

IDENTITY, HISTORY AND THE NORTHERN ATHABASKAN POTLATCH

IDENTITY, HISTORY AND THE ARMENIAN EPOCH

by

william E. Simeone

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AUTHOR: William E.Simeone, B.A. (University of Alaska)
M.A. (McMaster University)

SUPERVISOR: Professor Harvey Feit

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ABSTRACT

A basic theme underlying Athabaskan culture and the potlatch is the duality of competition and cooperation. In the literature on both the Northwest Coast and Athabaskan potlatch this duality is most often considered in one of two ways: as a cultural phenomenon which is functional and ahistorical in nature, or as a product of Native and White contact. In this study I take a less radical view. Within Athabaskan culture and the potlatch cooperation and competition exist in a historically reticulate duality which provides the internal dynamic in Northern Athabaskan culture and continues to motivate attempts to redefine the culture and the potlatch.

In the context of political and economic domination, however, the duality becomes an opposition in which competition is submerged and reshaped into a symbol for the White man, while cooperation becomes a symbol for unity and Indianness. The resulting ideology, or "Indian way," becomes a critique of the current situation and a vision of things as they should be. The potlatch is the major arena in which this vision derived from the past is reproduced.

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INTRODUCTION

Anthropologists and laymen alike have been consistently fascinated by the splendid ceremonial distribution of gifts known as the potlatch. For the most part the literature on the potlatch has concentrated on those ceremonies held by Native people living along the Northwest Coast of North America: the Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian and especially the Kwakiutl. Relatively less attention had been paid to similar ceremonies practiced by Northern Athabaskan people living in the interior of Alaska and eastern Yukon Territory. This study concerns the potlatch as practiced by the Tanacross people, a group of Athabaskan speaking people living in the upper Tanana River valley of east central Alaska.

A basic theme underlying the potlatch and Tanacross culture is the duality of cooperation and competition. In the literature on both the Northwest Coast and Athabaskan potlatch less debate is focused on the phenomena of cooperation, often taken for granted, than on the nature and source of competition. Their relationship is considered in

one of two ways: as a cultural phenomenon which is functional and ahistorical in nature, or as a product of Native and White contact. In this study I take a less radical view. My thesis is that within Athabaskan culture and the potlatch cooperation and competition exist in a complex historical relationship (cf. Kan 1986). On one level the duality reflects the struggle for power and prestige, and on the other, love and respect. In the context of political and economic domination, however, the duality becomes an opposition in which competition is submerged and reshaped into a symbol for the White man, while cooperation becomes a symbol for unity and Indianness. The resulting ideology, or "Indian way," becomes a critique of things as they are as well as a vision of things the way they should be.¹ The potlatch is the arena in which this vision, derived from the past, is reproduced.

1. Literature Review: History and the Potlatch

Although basic differences do exist between Northern Athabaskan and Tlingit potlatches, on the one hand, and the ceremony as practiced by the Kwakiutl, I have drawn on the more historically oriented Kwakiutl literature as it

¹ This concept is derived from Scott (1985: 23).

pertains to my argument. In much of the historical literature the potlatch is viewed from basically two historical perspectives: either as maintaining a cultural continuity which is static, or as fundamentally altered through the course of cultural contact. Codere (1950), for example, argues that while the Kwakiutl potlatch was elaborated and expanded in response to a specific set of historical circumstances, the function of the ceremony remained unchanged. Through participation, initially in the fur trade, and later fishing, mining, and the lumber industry, the Kwakiutl obtained enormous amounts of manufactured items which they used to increase the size of the potlatch. At the same time, the Kwakiutl experienced a sharp decline in population which caused competition over vacant hereditary titles. Finally, Canadian sanctions against Kwakiutl warfare forced the Kwakiutl to redirect their energies towards the "socio-economic contest" (1950: VI) of the potlatch. These sanctions, combined with the increased competition over titles, led to an extraordinary increase in the frequency of potlatching.

Despite these changes Codere reports the function of the Kwakiutl potlatch continued to be the

ostentatious and dramatic distribution of property by the holder of a fixed, ranked and named social position, to

other position holders. The purpose is to validate a hereditary claim to the position and to live up to it by maintaining its relative glory and rank against the rivalrous claims of the others (1950: 63).

Drucker and Heizer (1967) substantially agree with Codere's analysis. They believe the Kwakiutl potlatch maintained its function even though the ceremony underwent modifications in response to economic development and administrative sanctions (1967: 52). Echoing Codere, Drucker and Heizer point out that economic development not only increased the availability of commodities but made them available through labor that was both familiar and easy to the Kwakiutl (1967: 16). A major effect of this abundance was to widen participation in the potlatch both in terms of the number who gave potlatches and guests who attended. In turn the system of distribution, which had been predicated on rank, was altered as lesser ranking chiefs began potlatching. This was not entirely due to economic developments, however, but was also the result of circumventing the anti-potlatch law passed by the Canadian government. The host, instead of presenting the gifts in order of rank, went from house to house in geographical order (1967: 47).

Regardless of these "outward" changes, nowhere was there, according to Drucker and Heizer, a "suggestion of

deviation from the original purpose of the potlatch," which was "the formal presentation of a claim of hereditary right to a specific social status, or to hereditary privileges intimately related to such a specific status" (1967:52). Within this context competitive potlatching over specific hereditary rights functioned as an integrating mechanism for clarifying and resolving conflicting claims. Personal rivalries involving jealousy and public insults, often associated with potlatches, were a "culturally approved release mechanism for the interpersonal tensions that may be generated in any fairly complex primitive society" (1967:123).

By contrast Goldman (1975), in a symbolic analysis of the Kwakiutl religious system, concludes that little continuity exists between 19th century and contemporary potlatches. According to Goldman the "[m]ain principles of Kwakiutl culture, those that govern lineage, rank, marriage, the distribution and exchange of property, and rivalries and antagonisms among chiefs are so closely identified with religion as to be conceived of as religious expressions" (1975: 6). Land and water became the source of religious property and the accumulation of gifts a religious act. Gifts, such as animal skins, become symbolic of the

interconnection between all spheres of life (1975: 124) and exchange brought into "connection the contemporary and natural world and the mythic world of the ancestors" (1975: 127). Under these conditions gifts were a form of nourishment (1975: 43) of which quality rather than mere quantity was significant. However, the introduction of trade goods and Christianity completely undermined the aboriginal significance of the ceremony so that, although the modern potlatch persists, it has become "Christianized and commercialized" (Goldman 1975: 12-13). Goldman's view is that by the late nineteenth or early twentieth century the Kwakiutl potlatch had become secularized to the extent that rank and exchange were reduced to matters of prestige.

Using a different approach, Ringel (1979) reaches a similar conclusion. She writes that the Kwakiutl potlatch is a "survival" (361) and that its original function has been subverted by Native participation in incipient capitalism. "The alienation of wealth and rationalized concept of currency," she goes on to say, "undermined the viability of the potlatch as an institution, for it changed its significance from an expression of community to an arena for individual rivalry" (1979: 357).

Comparable views are expressed by McKennan (1959) and Strong (1972) in their discussions of historical changes

in the upper Tanana and upper Ahtna Athabaskan potlatches. According to McKennan the upper Tanana potlatch was "profoundly modified" by the fur trade (1959: 139) so that it became the "means by which an individual achieves prestige, not only within his own group, but neighboring groups as well" (1959: 136). One of the principal factors which led to this change, McKennan believed, was the introduction of trade goods. This was reiterated by Strong (1972) who wrote that Native participation in the fur trade altered the nature of the potlatch creating a milieu for the development of a prestige economy based on the accumulation and competitive redistribution of EuroAmerican trade goods through the mechanism of the mortuary potlatch (Strong 1972 chap 5: 32).

I believe that none of these views is quite adequate to account for the Northern Athabaskan potlatch as it is today and will offer an alternative model which I think has wider application. To do this I look at three interrelated topics included under the overarching theme of the dynamic between competition and cooperation. These are: the introduction of trade goods into the potlatch, leadership, contemporary Native cultural identity, and the potlatch.

2. Trade Goods and the Potlatch

Historically one of the major fields of contention between Whites and Natives involved differing concepts of property and its distribution in the potlatch. Missionaries, traders, and government saw the ceremonial distribution of goods as a detriment to economic self sufficiency and "real" prosperity. Native people saw, and continue to see, the distribution of goods as a spiritual and social matter. In some respects these contrasting views are reflected in the divergent opinions anthropologists have on the affect the introduction of trade goods had on the potlatch. Codere (1950: 95), for example, indicated that potlatch gifts had no symbolic meaning and that the use of trade blankets had no affect on the ceremony. Woolen trade blankets were used by the Kwakiutl because they were interested in quantity and a "common standard" by which to compare potlatches. Walens (1981) and Kan (1986; 1989), on the other hand, recognized the symbolic significance of potlatch gifts but saw no discontinuity in the use of trade blankets. Walens wrote that blankets became "homologous" to animal skins while Kan indicated that blankets and cloth were symbolically integrated into the Tlingit ceremony and became major symbols of love and gratitude (Kan 1989: 211).

In sharp contrast, Goldman (1975) wrote that the use of blankets in the Kwakiutl potlatch indicated a complete disjuncture in the meaning of the ceremony. "Kwakiutl property was originally a representation of lives, not dead currency" (1975: 123). Furthermore, blankets reduced exchange to a single unit, whereas in aboriginal exchange a diversity of gifts was distributed. Ringel (1979) expressed a similar view. Kwakiutl gifts referred symbolically to cosmology and marked group identity, while money and commodities became "alienated from a familiar system of meanings, detached from aboriginal status positions, its [money's] only significance lay in the economic system which had created it" (Ringel 1979: 357).

This point is important because it indicates a dynamic connection between the introduction of trade goods and changes in the symbolic meaning of gifts and their exchange. Ringel's analysis is also particularly provocative because she represents these changes as a "struggle" between the collective recognition of the individual and the "impersonal distinction conferred by success in the market economy" (1979: 360). In other words, the "struggle" can be construed as a matter of maintaining and reproducing cultural identity based on the collectivity of Native

society as opposed to the individualization of Euro-North-American society.

McKenna (1959) also pointed to this struggle when he wrote that the introduction of trade goods into Athabaskan culture produced a concomitant change in values as wealth became associated with prestige. This, McKenna believed, was a Tlingit trait introduced through protocontact trade with the Tutchone and reinforced by availability of EuroAmerican trade goods which created an atmosphere of intense competition, demonstrated in the potlatch, over prestige and status (1959: 129). These new values clashed with the "old Athapaskan traits" of cooperation and hyperindividualism creating a contradiction in the Athabaskan society of the 1920s. McKenna noted that a "similar conflict between the semicomunistic order and a new order based on wealth may be seen among the Alaskan Eskimo where the successful trapper must make frequent gifts of his newly acquired wealth as a sop to the older tradition of communalism" (1959: 133).

Ringel, Goldman, and McKenna seemed to have ignored the point that within the context of the potlatch, trade goods are transformed into gifts by the very act of distribution (cf. Gregory 1982). I argue, in chapters three,

six, and seven that, in the Athabaskan context, the accumulation of trade goods and their redistribution in the potlatch is a reaffirmation of cultural values. Instead of remaining alienated goods, or becoming symbolic of the conceptual system of the dominant society, I show, in chapter 3, that trade goods were indigenized (Gaultieri 1980: 57). That is, non-Native forms were given Native meanings, reflecting both the indigenous cultural system, and developing historical relations between Natives and Whites. By applying new meanings to trade goods and redistributing them, Native people rejected the capitalist view that property was to be accumulated, saved, and reinvested to achieve personal wealth. Instead, the new wealth was integrated to maintain and to recreate the social order.

Furthermore, although I agree that the introduction of foreign goods did enhance the individual's ability to attain social recognition and may have accentuated the contradiction between the collective and the individual, external influences did not set this competition in motion. That predated the fur trade. This same dialectical merging of communalism and individual prestige is, for example, found in the Koyukon Athabaskan Feast of the Dead. By

distributing the personal property of the deceased, and that accumulated for the ceremony, the host reaffirmed the principles of communalism, praised the memory of the departed, and reflected glory upon himself (Jette in Lyons 1964: 138). It was this dialectic that provided the dynamic for Athabaskan culture.

In Athabaskan culture competition and cooperation exist in a dialectical relationship which, I believe, was a part of a proto-Athabaskan "base" common to both Northwest Coast and Western Athabaskan cultures (cf. De Laguna 1975; Kan 1989; McClellan 1964;; Rosman and Rubel 1983). According to Kan (1989) the northern coastal style of potlatching (i.e. Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian) developed around a more abundant resource base, concomitant increase in population, a more sedentary settlement pattern, and an increasingly complex social organization as clans split into lineages and sublineages (Kan 1989: 270, 271). Ownership and control of resources by these matrilineal groups made inheritance and succession an important issue on the coast, which was not the case in the interior, and gave rise to a hereditary aristocracy (Kan 1989: 271). Sedentary life made coastal matrilineages more cohesive over time, producing stronger clan ties which became the basis for participation in

mortuary rituals. Consequently the number of people attending the ceremonies increased and the dead were represented by inherited names, crests, sacred regalia, songs and oratory, rather than the host's matrikin as was the case in the interior (Kan 1989: 268).

While Northwest Coast society became increasingly stratified and cohesive Northern Athabaskan social structure remained fluid and fragmented with a continued emphasis on relationships between extended family members and only tenuous ties between clan or sib members. Consequently, Athabaskan mortuary rituals continued to be hosted, as they are today, by individuals supported by their immediate family and localized sibs rather than extended sib. This reflects the greater emphasis on self reliance and personal autonomy and less reliance on matrikin. Prestige derived from the ceremony was not shared with matrikin to the extent that it was on the coast.

Despite these differences key elements of the prototypical mortuary ritual remained common to both. These included: a common emphasis on the communication between the living and the dead; a dual social system in which members of a group other than that of the deceased performed the funerary services, and remuneration of the funeral workers (Kan 1989: 264).

