, children, dances, festivals, and fairs" (1990:5-6; emphasis original).

Such totality--in both senses--characterised the gifts given between moieties among the Tlingit. The pre-eminent example of this is the mortuary ritual (see Kan 1989:8-9), a highly complex ceremonial lasting several years and involving great numbers of people from both moieties as well as considerable effort in preparation. Despite its complexity, the basic notion is quite clear: the lineages of each moiety exchange mortuary services and mortuary potlatches with the net effect of maintaining their equal status with regard to each other.

Tlingit believed that when a person died his⁶ souls--the individual person was thought to have several animating principles--experienced different fates. One of these, the *toowu* (also translated as "mind"), disappeared for ever. The same was true of the breath, *daseikw*.⁷ But other non-material parts of the person continued to exist after death, and it was to recognise and preserve these that the Tlingit carried out their mortuary ceremonies. One such spirit, the *yakgwaheiyagu*, inhabited the cemetery behind the village in which it had lived; it was also thought to travel to the land of spirits, where it remained forever. The *yahaayi*, on the other

hand, should become reincarnate in a newborn Tlingit of the deceased's clan. Reincarnation was not automatic, though; one very important function of mortuary rituals was to ensure that it happened.

Even a brief description of the ritual⁸ illustrates the relationship between the moieties in a practical context. Following Kan (1989), let us say that the head of a house had died. His body, which his father's and wife's kin had washed and painted and dressed in his best clothing, was placed in a sitting position at the very back of the common area of the house, resting against the carved crest screen that dominates it. He was decorated with crest items belonging to his lineage and his clan, and surrounded by yet more valuables--furs, blankets, slaves, and the like--belonging either to himself or to his close matrilineal kin (e.g., younger brothers, sisters, sisters' children). The number and importance of these valuables affected how the spirit would be treated in the village of the dead: many valuables gave him a high status there. During the first day or so of mourning the men of the opposite clans erected a pyre behind the house for the cremation of the body when the wake was completed. This usually extended over four days, but it might in exceptional circumstances last for eight. The most important part of the wake was the nightly "smoking feast," which the chief mourner (in this case, the deceased man's hier, one of his sister's sons) sponsored for the deceased man's matrilineal kin and his relatives in the opposite moiety (i.e., his father's and his wife's matrilineal kin). It had this name because the participants primarily smoked tobacco, believing that it would be enjoyed not only by themselves but also by the spirit of the deceased, which they thought was still present among them. Not uncommonly there was a feast of food, too, made up of whatever foods the deceased liked best: again, the Tlingit thought that the spirit could share in this and would be comforted thereby. Throughout the

wake the visitors, that is the deceased's father's kin and his wife's kin, offered speeches of condolence to the bereaved and praised the deceased. The spirit was thought to hear all this and take comfort from it, too.

When the four or eight days of the wake were finished the body was removed through a hole made in the rear wall of the house, and carried to the pyre that had been constructed behind it. This was, in form, a rough log container, containing wood shavings, into which the body was placed together with several blankets. Fish oil was poured over the whole, and then it was set alight. As it burned, men from the opposite moiety added fuel to the fire and occasionally threw in some valuable object of their own, so that the deceased would have the use of it in the afterlife. (Very often a slave was killed and cremated along with his master, for the same purpose.)

When the cremation was achieved and the fire had died down, the female affines of the deceased (i.e., his wife's mother, if she were still alive; the wife's sisters and their daughters) collected the bones and ashes, wrapped them in a blanket, and placed them in a carved wooden box which was, in turn, placed in the grave-house in the cemetery behind the house of the living. This was a miniature cabin or large box of wood, sometimes raised on a post or posts but more often built right on the ground, decorated with the clan and lineage crests.

Within three years of this deposition--ideally in one year--the mourners were hosts at the memorial potlatch, a ritual with numerous functions. One of these was to release them from the obligations of mourning. (These were a number of taboos whose net effect was to turn them into something like a deceased person themselves (Kan 1989:138): they abstained from sexual intercourse, avoided idle talk, moved infrequently and slowly, and ate very little.

To indicate their status as mourners even more obviously, they blackened their faces, and their hair was cut or burnt short.) This release ought, at the same time, to relieve them of the weight of grief itself. The widow or widower, if any, would be re-married at this time. The potlatch was said to "finish" the deceased too: the bones were brought forth and re-wrapped for a final deposition, while the spirits of the deceased were able to settle permanently in their proper places--one in the cemetery, one in the village of the dead, and one as a reincarnated Tlingit who would inherit the deceased person's names, titles, and ritual position in the lineage. Finally, the potlatch repaid the people of the opposite moiety for their work in carrying out the funeral.

It should be clear from this abbreviated account that the deceased's father's and wife's relatives were crucial to the completion of the mortuary observances because they, and not the deceased's own matrilineal relatives, accomplished the practical business of the funeral. They washed, painted, and clothed the body immediately following the death, and they assisted the mourners to assume their proper appearance too; they cooked the food on which they and the mourners lived during this time; they offered comfort to the bereaved; they built the pyre on which the body was cremated and kept it going long enough to accomplish its purpose; they rescued and wrapped the bones and ashes and placed them in the grave house, which they either built or refurbished for the occasion. If the deceased were a particularly important chief, his successor would erect as his memorial an entire new house decorated with clan and lineage crest carvings. This, too, would be built not by the people who would live in it but by their opposites.

The dependence of one moiety on the other as displayed in mortuary observances was not, however, unique to the funeral; it was evident at all life-crises among the Tlingit. For

instance, a baby was delivered by women of the woman's husband's or father's clan (which might be the same, of course) rather than by the mother's own sisters or mother; and the father performed the birth ritual (Kan 1989:107). The little basket into which the infant was put was manufactured by the opposite moiety, who would also pierce the nasal septum (de Laguna 1972:501-504). The same relationship is apparent at the very important ritual that marked a girl's first menstruation. As always, the elaboration of this ritual depended on the rank of the girl, but unless she were a slave some attention was paid to the event. Always she was shut away in a small room at the back of the house and not allowed to come out or to be social for a period of time varying from four days to four or eight months or even two years (that is, eight seasons). During this long ordeal--and it was meant to test the girl's moral and physical qualities as well as to bring about her change of status--she was in the care of her father's sister. This woman made sure she was fed, but also admonished her about being greedy (whether she was or not); took care of the waste products that necessarily accumulate when a person is closely confined and has no access to a latrine; and performed various small rituals to ensure that the girl would be discreet, virtuous, industrious, prosperous, and long-lived. At the end of the seclusion the girl was provided with completely new clothing and ornaments, and she was tattooed and pierced for the labret (a plug, ranging in size from a collar stud to a bread-and-butter plate, inserted in the lower lip; only Tlingit women wore these)--all by members of her father's clan (de Laguna 1972:518-522). This was, ideally, the same group from whom her husband came. As I have said, a spouse must always come from the opposite moiety, and preferably someone in the father's actual clan (de Laguna 1972:524-525).

It is clear that no Tlingit, man or woman, could be a complete social person without

the active participation of his or her opposites: those related through the father or the spouse. First we must realise that "person" is to be distinguished from "individual." The terms are not synonymous. A considerable literature on this point exists, only the most cursory summary of which is possible here. The American concept of the *individual*, a being both biologically and morally independent of others except insofar as he or she wishes to be associated with them, is almost never to be found in non-western cultures. Instead we find the idea of the *person*, a physical and moral being made by, and making, the others in his or her society. This is as true biologically as it is socially, since what we consider biological substances generated by our bodies--semen, blood, milk--and more or less necessary to the physical creation and maintenance of our offspring are, in other cultures, regarded as voluntary gifts that people, including parents, bestow on others, including their children. Since these are gifts they must, as Mauss observes of other kinds of gift, be repaid in some way. Likewise, socially, there cannot be any such thing as a "self-made man" in these cultures; the idea is incomprehensible. One's social identity is always a function of one's social relations and relationships to others, and in particular of their gifts to one's self.