3. Leadership and the Potlatch

The dynamic between the individual quest for prestige and the need to maintain social relations, in significant measure, revolves around the issue of leadership. In discussing the role of leadership in the Athabaskan potlatch, scholars have focused primarily on the role of the leader and the redistribution of goods (Guedon 1974; McKennan 1959; McClellan 1975; Osgood 1972; Strong 1972). Because of their social position, the "old time chiefs" were effectively able to exploit the developing trade and to accumulate wealth. As this ability increased so did the capability of holding large, ostentatious potlatches which enhanced the leader's prestige (McClellan 1975: 489-490; McKennan 1959: 129). For some Athabaskan groups, such as the Carrier (Bishop 1983; 1987), Tutchone, and Tagish (McClellan 1975), these transformations led to the development of a stratified society with inherited leadership and clan crests modeled after their coastal neighbors. To what extent this occurred in Tanacross culture is unclear.²

² For instance, McKennan (1959: 132), despite these developments, saw a weak leadership whose only claim lay in its continued ability to accumulate and distribute gifts. In fact, McKennan believed that as soon as a leader became unable to fulfill his duties his position was immediately usurped. But this perception is unsupported by either historical evidence or ethnographic data (Allen 1885; Strong n.d. chap 5: 27-28; Kari 1987: 15, 21-23).

Certainly, as I show in chapter three, the advent of the trade enabled leaders to enhance their individual prestige through the distribution of goods and reaffirm sib prerogatives through the assimilation, or indigenization, of certain trade goods. Prestige, however, did not rest only on the leader's ability to distribute exotic or scarce goods but depended on his ability to care for the people and reproduce the social order (cf. Myers 1986: 200).

This argument is carried over into chapter four where I discuss the continuing role of modern leaders in the contemporary potlatch and their contribution to the maintenance and transformation of Native cultural identity. Potlatch leadership is currently in the hands of traditional chiefs or "tradition bearers" whose role in the potlatch is at the core of their activities and identities. Through their ritual actions they attempt to create and recreate a model of Athasaskan cultural identity while enhancing their individual prestige through the public demonstration of traditional knowledge and ability to organize and inspire the people. This dynamic is rooted in the historical culture, but a key to its current dimensions lies in understanding contemporary Indian-White relations which is the subject of chapter five.

4. Contemporary Athabaskan Identity and the Potlatch

In the literature on the contemporary potlatch the problem of Indian-White relations has been addressed by Stearns (1975) in her work on the Haida. According to Stearns contemporary Haida rituals have retained their meanings despite loss of political autonomy, the individualization of economic action, and breakdown of corporate matrilineages (1975: 133). Considering themselves a "beleaguered" group, the Haida view themselves as separate from Whites in their concern for ritual and maintenance of tradition. Since Whites control education, medical care, and government and legal institutions, the Haida can only maintain their distinctiveness on a symbolic level. In the life cycle rituals the Haida reinforce their cultural identity and set themselves apart from Whites by asserting the "norms" of Haida culture: unity, equality, and cooperation (1975: 163). Exchange of gifts maintains community solidarity, while reciprocity continues to define and symbolize the individual's membership in the group, thus producing a sense of unity.

Despite this insistence on equality, people are concerned with rank. Instead of between lineages,

competition has now developed between households and heads of households who vie for prestige. In public, however, the competitiveness is suppressed through the reaffirmation of mutual indebtedness and distribution of gifts to all guests, regardless of moiety, which "nourishes the current myth that, 'everyone works together'" (1975: 164).

Stearns' work is important because it points to a further development of the potlatch as an expression and maintenance of culturally meaningful action in the context of political and economic domination. Her analysis is limited to the extent that she views the Haida ceremony as nurturing a sense of identity completely "insulated" from Whites (1975: 166). Like the Haida, Tanacross people set themselves apart from Whites through cultural practices like the potlatch. They also suppress public competition to nourish the ideology of cooperation. However, as I show in chapter five, and again in chapters six and seven, contemporary Athabaskan identity is not nurtured in isolation from Whites. It is a product of the dynamic relationship between Natives and Whites. As such, it exists in a never ending set of changing images Native people have of themselves and of Whites.

These images revolve around the fundamental oppositions of past and present, competition and

cooperation, and Indian and White. Cooperation, termed as sharing, reciprocity, love, respect, kinship, and competence are symbolic of the "Indian way" and the traditional hunting life. It is this which Native people consider "real" and to have existed only in the past. Competition, on the other hand, phrased in terms of self centered behavior and "jealousy" is behavior attributed to the White man. The key arena for maintaining and reproducing the images of the "Indian way" are the death related rituals of the funeral and potlatch. They are expressions of Tanacross people's perception of themselves and their place in history.

Although the values of the "Indian way" are expressed on the symbolic level they form a vital part of an ongoing internal and cross-cultural dialogue about the future of the Tanacross people. For the elders and the leadership of the community these values constitute an alternative model of social relations in which the individual acquires meaning within the context of a web of relationships. A major aspect of this dialogue involves the meanings attached to the potlatch, not only within the environment of political and economic domination, but also in the circumstances of the enormous wealth provided by the capitalist system.

Within this context the potlatch exchange has not been reduced to individual rivalry based on competitive redistribution but is a way of recreating and maintaining proper social relations. The goods now exchanged are commercially made, but this has not turned the potlatch into a riot of commercialism. The quantity of goods presented at a potlatch is significant, and people measure the social significance of the event, in part, by the number of gifts, but this is also measured in terms of the quality of gifts. For example, blankets are graded according to quality, with those of Hudson's Bay caliber being greatly esteemed, not only in terms of cash but emotional value. Parts of the Tanacross potlatch have been Christianized, yet the ideals of Christianity, especially of universal love, have been utilized by Native people to project a basis of social equality which transcends material constraints. The meaning of exchange has become ambiguous because the objects, while symbolic, also extend into the material world. The guns, blankets, money, cloth, are necessary to maintain a material existence.

In the funeral and the potlatch, the village attempts to recreate social linkages which reflect and restate the ideals of the Indian way. These are formalized

and carried through in the activities which comprise the potlatch: feasting, dancing, singing, oratory and the distribution of gifts. Consensus is created by working toward a common goal. Competition and individual achievement are recognized but submerged in the interest of the larger community. Yet, commonality is spiked with competition between sibs, families and individuals.

As a ceremony with historical roots the potlatch symbolizes "real" Native culture both in terms of values and practice. This is reflected in every aspect of the potlatch, from the distribution of food and gifts to the dancing, singing, and oratory. However, the potlatch, is not just about the past. In its expression of "real" Indian values, the potlatch is a statement about what are seemly and just social relationships.

5. Organization of the Study

The study is divided into four major sections of two chapters each, followed by a conclusion. The first section includes the Introduction and a general description of the upper Tanana region and the village. Chapters two and three are devoted to the history of Native and White contact. Chapters four and five concern leadership and contemporary

identity. The final section, chapters six and seven, begins with a description of a funeral and preparation for a memorial potlatch and concludes with the description and analysis of a modern potlatch.

6. Fieldwork

I first went to Tanacross in August of 1971 when I served as lay worker for the Episcopal Church for 18 months. On leaving the village in January of 1973 I moved to Fairbanks and attended the University of Alaska. During the following three years I maintained intermittent contact with the village until the summer of 1976, when I was given permission to build a house there. I lived in Tanacross for a year and half before moving to Anchorage. After that, I spent most summers in the village, and was able to secure several research contracts which enabled me to conduct ethnological and historical research in the region for four years.

I returned to Tanacross in December of 1986 for 11 months to conduct field work for my dissertation. Because of my previous experience I had no protracted orientation problems. Nevertheless, I had mixed feelings about doing research in a place I had lived and to which I had become

emotionally attached. I knew that people there were not particularly fond of anthropology or anthropologists and some had expressed the opinion that anthropologists "made money off of Indians." I also felt uncomfortable doing research about personal matters, especially people's financial situations, since most people believe that is no one's business. I have used the name of the village but because this study involves living people I have used pseudonyms.

For the first two or three months of my research I re-acquainted myself with the village and explained that I was "home" to conduct research for my Ph.D. This met with a mixed response, but only one person exhibited overt hostility to my project. I was fortunate to receive support from a number of people who were quite willing to talk to me on just about any subject.

Because I had my own house in the village I did not live with a family. Instead I visited people, usually on a daily basis. During the course of the project I was fortunate to be able to hire a research assistant. In his early 30s, my assistant was fluent in the Tanacross language and considered one of the most knowledgeable young people in the village. He himself had given one potlatch and provided

considerable insight into the meaning of the ceremony. Although reticent about conducting interviews, he was able to collect some information by himself, but his greatest contribution came through our frequent discussions about various aspects of traditional and contemporary life. He was also considerable help in keeping my spirits up during some difficult times.

Before doing field work for the dissertation I had attended approximately 25 potlatches. Through the course of this most recent research I attended another six ceremonies, three in Tanacross and another three in other villages. I collected data through participant observation, including helping people prepare and serve food at potlatch feasts. During all of these potlatches I either recorded music or took photographs.

In collecting data I chose to a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach. This choice was guided by my interest in the process of how people construct their identity over time in response to internal and external developments. Formal, structured, tape recorded interviews were conducted in English or a mixture of English and the Tanacross language. Much of the data, however, was collected in informal situations during which people conversed at

random on a number of topics. Most of these conversations were in English or a mixture of Athabaskan and English. Datum collected in this manner was recorded immediately after the event. Through this process I began to acquire a sense of people's priorities, values and their sense of their situation. As a result I decided to focus on the potlatch, Indian-White relations, and the dynamic of village leadership.

Chapter One

The Setting

1. The People and the Environment

They are classed among the groups of Indians usually referred to as Tanana. Regarding the identification of the Tanana and subdivisions within that designation, the comments of McKennan (1981: 562) should be cited:

Like other Northern Athapaskan peoples, the Tanana Indians had no self-defined "tribal" identity. Rather they thought of themselves in terms of small local bands that constituted both social and geographical units. Frequently several contiguous bands would be sufficiently interlocked through marriage, geography, and common interest for them to consider themselves a large unit or regional band...

The name Tanacross comes from the village, located on the upper reaches of the Tanana River, a major tributary of the Yukon.

The Tanacross language belongs to the widespread Athabaskan language family spoken by Native people scattered throughout northwestern North America and as far south as

the California coast and the desert of Arizona (Krauss and Golla 1981). Northern Athabaskan is spoken by a number of groups who live throughout the boreal forest of Alaska and western Canada. Living adjacent to the Tanacross people are the Upper Tanana, middle Tanana, Han and Ahtna.

The traditional territory of the Tanacross people lies predominantly in the rolling hills north of the Tanana River, but a part of their country includes the floor of the valley and the steep slopes of the Alaska Range. The southern edge of the valley is dominated by the mountains, which feed the river with numerous mountain torrents, while clear water streams flow out of the lakes on the north side of the valley. Behind the lakes are the Tanana uplands; high, forested hills separating the Tanana from the Yukon River. Everywhere are miles of boreal forest consisting of white spruce and cottonwood in the better drained areas, and black spruce, tamarack, willow, and alder in the swampy sections. Blueberries, as well as low bush and high bush cranberries, are plentiful in the late summer and early fall.

Animals of economic importance to the Native people include the moose, caribou, Dall sheep, muskrat, hare, and porcupine, as well as lynx, marten, wolf, wolverine, and

varieties of fox. Fishing is, of course, an important subsistence activity. The fish most commonly taken are whitefish, grayling, northern pike, lake trout, suckers, and burbot. Large numbers of ducks, swans, and Canada geese appear seasonally.

2. The Region

Tanacross is located along the Alaska Highway approximately 100 miles west of the Alaska-Canada border. The closest town is Tok Junction, 10 miles east of the village at the junction of the Alaska and Glenn Highways. The largest urban center is Fairbanks, situated 200 miles to the northwest. Since Tanacross has no store, people usually go to Tok for groceries, clothing, gasoline, potlatch gifts, and other necessities. While most people shop in Tok for their daily needs, many make the trip to Fairbanks to shop because it is cheaper and offers greater variety. The major medical facilities for interior Alaska are situated there. Additionally, Fairbanks is the location of the corporate headquarters of Doyon Ltd. and Tanana Chiefs, the non-profit social service arm of the Doyon Corporation. Less frequently, people go to Anchorage, the largest urban center in Alaska, 320 miles to the southeast.

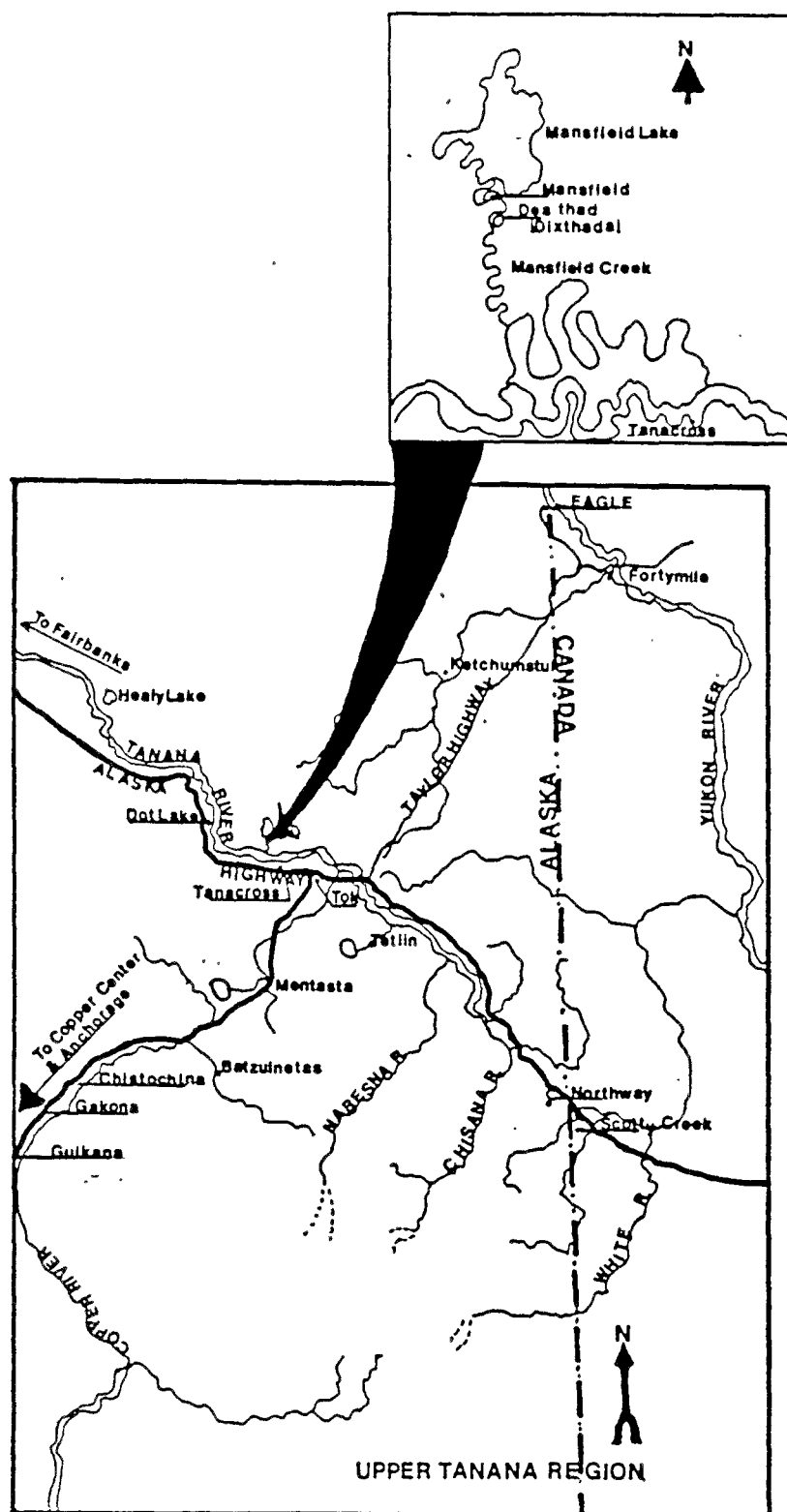


Figure 1.1 Map of the Upper Tanana

Within a 100 mile radius of Tanacross there are five other Athabaskan villages tied by blood and marriage to each other and to other villages along the Copper River and in the Yukon Territory. East of Tanacross are the two Upper Tanana villages of Northway and Tetlin. The first of these is located six miles off the Alaska Highway amidst a tangle of lakes and low lying ground. While Northway can be reached by car throughout the year Tetlin is linked to the highway by a winter road; otherwise, one has to take a plane or boat. West of Tetlin is the highway community of Tok Junction and ten miles further west, one mile off the highway, is Tanacross. Thirty miles up the highway, towards Fairbanks, is the other Tanacross speaking community of Dot Lake. North and west of Dot Lake, but off the Alaska Highway, is Healy Lake. South of Tanacross, situated near or directly adjacent to the Glenn Highway are the Ahtna villages of Mentasta, Chistochina, Gakona, Gulkana, and Copper Center.

According to the 1980 U.S. general census, the population of these villages is as follows: Northway 112, Tetlin 107, Tanacross 117, Tok 589, Dot Lake 67, Healy Lake 33, Mentasta 59, Chistochina 55, Gakona 87, Gulkana 104, and Copper Center 213.¹

¹ Fairbanks has a population of 22,645 and Anchorage a population of 231,100 (1980 U.S. census data figures).

3.The Village

In the 1970s the old site of Tanacross was being undercut by the Tanana River, which was also polluting the village drinking water. Furthermore, the only way to reach the village was by boat. During freeze up and break up, when the ice was flowing, the crossing was extremely hazardous. To alleviate this situation, the State of Alaska gave the residents a choice of either moving across the river or back to the ancient village of Mansfield. They decided to move across the river.

Since Mansfield is considered the spiritual home of the Tanacross people the prospect of moving back was enticing. It is where many of the elders grew up and practiced the hunting way of life which forms the backbone of Tanacross tradition. In addition, the state agreed to provide road access, a school, and houses. A new road, however, would open the area to non-Natives, with the attendant friction over hunting and fishing rights. More importantly, Tanacross people wanted to preserve Mansfield as their refuge from the White man's world. It is the one place where, uncharacteristically, people do not welcome strangers or uninvited guests.

The modern village of Tanacross is situated at the end of a gravel road approximately a mile off the Alaska

Highway. There are 36 houses in the village arranged around a large square occupied by several public buildings. These include a community hall, where potlatches and bingo are held, a post office, log church, and a combination workshop-garage, which houses the village fire truck. Other public buildings in Tanacross, not located in the square, are the school and gym, a building housing a clinic, and the offices of the village corporation and council. Across the street from these is the village pump house and laundromat.

In 1987 the population of Tanacross was 107. This breaks down as follows:

Figure 1.2

Children under 14	= 25
Young adults, 15-29	= 26
Parental generation, 30-44	= 24
Two senior groups:	
middle aged, 45-59	= 19
older people, 60-80	= 13

Most of the houses in the new village were financed through several development grants allocated by State of Alaska and federal agencies and the regional non-profit organization Tanana Chiefs. These are of frame construction, with running water and electricity. Initially, all were

provided with oil furnaces, but these proved too costly. Now every house has a wood stove as its primary source of heat. Within the last several years three or four smaller houses have been built to accommodate an increasing population. None of these has any facilities, but apparently there are plans to install electricity and water. In addition, five houses have been built by individuals, including the writer.

Homes constructed with government money have a standard floor plan consisting of two or three bedrooms and a combined living, dining, and kitchen area. Interiors are decorated with a variety of objects reflecting themes of contemporary Native culture. In the living area of every house, for example, there are photographs of family: school portraits of children; photos of men with game they have killed; pictures of grandmothers and grandfathers in ceremonial regalia; and snapshots of friends. A number of houses have some sort of Christian icon, occasionally a cross, but more often a popular portrayal of Jesus praying. Other popular items include cloth wall hangings with scenes such as The Last Supper, the American eagle, or Alaska big game animals. A few people hang Native crafts on their walls and pictures of plains Indians in feathered war bonnets. In two or three homes there are racks with rifles, shotguns and

pistols, but most guns are not so prominently displayed. Rather, weapons are kept unloaded in back rooms or in outdoor caches. Prominent in almost all houses are televisions and video cassette players.

Outside each house, there is a front yard, where cars are parked, and a backyard where people keep their dogs, steam bath, wood yard, frames for tanning skins, boats, motors, old cars, snow machines, and caches. Almost every house has some kind of building called a cache which is used to store firearms, chainsaws, meat, and untanned skins. Older people also use their caches to store potlatch gifts which they have accumulated over the years. These stored gifts are an aspect of traditional wealth that can be either used as donations to another person's potlatch or given away at one's own potlatch.

4. The Seasons

Fall is the most intense time of year for hunting. During the last two weeks of August moose and caribou season opens and lasts from two to three weeks. Bag limits, applied to Native and White alike, consist of one bull moose and three caribou. Most of the men and boys, and a few women, go hunting. In the 1970s, practically all of the fall moose

hunt took place along the river. The common practice was to go up river early in the morning or early in the evening in a motor boat and float down stream to the village. In this way hunters hoped to catch moose in convenient locations along the bank or crossing the river. Another method of hunting was to sit on a hill overlooking the dry lake beds which dot the landscape. If a hunter saw a moose walking in the open, he watched until he was certain of the moose's route of travel; then he hurried to intercept the animal.

In 1987, while I was doing field work, people still hunted on the river, but more frequently along the Alaska highway. This shift was a result of the State of Alaska opening a part of the up-river area for home sites. While only two or three cabins had been built at Tanacross, people felt uncomfortable about hunting in what someone called "people's backyard." But another reason for hunting along the road was the unusual presence of a herd of caribou which, as it moved along the edge of the mountains, came close to the highway on several occasions. Big game taken by villagers over a twelve month period (1987) included:

Figure 1.3

Moose harvested for private				
Consumption				= 7
Caribou	"	"	"	= 5
Moose killed for potlatch				= 6

Following the hunting season, the pervasive winter activity is trapping. The number of men who trap depends on the price of fur as well as the availability of serviceable snow machines. In 1987, five men trapped, but only two on a consistent basis. Traps are usually checked every two or three days, depending on weather and if the snow machine is running. Since most of the traplines overlap, trappers occasionally check each others traps. No one has a trapline which requires him to stay overnight away from the village, although people will travel up to 70 miles one way to check their traps. Most trappers check their sets alone, but occasionally two or three men will go together. During the winter of 1987 marten and lynx were the two most lucrative

furs. People went out of their way to avoid trapping fox because it was considered too "cheap." In addition to the trap lines, a number of men and women have hare snare lines in the woods surrounding the village.

Firewood is the most constant winter concern and can be secured in two ways: either one buys it or cuts it himself. The Tanana Chiefs has an energy assistance program in which people falling below a certain income level receive money to purchase fuel. A number of Tanacross people, especially elders and single women, use this program to buy wood from vendors from Tok. Those who cut their own wood go out of the village to stands of white spruce located close to the river.

For the dark months of November, December and January, the holidays of Thanksgiving and Christmas are focal points around which the community draws together to celebrate. At Thanksgiving the village hosts a big feast to which people from other villages are invited. On Christmas Eve there is often a school play in the community hall, a midnight Church service, and a stroll around the village, during which participants stop at each house and sing Christmas carols in the Tanacross language and in English. On the following afternoon the whole village puts on a

feast, after which gifts are distributed by Santa Claus and his helper.

The first months of the new year are usually the coldest, the temperature sometimes hovering around -60 F. for weeks at a time. This intense cold keeps everyone close to the village except for going to work or school. From January until late March, the life of the village is quiet. Then, during the last week of March, the village explodes into activity as people get ready to host the annual Tanacross dog sledge race attended by Native people from other villages as well as a number of Whites from the surrounding area.

Dog sledge racing is practically the Alaska State sport and is an activity in which Native people excel and often dominate. The Tanacross race is run over the weekend. On the eve of the race there is a banquet, hosted by the village, and a drawing for race positions. On the following morning, the trails are groomed, and barriers are erected to guide the racers along the village streets. A public address system is also installed. The race itself is run during the middle of the afternoon, the participants racing along a network of trails surrounding the village. Because dog racing is essentially a spectator sport most of the

spectators spend their time socializing, eating, and purchasing raffle tickets for prizes such as a hand tanned moose skin, a 30-30 Winchester rifle, and a dinner at a restaurant in Tok.

After the race, the village settles back to wait for spring breakup. By mid April the days are noticeably longer and much warmer. May is the month for school trips, usually to Seattle, but students have also gone to Los Angeles and as far away as Japan. Those who have regular seasonal employment begin work in May. In late May and early June the fire fighting season begins.

The major subsistence activity of the summer is fishing, done in the months of June, July, and August. The traditional methods involve the use of the fish weir and dip net. There are several kinds of fish caught in Tanacross territory: sucker, which people do not eat, grayling, northern pike, whitefish, and, on occasion, salmon. Whitefish is the favored species. These are caught in Mansfield Creek, a clear water stream rising out of Mansfield Lake. Once caught, the whitefish are split and air dried. Fish are also caught in the Tanana River using a gill net, but this method is not particularly effective. Although salmon can be caught in the Tanana, the major source is the

Copper River. In late June and July, Tanacross people go to the Ahtna villages of Gulkana and Copper Center, and rent fish wheels² from friends and relatives.

5. Employment

In Tanacross, employment of any kind is scarce.³ Out of a population of 107 people, ten have full time year around employment while four are employed on a seasonal basis. Others are employed part time as: teacher's aids, school custodian, postmaster, and alcoholism counselor. An important full time job is that of health aide, who is trained to treat emergencies and dispense medicine. Occasional village employment is also available through State and federal programs acquired by the village council.

Tok Junction offers various part time and full time employment opportunities. One Tanacross woman is employed full time in Tok working for the Tanana Chiefs Conference, while another works for RuralCap, a State funded development

² Fishwheels were introduced into Alaska during the gold rush period. The device consists of two wire mesh dippers attached opposite each other on a single axle which is mounted on a raft anchored in the river close to the shore. As the fish swim upstream they are lifted out of the water and slide down a chute into an open box (cf. VanStone 1979: 183 for a discussion of fish wheels).

³ The employment situation in Tanacross is constantly changing so these figures reflect employment in 1987.

agency. Other, less well paying jobs, are available during the summer through the Tok tourist industry. Several Tanacross women worked as maids in motels while one man was a maintenance worker.

Oil related industries on Alaska's North Slope are another source of employment. At one point during my field work, in 1987, four Tanacross people worked on the "slope," three as roughnecks on oil rigs run by Doyon Ltd. and one as a housekeeper maintaining the living quarters. The work cycle consisted of two weeks on and two weeks off.⁴

Seasonal employment includes working for the State of Alaska in highway maintenance, forest fire suppression, and maintaining state campgrounds. These, along with work for private construction firms, are relatively well paying. One Tanacross man, for example, earned in excess of \$25,000⁵ working on a highway construction crew for five months.

The most common employment is summer seasonal. For the majority of Tanacross people between the ages of 16 and 45, this involves fighting forest fires. In the summer of 1987, the village fielded two 16 person crews (male and female) comprised of Tanacross residents and a number of

⁴ Currently two of these people no longer work for the oil industry. One is unemployed and the other now works for the local village corporation.

⁵ This is in 1987 dollars.

non-Native residents from Tok. These crews worked only during emergencies. During the 1987 season, they worked sporadically in Alaska until late summer when they were called to fight fires in northern California for about three weeks. A crew member averages approximately \$6,000 a season.

6. Social Organization

The village is characterized by a single network of kin ties and marriage alliances which encompasses every permanent resident. Within this network there are four basic units of social interaction: the household, the extended family, village, and sib. The primary economic and social unit is the household. Its members share meals, sleep under the same roof and share what ever resources each member earns or receives. There are 36 permanent households in the village varying in size from a single person to families that include three generations. The majority of households are married couples with children.

Next in size and importance is the extended family which is comprised of parents, their children, the children's spouses, grandchildren, and first cousins. While members periodically share food, especially on special occasions such as a birthday, they do not usually live under

the same roof. Wild food is easily shared among members of the extended family, but cash and store food are not subject to this easy sharing.

The extended family is the basis for initiating social and political action within the village. While no one else may support a project individuals can usually rely on siblings or grown children for support. Sometimes this leads to a situation in which one family dominates the planning of village social activities. As a matter of course this seemingly aggressive behavior is roundly criticized.

The village as a unit may be defined as the sum total of the population. Native people, however, often restrict the definition to only those people who are related by blood. That is, a person who marries into the village and has no consanguine ties to anyone is not considered to be from Tanacross. However it is defined, the village is the principal reference for the young people, below the age of 30, who have little idea of the sib structure. The village often acts together to put on feasts and potlatches, and it has its own baseball team and Native dance ensemble.