I described above the spiritual components of the person, as the Tlingit conceived of them. The complementary physical aspects of the person are conveniently to be divided into the outer integument, the skin and flesh, which was the container for the more important inner component, the bones, of which they reckoned the eight long bones to be the most important (Kan 1989:49-50). These components, spiritual and physical, made up a human being, but did not by themselves constitute a "person" in the Tlingit view. For that one needed a social identity, which one acquired (in part) from the matrilineal ancestors of one's clan. The social identity had its material aspect, the many crest objects the clan owned and

had the right to display; and its non-material aspect, including stories, songs, dances, and names and titles. These formed a coherent system such that inheritance of an ancestral name gave one the right to tell certain stories and sing certain songs about the ancestor, perform the dances related to these, and wear the crest objects that transformed one from an ordinary Tlingit into the ancestral power itself. The Tlingit term for this is *shagoon*, which as Kan says "might be called the root concept in Tlingit culture...a very complex notion" (1989:68). One asserted one's relationship to the ancestors and also to the living-one's clan affiliation, one's status within the clan, and one's relationship to those not part of the clan--in terms of *shagoon*.

Tlingit held that most of what made up a person came from the mother's side of the family, but they also attributed certain aspects to the father's side. Thus one's souls or spirits and one's bones were primarily the contribution of the mother, but both parents contributed skin and flesh. A person might comment favorably on someone else's resemblance to his or her father, especially if the speaker belonged to the father's clan. A child might also act like his or her father, or like someone in the father's clan (Kan 1989:67-8). The fact of matrilineal descent, in short, did not deny the father and his clan any contribution to his child's appearance and qualities. On the contrary, "fatherless children were seen as incomplete persons" (Kan 1989:68).

We have seen, too, that the father's relatives were necessary to the production of social persons in that they carried out the important rituals that established one's status as a baby and child of one's parents, as an adult woman, as a married person, and finally as someone deceased. Following Hertz (1960) and van Gennep (1960), we recognise that statuses such as these do not follow automatically from biological events or changes. Simply being

born does not make one a person: one must be culturally established in that status by some ritual such as naming, washing, or feeding. Otherwise one is simply a scrap of biology and has no moral standing at all. Likewise the first appearance of menstrual blood in a girl does not make her a woman. If that were so, we would never have rituals of initiation for girls. Moreover, although birth and menstruation are themselves "natural" or "biological" events, their definition and importance are most certainly cultural. Birth, for instance, takes a long time, as we all know. At what point is the baby actually born? Even an infant entirely emerged from its mother may not be considered fully born until the umbilicus is severed and the baby separated from the placenta. We can make the same point about death. As we know very well in modern America, where technology allows us to fight to an unprecedented degree to keep the dying from final dissolution, the definition of "dead" is subject to endless debate and refinement. Nevertheless we share a common assumption: "death" is a physical state, and we look for physical signs to determine whether it has occurred. Elsewhere it is otherwise, and death has both a physical aspect and a social one, the latter being the more important.

Just as the appearance of menstrual blood did not in itself establish the girl as a woman among the Tlingit, so also the cessation of breath alone did not establish the sick man as deceased. The Tlingit looked to their opposites to perform the rituals necessary to make the social person, and for each such service a potlatch was due.

The potlatch that repaid the opposites for carrying out the rituals of death was the most important of these. At the potlatch the hosts, who were the matriline of the deceased led by his heir, presented their *shagoon*, their clan history and identity, to an audience made up of their opposites: local clans of the opposite moiety and at least one clan coming from

some distance away. In this endeavor they were assisted by local clans of their own moiety who however were less in evidence than the hosts themselves. (Referring to Fig. 5, Household 1 might offer a potlatch to Household 2, to the sister of which one of them is married; they would ask Household 3 for support because those men belong to another clan in their own moiety, and invite Household 4--to the sisters of which two of them are married--as the "out-of-town guests.") The symmetry of the moieties is clear here, but we see also that it is a fractal in that each moiety represented was itself divided into two: the primary clan, and the subsidiary clan or clans which were at least potentially opposed in that two clans from the same moiety could, and often did, dispute the ownership of crest objects. That the local clans were willing to support the hosts was a political gesture of solidarity, just as the willingness of the heir's kin to support him as their leader was a political statement that they recognised his right to that status.