Contemporary Athabaskan society in east central Alaska is divided into exogamous moieties which "function primarily in dividing individuals into 'opposites' who

intermarry, help each other at life crises, particularly at death, and who entertain each other at potlatches" (De Laguna 1975: 89-90). Each moiety consists of a number of sibs (Murdock 1960: 47) or consanguineal groups based on matrilineal descent and identified by name.

Theoretically, the sib is composed of all its members scattered among Alaskan and Canadian Indians. In actual practice, however, the sib is composed of those people who know each other and who live in the upper Tanana region (Guedon 1974: 95). At the village level Guedon (95) identifies the "localized sib" or "lineage," as she sometimes calls it, which consists of members of the same sib who form a smaller, but better integrated unit (*ibid*). In Tanacross there are two dominant localized sibs, the Dikagu and the Naltcine or Al-ce-den-da, who are considered opposites and whose members intermarry. A third sib, the Chaz, has few members and is considered a "relative" of the Dikagu. During a potlatch one of the stronger sibs acts as the host while their affines contribute money and labor.

CHAPTER TWO

TRADERS, MISSIONARIES, AND GOVERNMENT MEN IN THE UPPER TANANA

1. Introduction

One critical aspect of the conflict between Native Americans and Europeans can be framed in terms of differing views on the nature of property. Along the upper Tanana River this dispute revolved around the ritual distribution of goods in the potlatch. For their part missionaries, traders and government men saw the "terrific extravagance and self-deprivation ..." not in terms of sin but as a detriment to economic development, or, as one missionary put it, making the Natives "respectable, self-supporting people" (Wright 1925: 20).

While joined in denunciation of the potlatch, missionaries and traders had mutually antagonistic aims. Missionaries worked to create Christian Native communities insulated from what they perceived to be the worst influences of American society, namely lower class elements out to exploit Native people. Traders, on the other hand, attempted to draw Native people into capitalist oriented

relationships. If their aims differed, their methods had the common strain of seeking to change the basic structures of Native life, of which the distribution of goods in the potlatch was and continues to be the central part.

In contrast Native people saw, and continue to see, the distribution of property as a spiritual and social matter, tied to their survival as human beings. For Native people the importance of property existed, not in terms of personal investment, but in its distribution to maintain social relationships. It is these conflicting views that have spilled over into the current opposing attitudes toward the nature of land use and ownership.

While the introduction of trade goods had an effect on Athabaskan culture and the potlatch, it did not create the contradiction between the community and the individual. This predated the fur trade and continued to inform the potlatch as it has been elaborated and expanded in the 20th century. Change was not simply imposed but mutually determined as external forces entered into a dialectical interplay with the internal dynamics of Athabaskan society. The meanings of the potlatch were largely reproduced and transformed by the Athabaskan people themselves. In this chapter I outline the historical processes that led to

transformations in Tanacross culture following contact with Europeans and focusing on those developments which led to the ever increasing availability of trade goods.

2. Protocontact Period 1780-1850

The first European trade goods to reach the upper Tanana probably arrived in the late 17th or early 18th century through trade links from Russian traders in Siberia who were actively trading with the Chukchi. In turn the Chukchi traded with Eskimos at annual trade fairs on the west coast of Alaska. These fairs were also attended by Athabaskans from the Koyukuk River who had trade connections with other Athabaskans in the interior. The Eskimos also made trading expeditions to the Yukon River, trading with Ingalik Athabaskans living on the lower middle Yukon and Innoko Rivers. From the Koyukon and Ingalik the trade moved inland via the Yukon, Kuskokwim and Tanana Rivers. This easterly movement of goods was accompanied by a westerly flow of goods channeled along indigenous networks linking the interior of Alaska with the Northwest Coast and Canada. In the late 18th century, Russian and British trading

companies tied into these Native networks by establishing posts in southern Alaska and western Canada.¹

During the 1780s two competing Russian companies began trading into the interior of Alaska through posts located initially on Kodiak Island, and later, Cook Inlet. In 1799 the competition ended when the Russian American Company received an Imperial charter granting it a monopoly over all of Alaska. By 1840 the Company had expanded operations by setting up a post at Taral on the middle Copper River and establishing redoubts, as they were called, on the middle Kuskokwim River, on St. Michael Island and at Nulato near the confluence of the Koyukuk and Yukon Rivers. This monopoly was directly challenged in 1847-48 by the establishment of two Hudson's Bay Company posts on the Yukon River: Fort Selkirk and Fort Yukon. Consequently, by 1850 the Native people on the upper Tanana River were surrounded by trading companies which had yet to penetrate their territory.

¹ Russian and English attempts at redirecting the indigenous trade to their advantage were only partially successful. The Russians were most successful around Cook Inlet where they controlled the trade through superior force. Otherwise they were notably unsuccessful in western Alaska and along the Copper River (see Zagoskin 1967 and VanStone 1979 for a discussion on the trade in western Alaska). In the Yukon Territory the Chilkat Tlingit destroyed the Hudson's Bay Company post at Fort Selkirk and chased the trader, Robert Campbell, out of the country (cf. McClellan 1975 on the Yukon trade).

Prior to 1850 upper Tanana trade was conducted through a variety of intermediaries such as the Ahtna, Tutchone and Han (McKenna 1959).² These groups had access to goods which came either directly from Russian or English traders or through other Native groups. The Ahtna, for example, had direct access to goods from Russian posts located on Cook Inlet and the lower Copper River (De Laguna and McClellan 1981: 650-651) while the Southern Tutchone received goods from the Chilkat Tlingit who traded with American and English ships plying the waters off the Northwest Coast (McClellan 1975). The Han people, living north of the upper Tanana on the Yukon River, traded at Hudson's Bay Company posts in western Canada and at Fort Yukon (Murray 1910: 51).

Upper Tanana traders met these intermediaries at various locations. The Tutchone, for instance, were met at an annual rendezvous on the White River near the present international boundary (McKenna 1959: 129), and at a

² The isolation of the upper Tanana region is illustrated by the fact that the Tanacross and Upper Tanana languages have only 4 Russian loan words in their vocabulary as compared to the Upper Ahtna dialect which has 21, the Western Ahtna dialect which has 62 and Kenai dialect of Tanaina which has about 350. The complexity and diversity of the trade is also suggested by the fact that the Upper Ahtna language has 3 French words derived from Slavey jargon and three Kutchin words (Kari 1986: 87-88).

rendezvous near the mouth of the Klondike River, while the Ahtna were met in their own country at various locations on the upper Copper river. Trade revolved around a variety of indigenous products and European trade goods. Interior Athabaskans exchanged tanned skins, native copper, furs and tailored clothing with the coastal Tlingit for dentalium shells, Chilkat dance blankets and fish grease, in addition to such manufactured items as pipes, beads, knives and mirrors, leaf tobacco, and tea.³

3. Early Contact: 1850-1912

There is no record of exactly when Tanacross people began trading directly with Europeans. First encounters may have occurred in the 1840s at an annual rendezvous called Nuklukayet at the confluence of the Yukon and Tanana Rivers. Koyukon, Gwich'in, and Tanana River people gathered there to socialize and trade with each other, with Russians from Nulato, and Hudson's Bay employees from Fort Yukon. It is possible that Upper Tanana people visited the Hudson's Bay Posts at Fort Yukon or Fort Selkirk, but there is no

³ As far as I know there are no quantitative data on protocontact trade in this region of Alaska.

evidence for this.⁴ Certainly by the 1870s people from Tanacross and Upper Tanana villages made annual trips to Nuklukayet station or Fort Adams, established in 1868 by the Pioneer Company (McKenna 1981: 566-567; Mercier: 1986).

As one of several trading companies, the Pioneer Company moved into Alaska after the territory was purchased by the United States in 1867. At this point the development of interior Alaska trade increased sharply as a number of competing firms stretched up the Yukon, establishing posts along the river as far as the mouth of the Klondike River in western Yukon Territory. According to one chief trader, Francois Mercier, the initial impetus for building posts on the upper Yukon was to open unexploited areas and enhance trade relations with the remote upper Yukon and upper Tanana River people (Mercier 1986: 1-2). Before this, Native trappers had been obliged to take their furs to either Fort Yukon or Nuklukayet or trade with Tutchone middlemen. But the establishment of Fort Reliance in 1874, and Belle Isle in 1880, on the upper Yukon, brought the source of goods to the boundary of Tanacross and Upper Tanana territory.

⁴ Although Dall (1870: 108) indicates that Tanana River Natives visited Fort Yukon, there is no evidence these were Tanacross or Upper Tanana people. McKenna (1959: 29) believes that no upper Tanana River people visited either Fort Selkirk or Fort Yukon.

Consequently, by the early 1880s these people were making regular trading excursions to the Yukon (Allen 1887: 76, 80). This situation was only slightly altered with the discovery of gold on the Stewart and Fortymile Rivers in 1886. At this point the interest of the trading companies shifted to accommodate the needs of prospectors, and in 1887 two entrepreneurs, Leroy Napoleon McQuesten and Arthur Harper, established a post at the mouth of the Fortymile River to be closer to the placer mines (Mercier 1986: 3).

The discovery of gold on the Fortymile lured prospectors directly into Tanacross territory. Mining activities began on Franklin Creek, a tributary of the Fortymile, in 1886 and shortly thereafter on Chicken Creek, approximately 20 miles from the village of Ketchumstuk. Both mining camps were frequently visited by Tanacross and Upper Tanana people, for "trade and diversion" (McKenna 1981: 567). In addition to the trading opportunities offered at Franklin and Chicken, the Alaska Commercial Company opened a store at Steel Creek which, for a time, became a principal commercial center for the Mansfield/Ketchumstuk people. Both the mining camps and the store at Steel Creek offered employment opportunities for a few Native men who worked on and off during the summer.

As a result, by 1890 the trading situation had altered considerably for the Tanacross people. No longer isolated from direct trade by geography or intermediaries, they became accustomed to a variety of foreign goods ranging from commercially made clothing, blankets, firearms, tobacco, beads, Tlingit button blankets, and dentalium shells (Allen 1887: 75, 132). In 1899 a government agent, C.E. Griffith, described an encounter with the people of Mansfield which displayed their increasing familiarity with EuroAmericans:

These Indians were very friendly, and wanted to buy tobacco before anything else. They would, however, buy tea, sugar, guns and ammunition. They all seemed to be supplied with money and offered big prices for everything they wanted. They were intelligent, and all the young men spoke good English" (Griffith 1900: 726).

4. The Mission and Tanana River Trade: 1912-1940.

The more recent phase of contact between Natives and Whites is marked by the discovery of gold on the Chisana which is a tributary of the Tanana River, the creation of the Episcopal Mission, and the establishment of trading posts on the upper Tanana river. In 1913 gold was discovered on the Chisana River, a tributary of the Tanana, attracting thousands of people. During the winter of that year, miners

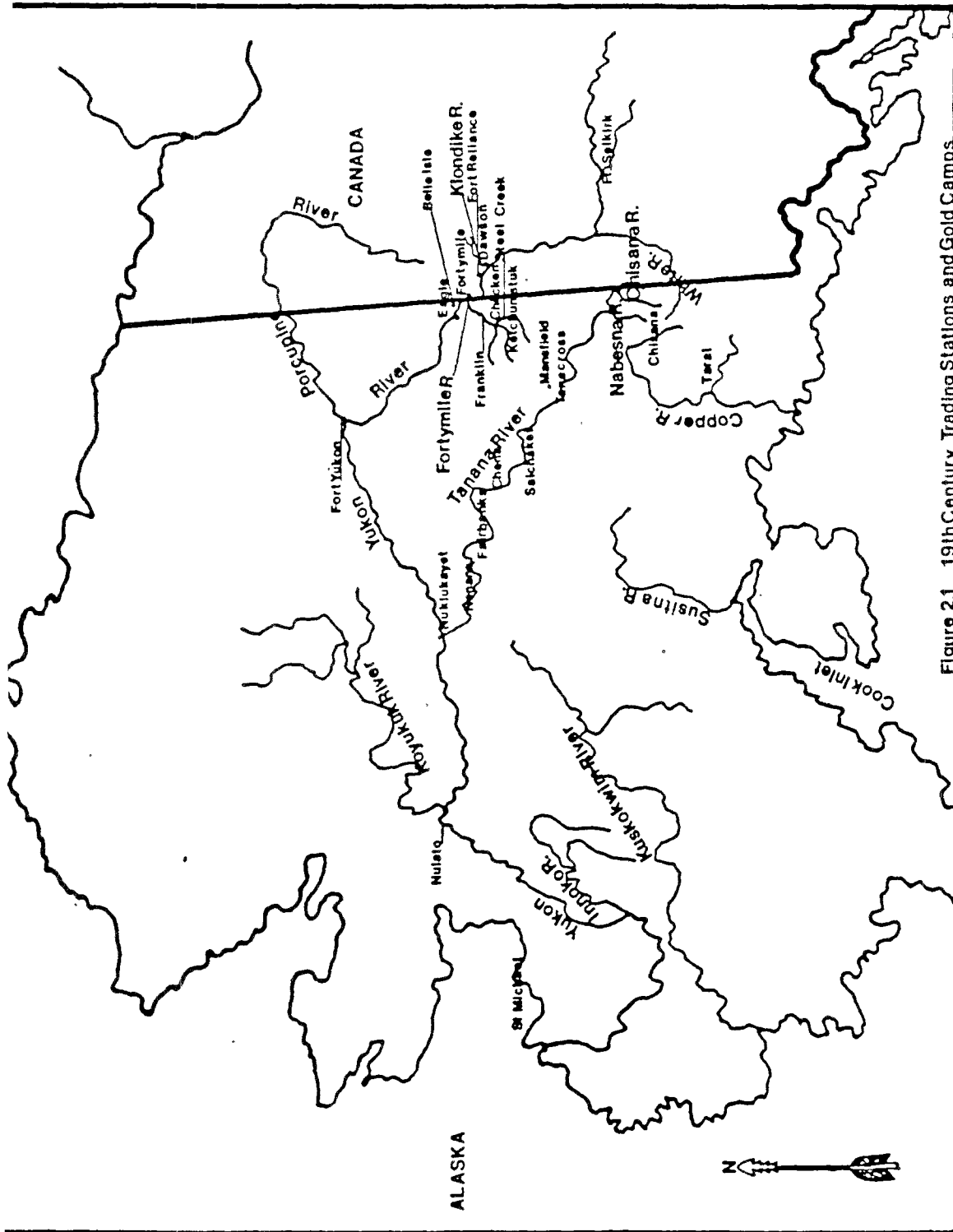


Figure 2.1 19th Century Trading Stations and Gold Camps

killed an estimated 2,000 mountain sheep and an undetermined number of caribou, forcing one band of Upper Tanana people to restructure their seasonal round (Capps 1916: 21). The presence of miners also attracted a variety of commercial establishments, including a cafe and saloon, giving Native people an opportunity to become familiar with foreign ways.