As part of the entertainment the hosts gave their guests great quantities of food and numerous gifts, and they might also destroy some property by burning or by casting it into the sea. One or more slaves might also be killed at this time. They presented food to their guests with the request that it be thrown into the fire, for by such means it became a gift to their deceased kin. (All the hosts' deceased kin should be honored in this way at a potlatch.) The other gifts--valuable furs, copper shields, blankets, and so on--were in fact gifts to the dead, but only their opposites could effect the transfer from the living.⁹ Here again we see the real necessity of the opposites to one's condition, whether one were alive or dead: they, even more than the deceased's own kin, could provide for one in the afterlife. Without their immolations of food the spirits in the village of the dead would starve, and without their accepting the other gifts the spirits would be naked and despised (Kan 1989:182, 185, 112).

For any Tlingit, the opposites performed the rituals and made the crest objects that established him or her as a social person; and in return the opposites received food, gifts, and entertainment at a potlatch. But at a mortuary potlatch, anyway, there was more going on than payment for services rendered. This was a ranked society, and so everyone claimed a certain precedence over others. But claiming by itself does not give high status; it has to be accorded as well. The conditional nature of a person's rank was most obviously the case when a very important man, the head of a house or a lineage, died. Although no one may have challenged his right to the status he claimed, it might be otherwise with his heir. Thus at the potlatch for his predecessor the heir invited his opposites to confirm his claim that he was, indeed, the new head of the lineage or of the house. That they would construct that house for him, as well as the mortuary paraphernalia and indeed much if not all his ritual accouterments, testified to their agreement that his claim was just. They confirmed this at the potlatch by addressing him, for the first time, with his new names and titles, which he had inherited from the deceased whom they were honoring with the ritual.

In many cases such confirmation seems to have been *pro forma*, but sometimes there might be two claimants to a status, and the opposites would have to decide which they thought was the legitimate claim. Such a situation was analogous to that in which the rights to certain crests were seriously disputed among clans, and then the decision might rest with the opposites. As we have seen, the crests were the most important things a clan owned, conferring as they did spiritual power as well as titles to areas of land and a sense of distinctive identity. When the opposites decided in favor of one claimant over another they performed the same service for that group as they did for those who made it up: in both cases they confirmed the social reality of those they recognised.

The potlatch was, in Mauss's terms, a total social phenomenon; indeed he uses the ethnographic data about the Kwakiutl potlatch as a basis for formulating this important anthropological idea. Without question it was economic, since it required a good deal in the way of production and its primary purpose was to exchange things. But, equally obviously, it was political, confirming as it did the claims to precedence of a person or a group and ratifying, where it did not establish, ties of alliance among lineages and clans. Its social dimension is plain, too: the hosts and their guests were not only kin groups but were kin to each other, related as fathers to children and husbands to wives; and it established social rank within and between such groups. Its religious content was supremely important, too, although that may not be quite so obvious from this particular discussion. But a primary function of the ritual was to display crest objects, reminders of the conferring of power from the supernatural world on the ancestors of those who displayed them--or, more accurately, on those who displayed them themselves, since they were held to be those ancestors reincarnate. And we must not overlook the aesthetic aspect of the ritual, which was critical. Without getting into a lengthy discussion of Northwest Coast Indian art it is still possible to say that the Indians had a definite aesthetic theory, that is a set of ideas about what would and should appeal best to the senses. As we have seen, an important part of that aesthetic was bilateral symmetry; the art of the potlatch thus reiterated the fundamental principle of social organisation among them.