In the sympathetic eyes of Archdeacon Hudson Stuck of the Protestant Episcopal Church, the presence of the miners resulted in the total degradation of the Native people:

It seems altogether impossible that a tribe of Indians should live in the near neighborhood of a considerable town without suffering degradation. There are always white men eager to associate with them to debauch the women and make a profit of the men; insensibly the native virtues are sapped, the simple native customs undergo sophistication into a grinning imitation of white customs; jaunty cast-off millinery displaces the decent handkerchief on the woman's head...the men grow shiftless and casual picking up odd jobs around town and disdaining the hunting and fishing by which they used to live (1917: 56-57).

Stuck believed "that he who would see the Indians at their best must see them remote from the settlements of the white men" (*ibid*).

The self-appointed counteragent to this demoralization of the Natives was Stuck's own Church. The

basic problem regarding the Natives, as the Church saw it, was their very survival and the need to adapt to changing circumstances (Stuck 1910: 64). In his annual report to the contributors "outside," Peter Trimble Rowe, Bishop of Alaska, wrote "though they [the Natives] are the original possessors of the country, yet it is no longer theirs. They are driven back, their hunting grounds overrun and exhausted by the White man, and to get enough food for themselves and children is getting impossible." While subjects of laws they have no voice in, yet no laws seem to protect them" (Rowe 1910: 67-68). In essence the Church viewed the Native people as victims of a system in which they were both morally and physically exploited by what the missionaries called "whitemen of the lower class" or "saloon element" (*ibid*).

Certainly there is an element of class antagonism here. The Episcopal Church, as a bastion of the Protestant middle class, saw the Native people as noble savages who had to be saved from the clutches of what was worst in American society. Equally important, Native people had to be saved from their own base instincts which induced them to leave the forest and mimic Whites. Although the Church was paternalistic in its attitude, it reacted with a very real concern for the welfare of Native people, which must have

been evident to the Tanacross people as they welcomed the establishment of a mission in their midst.

To avoid their further degradation the Church sought to maintain Native people in their 'regions of refuge' by advocating Native subsistence rights. More concretely, to counteract these forces of exploitation the Church built a series of mission stations at strategic points along the Yukon and Tanana Rivers. On the Tanana the first station was located at Nenana, the second at Chena, a Native fishcamp just outside Fairbanks, the third at Salchaket village, and the fourth at Tanana Crossing.

By 1912 many Native people on the upper Tanana River, Churchmen believed, had still not seen or been acquainted with a White man. For this reason the Church envisioned the upper Tanana region as fertile ground for the development of a pristine Christian Native community. As Bishop Rowe commented, the Indians of this area "have not been hurt by the evil white element" (Rowe 1910 68). "Naturally this means", wrote another missionary, "that in a place like Tanana Crossing where there is very little counteracting influence, we hold an unique position and have an excellent chance to remake the community." He went on to say that "our village and the mission is the cause and the

centralizing force..." (Drane 1918: 190. The emphasis is in the original).

According to the Reverend E.L. McIntosh, who served at Tanacross for various intervals between 1915 and 1941, the Church was induced to start a mission at Tanana Crossing by Chief Isaac, a headman of the Mansfield-Ketchumstuk people who "realized" the need for a mission in the area and "requested" the Church to build one (McIntosh: 1941: 3). Subsequently, the Church purchased the buildings of an abandoned government telegraph station at Tanana Crossing which was centrally located to a number of villages in the area. McIntosh ⁵ felt that he could attract the Indians away from, what he called their, foolish superstitions, including the potlatch, and keep out the "evil elements" and "remake the community" (Drane 1918: 190) by providing medical care, and making Tanana Crossing a "pleasant" place to live.

For the missionaries the potlatch appears to have been primarily an economic problem. Writing from Tanana Crossing in the winter of 1912, the first missionary, Margaret Graves, expressed the opinion that "[m]ost of the Indians are industrious; if they were less wasteful and could be made to abolish the potlatch system among

⁵ McIntosh to Wood, March 5, 1917. Episcopal Church Archives, R.G. 62-42 folder 1.

themselves, I believe there would be very little real need" (1913:74). Five years later, in 1917, McIntosh, the third missionary to serve at Tanacross, complained that "there will be the same ceremonies for God knows how long," but reluctantly agreed "not to interfere with their old customs" [the potlatch] because he had been specifically asked by the Natives not to.⁶ However, this hands off policy did not continue.

In 1924, Arthur Wright, a half Athabaskan missionary who replaced McIntosh at Tanacross, succeeded in convincing the village council to forbid extending or accepting "invitations for potlatching during the eight busy months of the year, i.e. October 1 to June 1" (Wright 1925: 18). According to Wright the Natives were dependent on the mission, and the potlatch was an economic hardship which, as long as it continued, would inhibit the mission from making "the Indians respectable self-supporting people in this section of the country" (*ibid*: 20). After a year, Wright felt he was successful and wrote that the "abolition of potlatches at Tanacross has been going on a year"... "though the Indians did have potlatches in June and July" (*ibid*: 19).

⁶ McIntosh to Wood, March 5, 1917. Episcopal Church Archives, R.G. 62-42 folder 2.

Apparently this success was short lived because in the 1930s John Hajdukovich renewed attempts to have the ceremony abolished. As a trader and U.S. Commissioner Hajdukovich had considerable influence in the upper Tanana region. He had, for example, in 1930, been able to insist, much to the annoyance of the participants, that a potlatch, attended by the anthropologist Robert McKennan, end after only two days (McKennan 1959: 136). Later Hajdukovich suggested to the Bureau of Indian Affairs that reservations be created in the region. In justifying his proposal Hajdukovich explained that reservations would enable the government to control "the custom called the 'Potlatch' which costs the Indians yearly from ten to fifteen thousand dollars" and forces them to "deprive their women and children of food and clothing in order to save up for the Potlatch."⁷ Subsequently, a reservation was established by the U.S. government for the village of Tetlin⁸ but neither he nor the Church succeeded in abolishing the potlatch. In

⁷ Hajdukovich, Special Cases collection, 1932-33. National Archives, Bureau of Indian Affairs records, box 228.

⁸ Behind his humanitarian purpose Hajdukovich's interest was in establishing a monopoly on the regional fur trade. He was successful in creating one for the Tetlin people. After it was created the Natives established their own store and kept Hajdukovich out. Because of this he abruptly dropped plans to establish a reservation at Tanacross. For a full account see Brown (1984).

fact, the ceremony was continually elaborated and expanded during the pre-World War II period with trade goods received from entrepreneurs like Hajdukovich.

The establishment of the mission in 1912 and the discovery of gold on the Chisana River the following year stimulated the development of commercial navigation along the Tanana (Cole 1979) and encouraged several traders to set up business in the region. The first permanent trader on the upper Tanana was W.H. Newton, who started a store at Healy River in 1907. In 1912 Newton moved part of his operation to Tanana Crossing and established caches both at Tetlin and the mouth of the Nabesna River. In 1914, selling out to John Strelic, he went back to the Healy River (McKenna 1959: 25; Cook n.d.: 12). In 1924 a trader named Flannagin built a store near Tetlin. The Natives took advantage of this proliferation of posts by trading wherever they could get the best price for their fur, either going down river to trade at Newton's store at Tanana Crossing and particularly at Chicken, where stocks of goods were more plentiful. The missionaries believed that Strelic was cheating the Indians (Drane 1918). McIntosh, for example, began trading with his congregation, which angered the professional traders. The resulting antagonism lasted for years, as missionaries and

traders maneuvered to gain influence over the Indians.

By 1929 commercial operations had come to focus on four rival traders: Ted Lowell, Milo and John Hajdukovich, who had operations at Tanana Crossing, Tetlin, and the mouth of the Nabesna River, and Herman Kessler who operated a business farther up river and traded with the Scotty Creek band living adjacent to the Canada-Alaska border. Trade goods were brought in by boat during the summer months and cached at the various sites. In winter the traders, traveling by dog team, met the Indians at various intervals during the trapping season. According to McKennan (1959: 26) they occasionally visited the Indians in their winter camps but more often the Natives came to the traders' caches.

As the decades wore on to the outbreak of World War II the Native people enjoyed a relative abundance and diversity of trade goods. By 1930 Natives had a choice of 23 different kinds of food offered by the traders at Tetlin and Tanacross including sugar, milk, butter, lard, rice, bacon, fresh eggs, carrots, beets, cabbage, corn, as well as dried apples, apricots, prunes and peaches. There were clothes: wool shirts, wool coats, pants, rubber shoes, and socks. There was also a variety of household items: candles, pots and pans, dishes, phonographs, and records. There were also

blankets: black ones for \$14.00 a piece, and creamy ones with green, brown, or yellow borders for \$13.50 a piece. The traders sold rifles, 30/30s and 22s, and bullets at \$4.50 a box for the 30/30s. Although repeating Henry rifles had been available from the trading station at Fortymile in the 1880s, smoothbore muzzle-loading guns were the arms of choice up until about 1914-15 when rifle ammunition became more readily available from the local traders.⁹

5. Trapping and Wage Labor

To acquire trade goods Native people trapped, occasionally worked for the traders or some other enterprise, and sold handicrafts. Trapping was the most important activity, and during the winter the men spent long hours trapping lynx, marten, fox, and beaver. In the spring both men and women trapped and hunted muskrats. The price of furs and the size and value of the fur catch fluctuated from year to year. In 1920, for instance, red fox was worth \$80.00 each; in 1923 it was worth between \$80.00 and \$90.00 while a cross fox was worth \$100.00. But in 1928 the price of a red fox pelt dipped to \$25.00, rebounding to \$65.00 in

⁹ This data comes from a variety of sources including: fieldnotes; Back 1930; Endicott 1928; Strong 1972; and the John Hajdukovich collection, University of Alaska (U of A) Archives, box #3.

1929 (Strong 1972: chap 5: 49). The fluctuation in fur catches is reflected in the numbers of total exports. In 1920 the total exports of furs from Alaska was 200,000; it was 600,000 in 1940 (Melchoir 1987: 1122). I have no systematic data on the worth of the regional fur catch, but during the trapping season of 1929-30 it was estimated that the catch was worth between \$20,000 and \$25,000, down from the \$40,000 to \$50,000 of previous years (Back 1930: 31). Apparently a good portion of the catch was muskrat fur (Melchoir 1987: 1121).

Furs caught during the winter were traded in March, payment being made in goods, not cash (McKenna 1959: 26). Between then and November people had no money, only the supplies they had traded for. As a result some men tried to work during the summer to buy shells and "a few groceries." In Tanacross it appears some men worked regularly for the traders, particularly piloting the river boats, which took great skill. Others worked only occasionally, when there was some immediate need for labor on large projects such as the construction of the airfield at Tanacross or the school at Tetlin in the early 1930s.

A number of men whom I interviewed recalled their first working experience. One said that he earned his first

wages in 1928, when he was 24 years old, cutting cord wood for the trader Flannagin at \$2.50 a day. Later he ran a river boat for Kessler and Hajdukovich on a regular basis. Another man said that in 1933, when he was 21, he worked for the first time at \$5.50 a day hand clearing the airfield at Tanacross. The following summer he worked at Tetlin on the new school until September, when he went back to Tanacross to work on the air field again.

This man also told me his father-in-law was attracted by the wages offered for work on the airfield. One summer day the father-in-law left his family at its summer camp to travel the 50 miles back to Tanacross to buy groceries. He was gone nine days. Finally, fearing the worst, his son in-law went to look for him and found him working. It should be noted that, unlike most traders, who paid in commodities, and the missionaries who expected the Natives to donate labor, these government projects paid cash.

During six days of August 1931 Titus Paul of Tanacross and Paul and John Healy of Healy Lake worked for Hajdukovich on his river boat. They were paid in commodities as was the practice. For the six days Titus received \$30.00 worth of credit, 20 of which he spent on one box of tea, one

box of 30/30 shells, one dozen candles and one heavy wool coat. Paul Healy bought socks, rubber shoes, wool shirts.

Other sources of income were derived from the selling of handicrafts and meat and working for big game guides. In 1934-35 women sold moccasins for \$2.00 a pair, mittens for \$4.00, and caribou skin socks for \$0.75 each. Snowshoes, sold by the men,¹⁰ went for \$4.00 and \$5.00 a pair.¹¹ The Church, encouraging the production of handicrafts, took, in lieu of cash for offerings, moccasins and mittens which were sent off to be sold in Fairbanks and New York.

6. The Beginnings of Federal Intervention

Between 1920 and 1940 three forms of federal intervention occurred on the Tanana River. The first of these was the enactment of game laws which, while not having an immediate effect, is a major source of friction today. Second, was the opening, in Tanacross, of a federally subsidized school and post office, both run by the missionaries, and third the building of an air field across the river from the village.

¹⁰ Snowshoe frames were made by men out of birch wood. Women customarily filled them in with babiche, a type of rawhide made out of untanned moose skin.

¹¹ Hajdukovich collection, U of A archives, box 3.

Although trapping and wage labor had become a part of the Native economy, hunting continued to be of primary importance. Up until about 1905-10 communal caribou hunts, using drift fences and snares, had been the principal means of killing large numbers of caribou. This technique was phased out as a source of ammunition for repeating rifles became readily available. With lever action rifles, hunting became more of an individual endeavor (Guedon 1974: 129) since a single hunter could harvest quantities of meat. However, the autumn caribou hunts continued to be communal activities managed by the old leading men who told people when to hunt and what animals to kill.

According to the naturalist O.J. Murie, who, in 1921, made an extensive survey of the animal resources of the upper Tanana region, including the Forty Mile caribou herd, Native hunters averaged 25 caribou each for the month of October, while some killed between 15 and 30 in two days. He also wrote that the people of Healy Lake were reported to have killed 51 in two and one half months (possibly for a huge potlatch) while at a Tetlin potlatch in 1920, 22 moose were butchered and the skins given away as presents (Murie 1921).