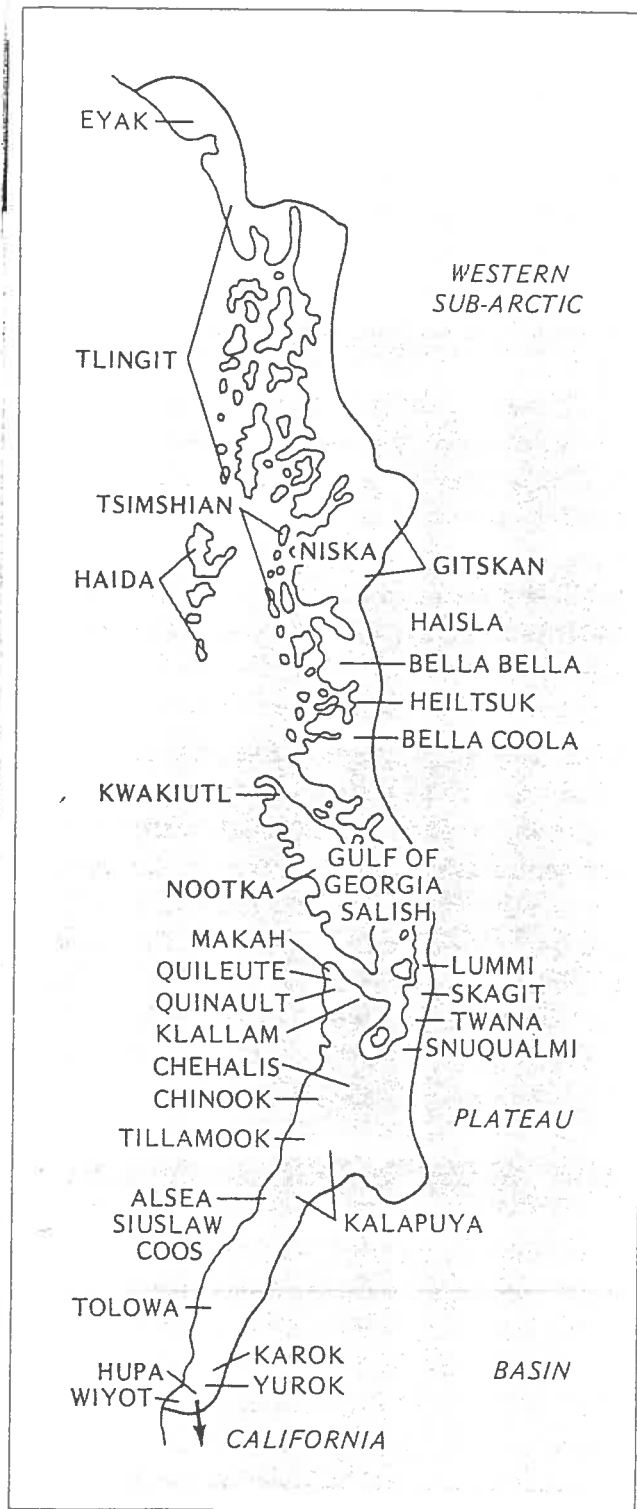
With the conclusion of the potlatch the clans from either moiety felt that the unequal relationship between them, the result of the mortuary services being so far unreciprocated, was no longer in effect; they were once again each other's equals (Kan 1989:191-197). This fact by itself might seem to confirm my initial assertion that the moieties were equals,

equivalent to the two halves of a bisected rectangle. But in fact I have presented here only one-half of the relationship: one moiety performing a funeral, the other paying them for it. True, this did restore equality between them; but since the initial gift--the mortuary services--and the repayment--the potlatch--were not at all the same kind of thing, theoretically a hierarchy might still have persisted. That it did not was due, of course, to the obligation of each moiety to perform such services for the other, and to accept the gifts of a potlatch in return. In fact we have here a four-fold structure: Eagles bury Ravens, and Ravens potlatch Eagles; Ravens bury Eagles, and Eagles potlatch Ravens. It was this structure, much more than the potlatch-for-services exchange, that reflected and maintained the equality of the moieties.