Murie's attitude towards Native use of game was ambivalent. At one point he said the "Indians were

destructive to game" (Murie 1921) and on another occasion he declared the "interior Indians along the Tanana River never seemed to waste wild meat; at the same time they are fond of unborn moose and caribou, and that each family kept too many dogs, feeding them perhaps as many as twenty-five caribou a summer" (quoted from Sherwood 1981: 172). Murie's comments were relayed to Washington. Whether his comments were instrumental in changing the game laws is unclear. Whatever the case, the fact is that by 1925 Territorial game laws had been changed, ostensibly because non-Natives complained that Natives were abusing their privileges (Sherwood 1981: 106).

The 1902 federal regulations pertaining to hunting in the Territory of Alaska allowed Native people, along with miners and travelers, to kill game for food and clothing regardless of the season. The only restriction was that they could not sell or ship the meat. The federal game law of 1925 again classed Native people with miners and travelers, but it permitted no one to kill game out of season except when in "absolute need of food and other food is not available" (Sherwood 1981: 106). Furthermore, this exemption could be revoked by the Secretary of Agriculture if he decided that game in a certain area was in danger of extermination. It appears that these laws were not

immediately enforced among Native residents of the upper Tanana region, but they reinforced the principle that Native and White hunters had equal rights to game, an idea which would have a tremendous effect in years to come.

The restructuring of game laws was only one indication of the expanding federal presence in the Territory of Alaska. In 1931 the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) appropriated \$4000.00 for a school at Tanana Crossing, and the Church offered the mission buildings as a facility. At this point many of the Mansfield\Ketchumstuk people decided to live permanently in the village at Tanana Crossing. The result was that families, which had hunted and trapped together, were now separated for extended periods during the winter months while the men were out on the trap line. The women stayed at home so the children could attend school. Along with the school a post office was established which relied on deliveries by airplane during the winter and riverboat in the summer. The village, then, became a focal point of activity which probably gave the missionaries more control in the lives of the people.

In the 1920s the Alaska Road Commission was given the responsibility of constructing air fields throughout the territory. Under this mandate the Commission opened a field

at Tanana Crossing built with Native labor. In 1934 the field was upgraded to accommodate planes flying along a commercial route between Juneau, Fairbanks, and Nome (Haycox n.d.: 1) which the traders opposed because it enabled the Natives to buy from mail order houses and to send out their furs ¹². Then in August of 1940 the airfield was designated as one of the fields on the newly formed Northwest Staging Route, a secure airway linking the United States and Alaska (Haycox n.d.: 1).

7. Summary of an Era

Little or no data exists regarding the importance of the fur trade in the protocontact period (1780-1850). As I indicated earlier, Tanacross people traded with the Ahtna, who had access to trade goods from Cook Inlet and trading stations located on Prince William Sound, and with the Tutchone who acted as middlemen for the Chilkat Tlingit. Sometime after 1850 lengthy trips were also made by Tanacross people to the mouth of the Tanana River. Certainly, by the 1880s, they were trading regularly on the Yukon at Fort Reliance and Fortymile. Definite data on the extent of the trade exists only for the period after 1912,

¹² McIntosh to Wood, December 12, 1932. Episcopal Church Archives R.G. 62-42, Folder 2.

when traders moved directly into Tanacross territory following the establishment of the mission.

Exactly what influence it had is difficult to assess. Certainly, Tanacross people interpreted Christianity in their own terms. This process is reflected in a story about a man named Big Mark. According to my informant, Big Mark said that "Indians really think they are Christian and they really believe it. Inside people are really Christian, Jesus is part of good luck and if you live a long time hold Jesus responsible." His belief grew out of a particular experience he had when his wife was ill with tuberculosis, and he was unable to hunt. He was "stuck" in Mansfield taking care of her. Eventually running out of money, they could not get flour to make bannock or rice. Depressed, Big Mark knelt down to pray. The next day he shot a silver fox which, in those days was worth \$500.00. Big Mark took his good fortune as a sign that God had graced him. He said the fox was sent by God because he never saw any sign, meaning he never saw any indication that the fox was there before he shot it ¹³.

Such expressions of belief were often misinterpreted or denigrated by the missionaries who alternatively praised

¹³ Interview conducted in Anchorage, November, 1986.

the Indians' apparent attachment to Christianity and complained about their ignorance of it. Arthur Wright, a missionary at Tanacross, for instance, criticized the Indians for asking:

[W]hy if God is as we say the father of us all, he does not provide for them filling their traps with fur animals and bring meat to their camp when they want it and ask for it, as their spirits do if properly involved. The idea of personal gain is the only idea with which they associate our Teaching of God (Arthur Wright in Bishop Rowe's correspondence, 1927. Episcopal Church Archives R.G. 62-61).

Big Mark's story and Wright's complaint illustrate a paradox in Native and White relations. While the missionaries wanted the Natives to abandon the potlatch because it was wasteful and obstructed their economic independence, they thought it unseemly that Indians would pray for personal gain, even if they were starving.

Paradox aside, today Tanacross people are greatly attached to the Episcopal Church which has been incorporated into Native culture, both as part of Native ideology and practice. For example, in the early part of this century Christianity was equated with being "civilized." That is, going to Church was thought to be a civilized activity similar to wearing a suit and tie. Missionaries were incorporated into the traditional hierarchy becoming

paternal figures who took care of the people, much like other headmen. Christian virtues of kindness, sharing, and love have also been equated with the virtues of Native culture or what is now called the Indian way. Finally, the Episcopal Church continues to be esteemed because it is the Church of the old people. To abandon it would be to abandon a traditional tie and for this reason the dead are always buried with a Christian funeral service. Yet, despite being indigenized the Church is viewed essentially as a non-Native domain and Tanacross people feel they need a non-Native practitioner to correctly interpret Christian teachings. While there is a minister from Tok who serves the village, Tanacross people feel abandoned by the Church because it no longer provides a resident priest or supports a mission in the manner of the past.

While the Church, the traders and the government all impinged on Native autonomy, the Native people of the upper Tanana region continued to live a relatively free existence. As one observer noted in 1930, "[t]hese natives live a rather independent and aristocratic life. When fur is scarce they must eat more caribou and dried fish and less of the White man's food sold by the traders" (Back 1930: 31).

Thus, prior to World War II, Native people maintained a certain freedom which allowed them to produce

only enough to acquire the new means of production: rifles, shells, and traps. Additionally, they were often able to produce a substantial supplement of furs, the proceeds from which were channeled towards the development and elaboration of the indigenous ceremonial system, the potlatch (cf. Strong 1972: chap.5, 50-51 on the Ahtna). Figure 2.2 indicates the extent to which potlatching continued in the region prior to World War II.

Figure 2.2 Data on Historic Potlatches in the upper Tanana and upper Copper River area 1918-1930.

Goods Distributed	Cost of Ceremony	Year&Place	Source
200 Blankets, undetermined amount of guns. Pots and pans. Skin coats, moccasins, mittens. Cloth. Caribou meat.	\$4,000	1918 Tanacross	Ak. Churchman Magazine, Feb. 1918.
Average 50 and 80 blankets ? at a cost of \$14.00 each. Pots and pans. Average number of guns distributed 5 to 10. Beadwork.		1923,25,26,27 Tetlin & Batzulnetas.	Field Notes & Strong (n.d.).
Undetermined amount of blankets, guns, pots and pans, beadwork, cloth, moose meat, store food.	\$15,000 to \$20,000	1927, Healy Lake.	Endicott (1923).
165 blankets, Undetermined amount of guns, pots and pans. Cloth used to eat on. Wild sheep meat, store food.	\$2,000	1930, Batzulnetas.	McKenna (1959).
100 blankets, between 20 and 30 guns, pots and pans, beadwork, cloth. Store food.	\$2,500	1930, Mentasta.	Back (1930)

Note that the figures quoted for the two potlatches held in 1930 reflect 10% of the annual regional fur trade, which was reported to have been between \$20,000 and \$25,000.

8. The Modern Period: 1940 to the Present

Following the declaration of war in 1941, the United States Government decided to up-grade the airport at Tanacross and to construct a highway connecting Alaska with the "lower 48 states," which could be used as a supply route linking the airfields along the Northwest Staging Route. This road, the Alaska Highway, passed directly through Upper Tanana territory. At the same time the Government began construction of the Glenn Highway, which originated in Anchorage and intersected the Alaska Highway at Tok Junction, 10 miles east of Tanacross. Over 14,000 men worked on the Alaska highway. At Tok there was a massive construction camp housing as many 5,000 personnel (Haycox n.d. 4). After the war, in 1946, it was considered possibly the most modern, if not the most complete, maintenance center on the entire Alaska Highway (ibid).

Development of the airport and highway drew the Tanacross people further away from the hunting and trapping

life. People who had continued to live away from Tanacross in the more traditional villages of Ketchumstuk and Mansfield took war-related jobs and settled in Tanacross. Other outlying villages, such as Healy Lake, were abandoned as people moved to the road. Some Tanacross people believe that during the construction of the highway the Native economy involved approximately 50% wage labor. That is, while hunting was still considered the "regular life" almost everyone in the village devoted at least half of their time to earning cash with which they purchased food. A similar observation was made by the upper Ahtna people of Mentasta, who told the anthropologist Strong that in the years "1942 to 1945 a switchover occurred in which over half of the diet of the native peoples came from purchased groceries" (Strong 1972: chap. 6 p. 3).

Most of the jobs lasted only for the duration of the war. But it was not this short term "boom and bust," which so characterizes Alaska's economic history, that had a lasting effect on the Tanacross people. It was the Alaska Highway, which opened the region to non-Natives and enabled the Native people to travel and work away from the village. It was the highway around which the regional center of Tok Junction was built, attracting a sizable non-Native

population. It was the highway which changed the villages in the upper Tanana region from bush communities to road communities. With the highway came chronic alcohol abuse and the feelings of being "lost."

The opening of the highway intensified friction over hunting rights. Between 1939 and 1950 the non-Native population of Alaska doubled, and the number of resident hunting licenses more than tripled from about 9,000 in 1946 to 31 500 in 1955-56 (Sherwood 1981: 143). The road enabled hunters from the urban areas of Anchorage and Fairbanks to hunt in Tanacross territory. More rigorous enforcement impinged on Native hunting practices. As early as 1932 Ahtna people living around the highway settlement of Copper Center had been imprisoned for game violations, and in 1947 a Native man from the Upper Ahtna village of Mentasta was jailed (Strong 1972 chap 5. p.6). Although no Tanacross people were arrested, or ever have been, there was a growing antagonism to game wardens and game laws. Today these laws have become a central issue between Natives and Whites.

Development, which continued after the war, offered additional employment and further opened the area to outsiders. In the late 1940s the Taylor Highway, which winds its way through the hills of the Fortymile River country to

Eagle and Dawson City, was built using some seasonal Native labor. This road had a particular effect on Tanacross subsistence activities as it bisected the migration route of the Fortymile caribou herd, traditionally the main source of food for the Tanacross people. It also made the herd accessible to "road hunters" from Fairbanks and Anchorage.

Some people from the village continued to work away from home after the war on various construction and mineral extraction enterprises. One man, for example, worked on a gold dredge located on Chicken Creek in the Fortymile country, while one or two others worked on Federal construction projects around Alaska. I have no figures for migration patterns, but it is my impression that the presence of the highway did not foment any significant move away from the village. Most people who worked came back to live in the village while only one or two families moved to Tok to be closer to work. But the road did offer employment opportunities not found in other Native communities located off the road system.

As I have noted, during the construction of the Alaska Highway, Tok Junction had been the site of a huge, well equipped construction camp. For many years it was also the site of a pump station and tank farm for a military

pipeline connecting the U.S. Air Force and Army bases at Fairbanks with the deep-water port of Haines, Alaska. The pipeline was abandoned in the early 1970s, and the station became a headquarters for the Bureau of Land Management. Since the 1950s the B.L.M., as it is called, has had primary responsibility for fire control in Alaska, since most land is in federal hands. The B.L.M. used a forest fire control station at the abandoned military installation at Tanacross for fire retardant airplanes and as a staging area for Native fire crews. Unlike the pump station, which employed no Native people on a regular basis, the B.L.M proved to be a source of steady seasonal employment. This has since changed as the State of Alaska took over responsibility of state lands.

Tok also became a regional center for the Territory and later State of Alaska with a variety of government offices, including a district court, an office of the Department of Fish and Game, and a highway maintenance camp. In the 1970s these were augmented by several State of Alaska social service agencies including an Alcohol program and a development agency called the Upper Tanana Development Corporation (UTDC). Tok also became the site for the regional offices of the Tanana Chiefs Conference, the non-

profit arm of the Doyon regional corporation created under the Alaska Native Land Claims Act of 1971. As noted in the introduction each of these organizations, the Alcohol Program, UTDC, and Tanana Chiefs now regularly employs three or four people from Tanacross.

As the first, or last, town on the Alaska Highway located in Alaska, Tok is a major tourist center with bars, hotels, gift shops, gasoline stations, and all the conveniences of any small American town. This diversity has offered private-sector employment to several Native women working seasonally as housekeepers in the hotels. The gift shops also offer a limited outlet for some Native art work, but the major attraction is the availability of many kinds of consumer goods. As the regional center it is the principal source of groceries, fuel, clothing, and potlatch gifts.

9. The Alaska Claims Settlement Act

Up until 1970 historical developments in Alaska had followed similar patterns to those in other parts of the North American subarctic. In 1971 the United States Congress signed into law the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) which would have a profound effect on Native people

in Alaska. The act provided 44 million acres of land and \$962.5 million dollars as compensation for the extinguishment of all aboriginal rights. Ostensibly, the purpose of the settlement was to give Native people more control over their own lives. It was also designed to draw Native people into the main stream of American life.

Under ANCSA were formed over 200 village and 12 regional corporations. For the first 20 years, until 1991, all Native corporations are restricted to Native ownership and all undeveloped land is nontaxable. In 1991, when these restrictions are lifted, corporations are to reissue stock which is negotiable on the open market, and all undeveloped land becomes taxable. Consequently, in the 1990s Native lands are at risk if the corporations cannot pay their debts or taxes. One Native response to the situation has been to propose legislation that would enable villages to "tribalize," or set aside, the land by placing it under the jurisdiction of the village council, which is a nonprofit organization.