Symmetry may consist in this sort of equality, or equilibrium; but, as I suggested at the beginning of this paper, it requires also a relation of mutual definition. Each half is a half because the other half exists. And we see that that relationship, too, existed between Tlingit moieties. Categorically it operated in a negative way, in that anyone must belong to one moiety and never to both; therefore anyone who was not one of Us must be one of the Others. There were no other possibilities. De Laguna reports, for instance, that so thoroughgoing was this principle that the Tlingit classified every people with whom they came into contact, including the U.S. Navy, in these terms (de Laguna 1972:450). In practice the principle operated positively in that the social persons (and to a somewhat lesser extent the clans) of a moiety were made by their opposites in the other moiety. Thus the moieties depended on each other for their continued existence.

Some anthropologists have seen in dual organisation the oldest, and therefore most basic, form of social organisation in the world (e.g., Durkheim and Mauss 1963; Lévi-Strauss

1969). Their argument rests partly on the fact that the form is widely spread, and it cannot be shown to be a function of any particular economic, religious, or political form; rather, it is a basis for organising all these aspects of a culture. Whether their claim to antiquity is valid can never be known, and in any case we need not invoke immense age to explain its appearance in so many otherwise diverse contexts. Symmetrical structures realise the possibility of stability, which we must suppose all human groups to strive for despite the vicissitudes and contingencies of everyday life.



Map of the Northwest Coast.

from Spencer & Jennings et al, 1977

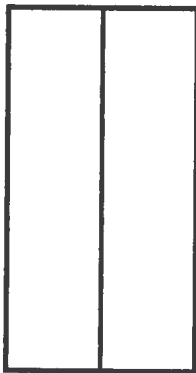


Fig. 1. Bisected rectangle,
a simplified model of Tlingit
social organisation.



Figure 2.
 Thunderbird Screen from Thunderbird House, Yakutat, now in Alaska State Museum, Juneau. (See pl. 215.)
 (Photograph by J. Malcolm Greany for this volume.)

from De Laguna 1972

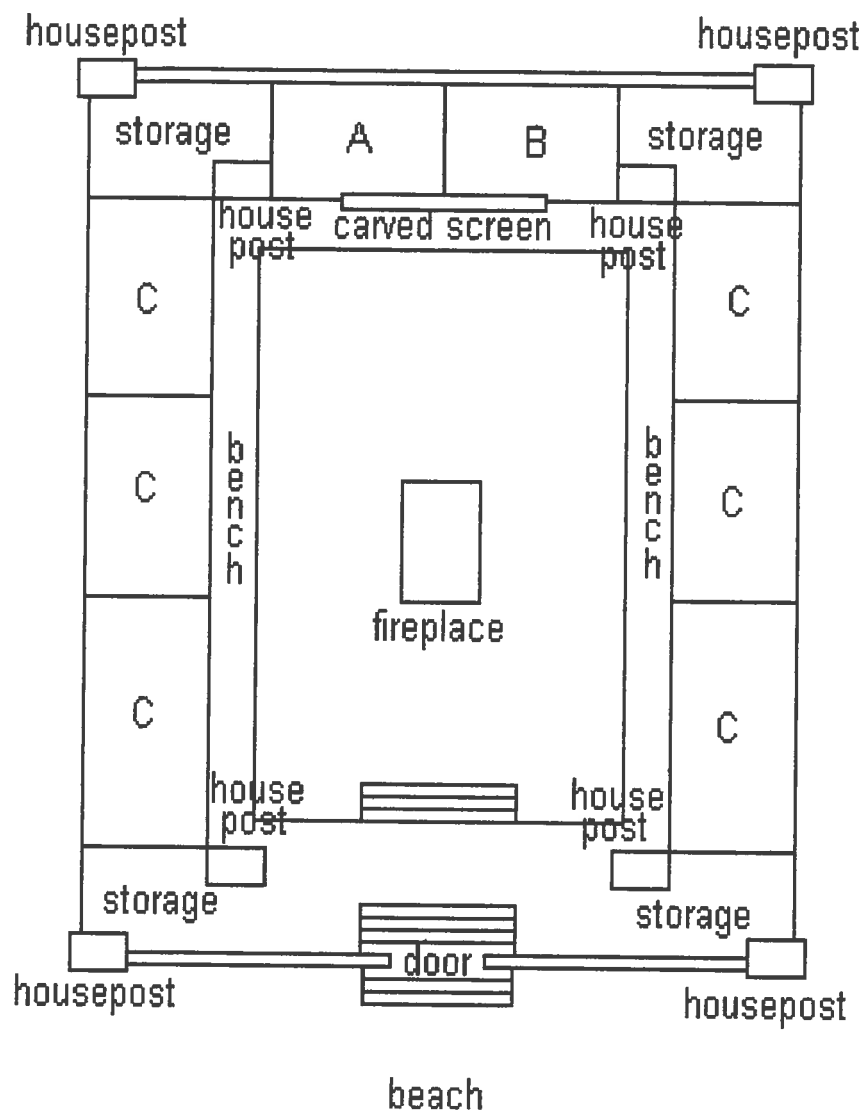


Figure 3. Plan of a Tlingit Winter House
 (After de Laguna 1972:Fig. 9)

A, chief's quarters; B, chief's brother's quarters;
 C, C, lower-ranked families' quarters

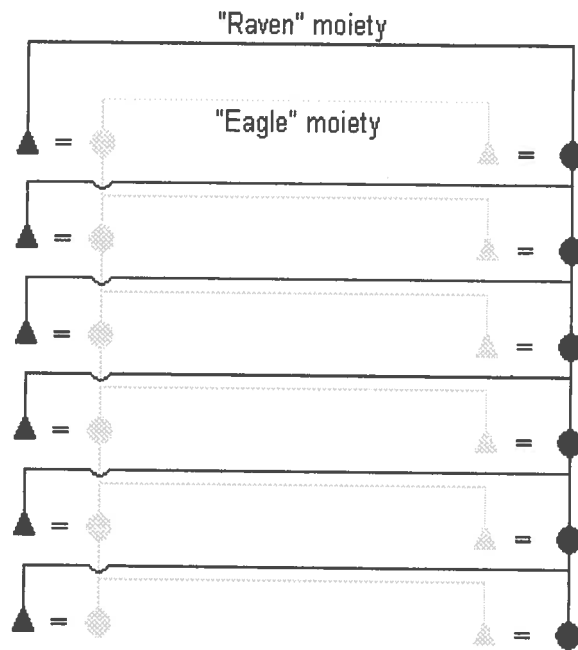


Figure 4. Tlingit moiety system, demonstrating marriage (idealised).

A "Raven" must always marry an "Eagle," and vice-versa.

Systematically, in each generation a man's wife is also his sister's husband's sister; a woman's husband is also her brother's wife's brother.

Each side loses a woman (sister) and gains a woman (wife) in return; the exchange is equal and so are the sides.

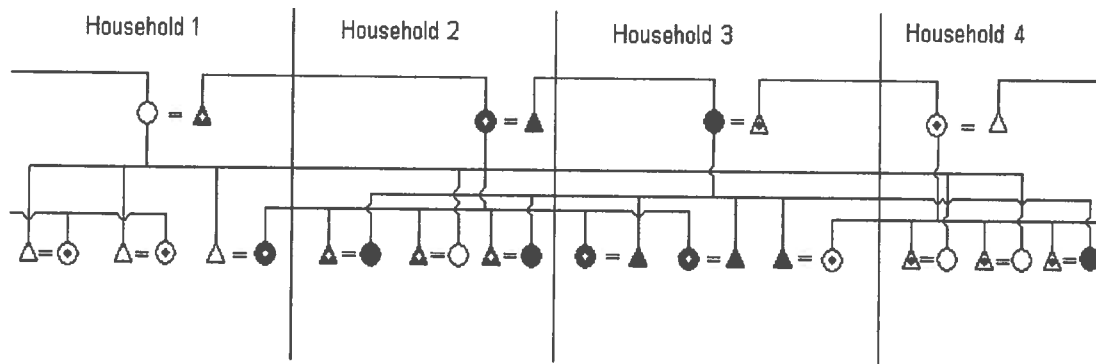


Figure 5. Marriages among four Tlingit households (ideal)