But there are concerns over what role land and animals will play in the future. Some Native people have voiced the opinion that land is, or will become, important only in terms of its development potential or

"profitability." Hunting and trapping, while they provide food and income now, will not be viable alternatives in the future. These contradictory feelings were reflected in the negotiations between Tanacross and the U.S. Air Force over the proposed construction of a radar site on Tanacross land.

In 1987 the Air Force proposed the construction of an Over the Horizon Backscatter Radar Site¹⁴ on land which Tanacross received through ANSCA. Most people welcomed the project because they believed it provided employment opportunities for the village even though, in all probability, it would disrupt moose hunting on the Tanana River. Hunting territory was compromised for jobs, but at a calculated risk. First, there was a consensus that employment was a priority; second, hunting on the river had already been disrupted by the state, which had opened the area for homesites. Finally, there was no direct risk to other areas, particularly Mansfield village, which is important as both as a symbol of tradition and a refuge from the everyday world of the village and highway. Nevertheless, the one criterion stipulated for Tanacross participation was that instead of purchasing the land, the Air Force must

¹⁴ This type of radar is able to look over the horizon deep into the Soviet Union to see missiles and airplanes as they are launched.

lease it. There was a strong feeling that Tanacross people had so little land they could not afford to lose any more. As several old people expressed it, they had to have something they could leave to their children and grand children. The result was that the Air Force agreed to lease the land.

While Alaska Native people were given land and money under ANCSA they received no additional rights, other than those granted to any Alaskan resident, to hunt or manage game on their lands. In 1978 the State of Alaska passed a law which insured subsistence rights for all Alaskans, Native and non-Native. Under this law the criterion for subsistence was based on factors other than culture. Consequently, both urban and rural residents claimed subsistence rights. To give rural residents more control the State instituted local game management boards which, in conjunction with the state, have the power to influence local game management regulations. But, like the game regulations of 1925, the current subsistence regulations still do not rest on a cultural imperative.

In the upper Tanana region ANCSA has produced conflicts between Natives and Whites. Local Whites feel that Native people have been compensated more than enough for the

loss of aboriginal rights, and they resent the economic and political power Native people wield because of the settlement. For example, Tanacross, under ANCSA, selected land already occupied by the Tok school. Rather than accept the Tanacross offer to lease the land for a nominal fee, the regional school board decided to move the school.

The subsistence issue has also produced conflicts. Tanacross people generally feel that anyone who is poor, regardless of race, should have subsistence rights. But they also feel that as Native people they should have rights that supersede any sport hunter, i.e. anyone who has a regular income, which is thought to be the vast majority of White people. There is also a growing feeling that Native people should be able to manage local game populations. As one young man said, "the Inuit can manage whales, why can't we manage moose?" These feelings have brought the Native community into conflict with local non-Native hunters, big game outfitters, and the local fish and game board which is dominated by Whites opposed to what they consider special rights for Native people.

The issues of land and hunting rights cut right to the roots of Tanacross cultural identity and economic survival as a group. People still consider themselves as

hunting people who have a distinct culture. They also see that their ability to maintain this distinctiveness, or "Indianness," is slipping away. In an uncertain world a place such as Mansfield and a ceremony such as the potlatch have become important in maintaining continuity with the past and a sense of identity as Indian people.

10. Summary

Tanacross history is characterized by increasing Native involvement with a wide range of non-Native institutions. This has produced a dependency on a whole host of non-Native goods and services. My impression is that between 60% and 70% of the food people eat comes from the store as do all their clothes. Some sort of wage labor is the primary source of income, followed by various forms of government transfer payments. Almost every family in the village has a car, a boat with outboard motor, television set, and video cassette recorder, all of which are considered necessities. The educational system is run by the State of Alaska, and Tanacross children, before grade nine, are taught in the village by non-Native teachers. From grade school the children can either attend high school in Tok or a Bureau of Indian Affairs school in Chemawa, Oregon. The

health system, on the village level, is channeled through two village health aides who work closely with a physician's assistant, stationed in Tok, and doctors in Fairbanks.

Thus, employment opportunities, increased accessibility to trade goods, the application of stringent game laws, a more sedentary village-based life, and the Christian Church, all have fundamentally altered Native life. However, as I shall show, these changes have not simply been imposed on Native people. Rather, change occurred in a dialectical relationship between Natives and Whites. The loss of a certain independence and control required new responses from the Native people, but the Native system has not disappeared.

Chapter Three

THE NATIVE RESPONSE: THE INTEGRATION OF TRADE GOODS INTO THE POTLATCH

1. Introduction

As we have seen, the people of Tanacross accepted the trade goods they were offered and acquiesced in the Episcopal Church's attempts to resettle and convert them. However, they refused to give up the potlatch, and in doing so they resisted the basic, more profound changes sought by the Whites. In effect they resisted all that the traders and missionaries understood to be "natural," that is: personal accumulation, thrift, and investment. Native people did accumulate and distribute the new wealth of goods, but these were integrated into the potlatch as reflections of "traditional" Athabaskan society and Native identity.

2. The Assimilation of Trade Goods

In both the Athabaskan and Northwest coast potlatches trade goods have long been used as gifts but opinions differ on the effect these goods had on the

ceremony. Walens (1981) for instance, noted that for the Kwakiutl blankets became "homologous" to animal skins. In sharp contrast, Goldman (1975) wrote that the use of trade goods in the Kwakiutl potlatch indicated a complete disjuncture in the meaning of the ceremony. Ringel (1979) expressed a similar view. To her Kwakiutl gifts referred symbolically to cosmology and marked group identity, while money and trade goods became "alienated from a familiar system of meanings, detached from aboriginal status positions," and only significant in terms of the economic system that created them (Ringel 1979: 357).

In discussing the Upper Tanana potlatch, McKennan (1959) wrote that the introduction of trade goods not only altered the ceremony but created a contradiction in values between the traditional "traits" of egalitarianism and sharing and the newly acquired emphasis on the competitive distribution of wealth for prestige (1959: 133). Within this context a leader came to attain and validate his position through the distribution of gifts in the mortuary potlatch. Thus a succession of trade goods became symbolic of prestige, each replacing the other at various historical intervals. McKennan postulated that, as the earliest objects of esteem, dentalium shells were eventually replaced by

beads introduced by the Hudson's Bay Company; these were eventually replaced by blankets. Thus Goldman, Ringel, and McKennan believe trade goods derived their value wholly from the meanings they expressed in non-Native society.

However, I will show, as Kan indicates, that far from disrupting the cultural system or having a single reference reflecting the conceptual system of an external dominant culture, trade goods, such as dentalium shells, beads, guns, and blankets, were indigenized (cf. Gaultieri 1980: 57). That is, they were given Native meanings reflecting both the indigenous cultural system, and developing historical relations between Natives and Whites.

In historic Tanacross culture, production, consumption and the distribution of things were elements of a totality and not autonomous spheres.¹ Within this totality, objects were not alienated from their social context but tied to people and relationships. The intimate connection between individuals and objects is reflected in the idea that objects can be "spiritualized" or "personified." I would compare this spirit to the Tlingit concept of yek, which is a constant personified spiritual power in an object or being (McClellan 1975: 68), or the

¹ As Gregory (1982: 33) indicates more generally.

Maori concept of hau which is a "vital essence of life found in human beings, in land, and in things. Because the hau is connected through people to land and things, things take on the power of personification" (Weiner 1985: 212).

In Tanacross culture this personalized spirit is found in everything.² For example, a bandoleer of dentalium shells once owned by a spiritually powerful Tanacross man, who died several years ago, was said to have the power to heal sick people. His bandoleer was hung over a person's sick bed while another one of his belongings was placed under the patient's pillow. Personalized power is also found in arrows, guns, bullets, and steel knives so, as it is said, "they can do their job." Each of these objects has, to a lesser or greater degree, some power which is both inherent in the object and infused by the maker and owner.

Potlatch blankets, guns, and beads were also inoculated with emotions and power or made "sacred" (McKenna 1959: 135). Through his labor the host of a mortuary potlatch invested his emotions into the gifts,

² Apparently this also means cars, television sets, video cassette players, coffee pots and other consumer goods although I never heard anyone say so. It certainly applies to commercially made clothes. It is considered bad luck or Njii, for example, for a wife to wear her husband's clothes. McClellan (1975: 300) has also pointed out the intimate connection between individuals and their clothing.

thereby objectifying his emotional pain. He then purged himself of sadness and grief by distributing the gifts to his guests. In turn they received, not only prestigious objects, but some of their host's sorrow. Thus the host and guests were bound into a reciprocal relationship based on shared emotional pain and goods. The animate power of objects is also evident in the idea that potlatch gifts actively attract wealth. This is why a potlatch host keeps a small piece of blanket or why a young person who made his first potlatch wears gloves. Wearing gloves is said to be "just like you tie it [the wealth] down." The spirit of the objects adhered to the gloves instead of being washed away when the host washed his hands. Like the piece of blanket, the gloves were kept as beacons which attracted wealth and enhanced the host's reputation as a person able to participate in and sustain relationships.

In distributing objects, then, the potlatch host gave a part of himself or herself, and he or she did so because he owed himself and his possessions to others (Mauss 1967: 44). The host's place in history was predicated not only on his distributions but also emanated from the actions of his paternal and maternal ancestors. For this reason Native people say that it is not the living host who gives

the potlatch but his ancestors. The host's connections to the past and present are cemented through the distribution of gifts.

By distributing guns, blankets, and beads to the assembled guests the host demonstrates his relationship to and his feelings for his paternal relatives and potential affines. This is summed up in the statement that "you were born because of your father's people, that is why you pay back" (Guedon 1981: 578). Through these distributions the host gains prestige as he symbolically insures his guests' existence³ by giving them guns to hunt with and blankets to keep them warm and, in the case of possible marriage partners, to insure the existence of succeeding generations.

The host also demonstrates his or her respect for the maternal side by wearing dentalium shell necklaces, skin coats and bandoleers of beads. Through these objects, which either literally or figuratively belonged to the ancestors, the host absorbs some of their power and is enlarged beyond

³ The idea that the host gives something of value to sustain his guests is illustrated in a story about a potlatch held at Tetlin in the late 19th or early 20th century. The host invited people from Dawson City, Y.T. and gave them several dozen marten skins as a potlatch gift. He gave them the skins because the price of marten in the Dawson area was much higher than in Tetlin. The idea was that the Dawson people would benefit more from selling the skins than the host would.

himself. This demonstration is considered diichaagh, or "something really great" and earns the host prestige in the eyes of his maternal relatives. At the same time, the host establishes his social position in relation to that of his guests. It is through this interplay between the quest for individual prestige and the maintenance of social relations that the potlatch enabled the old time leaders to enhance their position.

3. Trade and the Role of Leading Men

Access to foreign goods, whether from EuroAmerican sources or indigenous people, reinforced status distinctions in Tanacross culture. However, individual status was only enhanced in relation to the person's ability to maintain social relationships. As Tanacross people say, it was only by actively caring for his people that a leading man was able to garner prestige.

Through the redistribution of goods leading men organized and controlled the trade during the protocontact (1780-1850) and early contact periods (1850-1912). In the middle of the 19th Century older men organized annual trips down the Tanana River to Nuklukayet and "hired" their nephews and other relatives as packers, paying them in

ammunition, tea, or chewing tobacco at the end of the trip. It should be noted that "hiring" does not indicate a contractual agreement but rather a form of generalized reciprocity. An older woman from Dot Lake, who described the trading expeditions of her great grandfather down the Tanana, said that on the

First of June my grandpa go down, they go by canoe, bring all his nephew and all his uncle, all go down to Tanana. All people go together, bought all that shell, tea, chew, what ever they use, come back when berries ready to ripe, August or September. Hard trip, but old people pay so much a day for the packing. His own relative pack stuff for them, the leader old people take care. If chief hire you and [you] do it [work] for them they give you stuff, if you get hard up, they share with shell, tea and all that stuff. The chief keeps up all his people, just like one family." (interview conducted February, 1987).

The "great grandpa" which she referred to was a man called Tseenetle' who was a 19th century "richman" or leader. He and his brother (some say first cousin) Ket-laata' were headmen for the Dikagu sib and important figures in Tanacross history. Both were purported to have been very rich, according to some, the richest men in the whole upper Tanana region. Today a majority of the Tanacross people claim descent from them. Their status came, in part, from their control over subsistence production and from wealth derived from trade conducted initially at Nuklukayet and

later on the Yukon River at Fort Reliance, Belle Isle, and Fortymile. The trading ventures of Ket-laata' to the Yukon are documented by Lt. Henry Allen who, after a short visit with the chief in the summer of 1885, wrote that Ket-laata' would meet him "on the upper Yukon in July, when the steamboat would have arrived..." (Allen 1887: 80).

Allen alludes to the wealth of the Tanacross and Upper Tanana people when he writes that "[t]heir clothing indicated more easy communication with a trading station than did that of the Atnatanas [Ahtna]" and "[w]e realized from their appearance that better times awaited us" (Allen 1887: 75). Also the Natives' "frequency of visits..." to the Yukon River had "...considerable influence in modifying their customs and dress. They have almost entirely ceased to wear nose-rings, and but a few wear ornaments in their ears" (ibid: 136). He also mentions that muzzle-loading shot guns were displacing the bow and arrow (Allen 1887: 132).

The importance of Tseenetle' is suggested by the oft-told story in which he is said to have killed one or two young boys, apparently for laughing at people when they were singing a "sorry song" during a potlatch. Ordinarily such an offense would have resulted in death. However, Tseenetle' was spared because of his importance in the trade. As the

story relates, the chief of the murdered boys' village was a friend or "partner" of Tseenetle' and interceded for him, though "not for love but for business, like trading." To protect Tseenetle' his partner put both arms around him "so he won't be hurt too much" while "some other men beat him up but not kill." Afterward the partner helped him up and "talk, talk to his people to get [Tseenetle'] out of his trouble, just like lawyer!" Tseenetle' then told the people he wanted no more trouble and would pay whatever they wanted to avoid revenge. For this Tseenetle' put on a big potlatch and paid the deceased's relatives off (Paul 1957: 28-29).