"Raven" moiety	"Eagle" moiety
Clan "A" ▲ ●	Clan "A" ▲ ●
Clan "B" △ ○	Clan "B" △ ⊕

NOTES

1. The Tlingit have been known to Europeans since 1741, when a Russian expedition encountered them in the Gulf Coast of Alaska (de Laguna 1972:108; Kan 1989:27). Later in the century they became heavily engaged in the fur trade; in the succeeding century they continued to trade with, and be somewhat affected by, Europeans and their culture (Kan 1989:21). The greatest change during the nineteenth century was an increase of wealth, mostly among the high-ranking families, the result of their control of trade routes and items (Kan 1989:28). American colonisation following the purchase of Alaska in 1867 wrought the greatest cultural changes among them, and today much of their nineteenth-century glory is found only in anthropologists' writings. Some part of it still continues, though, including the dual organisation described in this paper, the rank system, potlatching, and the production of art. In this discussion I present the Tlingit as they were, or are re-created to have been, towards the end of the last century.

2. De Laguna refers to the most inclusive descent group as a "sib" rather than a "clan," following a usage, current at the time in which she did her research, that restricted "clan" to patrilineal descent groups and "sib" to matrilineal descent groups. This distinction has since been abandoned as unnecessarily particular; Kan, for example, calls these same social groups "clans" (1989:23).

3. In case the anthropological conventions of diagramming a kinship system should not be known, I mention them here: circles = women; triangles = men; equal sign = marriage; vertical line = descent; horizontal line = siblingship.

4. In this discussion I may seem to have adopted Lévi-Strauss's point of view regarding marriage, viz., that in any social group the men exchange their sisters and daughters with the men of a comparable group for *their* sisters and daughters (Lévi-Strauss 1969:Ch. III *et passim*). Although he makes a few gestures in the direction of denying that he thinks women are "things," still the argument he presents casts them very much in that light. I do not at all agree that this is a necessary situation and therefore universal in all human societies (and see Van Baal 1975;

Weiner 1992). The ethnographic information available about the Tlingit makes it clear that, at least in the past, girls had almost nothing to do with the choice of their spouses (most Tlingit married several times during a lifetime), whereas boys could and did make some choice in the matter. Nevertheless it would be wrong to infer from this that women were things--that is, utterly powerless--and not persons, because women could and did make choices on behalf of their daughters (de Laguna 1972:490). Thus when I say that a group parted with a sister or daughter, or acquired another's sister or daughter as a wife, I mean just that: the women and men of the group together agreed to part with, or to accept, a girl or woman to or from another group of men and women.

5. "Gift" is the term anthropologists use for any sort of thing given by one person or group to another. European gifts--at Christmas or a birthday, for example--are a special case of the kind of gift Mauss discusses, but the term as used in anthropology has a much wider application than its use in popular speech suggests. Most broadly it refers to anything at all that anyone gives another, from the most casual sharing-out of a snack or meal to the most formal presentation of valuables by one chief to another. What all gifts have in common is that they are not money, not currency; they represent, as Gregory suggests, the relative values of persons, while money represents the relative values of things (Gregory 1982:47).

6. "His:" it is a curious fact that, in anthropological literature, women almost never die. They are frequently widowed. We know vastly more about how a bereaved woman should act than about her male counterpart. Although Kan (1989) does say something about what happened when a Tlingit woman died, for the most part he is obliged to discuss male decedants since his sources themselves offer very little information about women's decease. Since I am relying on Kan and his sources I must necessarily do the same.

7. In this paper I approximate the spellings of Tlingit words in Kan (1989), omitting however his diacritical marks. Those interested in a more accurate transcription of the language are referred to his work and to that of de Laguna (1972).

8. The information in the following summary is taken from Kan (1989).

9. The reasons why the Tlingit held this idea are not pertinent to the argument in this paper and so I do not discuss them here. Those interested should consult Kan (1989), who explains its cultural logic.

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