This story illustrates several aspects of 19th century trade relations and the pivotal role of leadership. Leaders are portrayed as being responsible for managing the trade (cf. Allen 1887 and Kari 1986) and, as leading men, distributing gifts to settle a dispute, thus insuring the continuity of social relations and the trade. But their leadership was also based on their personal qualities and on their position as leaders of a high ranking sib whose status is reflected in their recognized "ownership" of two highly valued objects: the dentalium shell and the gun.

4. The Goods

Dentalium shells are short, tusk shaped mollusks found in the waters off the Northwest Coast. As symbols of wealth and prestige, the shells are highly valued by many Athabaskan groups both in Canada and Alaska. According to Tanacross and Upper Tanana oral tradition the shells were first received as gifts from the guu or "Brush Indians." One story relates how the shells were acquired as a reward for saving a stranger from a bear attack.

A "man" sees that a Brush Man is being stalked by the bear. As the Brush Man attempts to flee the bear, his shirt becomes entangled in the brush and he falls. The bear is on top of him immediately, and the stranger attempts to stab the bear in the mouth with his knife. By this time the "man" arrives and spears the bear in the heart. He then clubs him. The bear dies, and the two men smile at each other. They then sit back to back, and the stranger tells the "man" that he should clear a tree of all its limbs so that he will be able to find this spot again. The stranger then says that the "man" should come back to this spot every year and take whatever he finds useful hanging from the tree. The next year the "man" finds "necklace beads" or dentalium shells hanging from the tree (story recorded in Tanacross, August, 1983).⁴

In this way the first dentalium shells were received as gifts commemorating a deed and a relationship. Some people say the man who saved the "Brush Indian's" life was a

⁴ For two more versions of stories which relate how "dentalium necklaces came to the people" see Paul (1980) and for another version of the bear story see McKennan (1959).

member of the Dikagu sib and through his act they were the first to acquire the shells. Consequently, they were considered to "own" the shells and to be wealthy people as reflected in the statement: "Dik'agiyu, they're millionaire tribe, high price people" (Guedon 1974: 69). Ownership in this sense did not indicate exclusive rights to the shells but meant that the Dikagu had to be always acknowledged as the first people to have the shell. Thus their status was continually reconfirmed.

During the fur trade dentalium became symbolic of wealth obtained by leading men through their management and control of the trade. Unlike other types of property the shells were not shared or redistributed (Strong 1972: chap 5, p.30) but displayed as symbols of individual status and handed down from generation to generation from father to oldest child. According to one person, who was born on the Goodpaster River in the 1860s,

Wampum [dentalium] was money but people didn't hide it; they wore it. Just rich people and chiefs and their wives could wear wampum in big wide collars around their necks and long earrings hanging clear down to their shoulders and even longer sometimes...[and] sometimes when there was a potlatch, mama said the chief put on a neck-piece with beads just solid and big, big breast plate all over beads and he was beautiful..." (Loftus\Anderson 1956: 2).

Today Tanacross people see dentalium shells not only as symbols of prestige but expressions of affection. One young man said that parents express their love by sewing shells on their children's clothing or giving them necklaces. Dentalium, he said, do not symbolize wealth but are "about love." The significance of the shells is also indicated in the different meanings attached to the three types of dentalium currently available. Most valuable are the old necklaces made from Northwest Coast dentalium and handed down usually from the father to eldest child. These are valuable, not only because they are rare, but because they reflect a history of fundamental relationships between people. Of secondary importance are African and Japanese varieties which have been introduced within the last 20 years. Today chief's necklaces made from Japanese dentalium are given away at potlatches to elders in recognition of their status. They are also occasionally sold to tourists and museums.

While there is an oral tradition about how beads came to the Tanacross people my informants say they do not remember it. Like dentalium, beads are said to express affection and are a sign of wealth. When a young man received a beaded sash for a Christmas present he became

"bound by love," to those who gave him the sash. Beads, like dentalium, are also symbolic of social relations which, when expressed in the form of necklaces or sashes, literally surround or embrace the individual. When a person wears a beaded sash or dentalium shell necklace, it is said to be "something really great." That is, the acknowledgment of a relationship is a great or significant act in which the wearer displays not only his personal status, but identifies himself with his ancestor's achievements.

Historically beads were displayed in long strings worn around the body or sewn on clothing. When a particularly prominent person died strings of beads were broken by beating them against a building or tree in honor of the deceased. Those beads not broken were picked up by people "who had the right," i.e. the paternal relatives of the deceased. According to William Hardisty (1872: 317-318), the Hudson Bay Factor at Fort Yukon, when a Gwich'in person died, the relatives destroyed many of his beads thus indicating the depth of their grief and feelings of esteem for the deceased. Any beads left were either destroyed or distributed at a "Dead Dance" following the funeral nine to twelve months later. He went on:

After a certain time subsequent to the death of a relative,

the nearest of kin to the deceased, if a man of wealth, makes a general festival for the dead, the "dead dance"-when he distributes the rest of his beads-his whole fortune-to his countrymen, half of what each receives to be returned either in beads or furs after a year to enable the person who makes the festival to begin the world afresh after he has completed his term of mourning. In the mean time he makes every exertion to collect a quantity of good meat. Invitations are sent to all the neighboring tribes; a level piece of ground is fenced around, and the beads are strung neatly hung up on painted cross poles within the enclosure. During this time, also, he composes the songs to be used on the occasion, in which all the good qualities of the deceased are enumerated...

In destroying and distributing his beads, the host was able to cleanse himself of his grief. Later, upon receiving beads and furs which encapsulate the qualities of their owners, the host was able to renew himself.

Today several kinds of beaded articles are given away at potlatches. Necklaces, made out of beads and "hair pipes" which are bone tubes purchased from an Indian craft supplier, are frequently distributed in lieu of dentalium shells. Woven beaded sashes are another popular item that have replaced the old style dentalium bandoleer which "rich" people often wore. Other beaded objects given away include moccasins, gloves, vests, and gun cases. All of these gifts acknowledge the particular status of a guest. For instance, only leading men and women receive dentalium shell necklaces and skin garments. Articles made of moose skin are also made

for presentation to guests who have a special relationship to the deceased or honored person.

In contrast to dentalium and beads, guns were introduced into Tanacross culture in the last quarter of the 19th Century through American traders operating on the Yukon River. Tanacross oral tradition recounts that guns were introduced when a man of the Chaz sib bought them from some prospectors who illustrated the power of the gun by shooting through several planks of whip-sawed lumber. The Native man was so impressed that he purchased two of the guns. Through this man the guns eventually reached the Dikagu sib at the village of Dea thad who purchased the guns by piling furs to the height of the weapon, a tradition widespread in the Subarctic. Like dentalium shells, the Dikagu bought the guns so they would be the first to own them. Apparently the prestige associated with guns is not exclusive since they can also represent the Al-ce-den-da/Nalcine sib. Because, in Tanacross, this sib is the preferred marriage partner of the Dikagu, the gun may symbolize an intermoiety alliance.

Guns are integral to the ceremony as gifts representing love and respect and as symbols of Native identity. It is the ideal that a host collect enough guns so there is one for the chest or torso, one for the head, one

for each arm, and each leg and a seventh gun which stands for the whole body of the deceased. The number of guns collected is always supposed to be increased in increments of seven. I have never heard anyone express the reason for this symbolism, and I suspect it is rather esoteric knowledge known only to a few people. Nevertheless, I believe this ideal reflects the larger concern of the host to express his or her love and respect for the deceased by symbolically covering the body with love. Each gun metaphorically represents, or "covers," a part of the body with an object of great value. By giving a gun which represents a part of the deceased's body the host manifests his love felt for the deceased. The deceased's body is also said to be "destroyed" by the wealth represented in the guns "so people won't miss that person" and "have to worry about it [the body] any more."

While guns have symbolic meaning, they are also a weapon required for the hunt. It is said that "[w]hen you got no gun you can't kill anything, gun is just like food." This view was reiterated when, as a host handed the gift of a gun to a potlatch guest, he said "now you can kill your moose." Although a variety of types of rifles is distributed as gifts today only 30-30 caliber lever action guns are

considered "Indian guns." As "traditional" gifts they connect the past and the present. The first guns acquired were muzzle-loading shotguns, but these are regarded today as no more than curiosities without symbolic significance. The 30/30 is the gun associated with the autonomy of the hunting life, and it is this association which is predominant in most people's minds today.

Blankets are the most numerous gifts distributed at a potlatch, and it is not uncommon for 300 or 400 blankets to be given away at one time. Classed in two types, blankets are either considered "high priced" or "standard." High priced blankets are thick, white wool ones in the Hudson's Bay style. These are prestigious and charged with emotion: real HBC blankets are rare and only a few are given away to those people who have had a special relationship with the deceased. And they are often given away in a more public display preceding the distribution of other gifts.

It is said that "blankets is just like you put your arm around, [or] wrap somebody up with your love and warmth."⁵ Giving large numbers of blankets is also thought to "cut down on a man's worry" and to make his sorrow

⁵ Kan (1986: 206) notes a similar significance for blankets in the Tlingit potlatch. The physical feeling of the soft, warm blanket conveyed warmth to the guests who thanked their hosts for "warming them."

easier. Fancy blankets, particularly the Hudson's Bay style, are always laid in and on top of the coffin. By giving an identical blanket to people especially close to the deceased the host shares a part of the love that is buried with the deceased. The emotional value of the HBC blankets was expressed to me after I had given two as Christmas presents to my close friends Elisha and Lila. Elisha said that "it was a great Indian potlatch" and that it made him feel good, almost beyond words. Lila said that when she dies she would like to be buried in hers. It is also said that some of the value ascribed to HBC blankets stems from the fact that they were the first to be used in potlatch.

Next to blankets, scarves are the most common item given away at potlatches. They may have some symbolic value similar to blankets. Purchased by the dozens, they are tied to rifle barrels to identify those belonging to a specific host and distributed to dancers who use them to punctuate their movements. They are also tied to grave fences as expressions of love for the dead.

Bolts of cloth, locally referred to as "calico," have been distributed at potlatches since at least the late 1920s (McKenna 1959). Occasionally cloth is hung up on the wall in display and like scarves is used in dancing. Cloth

is the only gender specific gift, as it is always given to women who use it for making dresses.⁶ The bolts are torn into lengths measured by stretching both arms. Afterward the torn cloth is tied in a loose knot and given away.

Cash is always given away at potlatches, usually in increments of \$5.00, \$10.00 and \$20.00. High-ranking men and women usually receive a rifle, dentalium shell necklace, and blankets which are given as a package, so to speak, along with cash. While there is a display around the blanket, gun and necklace, money is handed over almost as an after thought. Cash is also distributed to people who have assisted with the potlatch. For example, at several potlatches I was given cash which compensated me for driving people to the potlatch or helping prepare and serve food. Basically, money is distributed as a repayment for what a guest spent in attending the potlatch.

Money, however, more than any other gift, symbolizes a driving paradox in contemporary Native life. The most Native of institutions, the potlatch, requires that most quintessential symbol of the White man, money. This paradox is partially mediated by relegating money to the position of

⁶ At one potlatch I was given a piece of cloth as a joke. Now that I had a piece of cloth I was supposed to find a wife to give it to.

a secondary gift. Yet this mediation also serves to reinforce the power of money because, unlike the other gifts which have been completely indigenized, money can never completely be co-opted as a symbol of Indianness. For this reason Native people take an apparently relaxed or disinterested view of money. I was told by one man, for instance, that for Indians money "just comes and goes." Nevertheless, money is a primary source of conflict or "jealousy" in the village.

The power of money is reflected in the idea that during a potlatch you can hear it moving around the hall. Money is also regarded as animate and able to generate wealth. Its power is voiced in the potlatch song which asks that "all the money in the world" be called upon to "destroy the body" to alleviate the mourners' grief. Because of its power, money has to be handled carefully. A person who takes inordinate interest in wealth by continually handling it or always seeming to be involved with it in some way is suspected of being self interested and ultimately irresponsible.

Once an object is received as a gift it cannot be used as a gift in another potlatch. If, however, guests wish to sell their gift they can do so, and many gifts are sold

promptly following a potlatch.⁷ In a rigid sense people are supposed to sell their gifts only if they need money. This restriction reflects a general view that potlatch gifts are supposed to be worth more than the sum of their cash value. Gifts which memorialize or acknowledge an especially close relationship or commemorate an especially important event are not sold.⁸ But not all gifts are that significant. Today almost every adult attending a potlatch receives a gift, regardless of who they are, and prominent guests may be given anywhere from two to ten blankets and two or even three guns. Consequently, some people feel no need to hold on to a gift and they resell them either immediately after the potlatch or at some other time.

While gifts may be exchanged for cash they do not become alienated property. It is the intention of the host to provide something of value to the guest and if the guest feels he needs to sell it that is his prerogative; the gift has had its use; the recipient has used it to advantage. Additionally, almost all of the gifts are sold to people who

⁷ McKennan (1959) noted that immediately after a potlatch he attended in the Ahtna village of Batzulnetas in 1930 the guests began selling their gifts.

⁸ At one potlatch, commemorating the recovery of a young man from an accident, the man who stayed with him during the accident was given a beaded moosehide gun case and rifle which he refused to sell.

intend to make a potlatch; consequently, the object remains within the circle of distribution. Furthermore, gifts are sold well below market value. For example, a 30/30 Winchester rifle sells at retail from \$200.00 to \$250.00⁹ but is sold for \$150.00 at a potlatch. Hudson's Bay and Pendleton brand blankets retail for over \$100.00 but are resold for \$60.00, while common blankets are sold for \$10.00 each regardless of their original cost. People do not want to seem greedy when selling a gift; one person's gift should not be another man's capital.

5. Conclusion

Guns, blankets, scarves, beads and dentalium shells have evolved into powerful multifocal symbols used not only to establish and validate individual prestige but to create and maintain fundamental relationships and to express personal feelings. Two objects of major symbolic importance are the dentalium shell and gun.

The shells were initially representations of the Indian's achievement in saving the Brush Man's life which gave the Indian both an equality to and superiority over the stranger. This significance was reiterated in the fur trade

⁹ Prices quoted are in 1987 U.S. dollars.

period as the shells, symbolic of wealth were strung into "chief's necklaces." They were also considered signs of affection when used as personal adornment for children. Today many Native people consider dentalium as wealth objects.¹⁰ Additionally, they take the shells to signify "Indianness" both in the sense of being identified with an internal set of cultural values and as uniquely Athabaskan.

Like dentalium, 30/30 Winchester rifles have evolved as cultural symbols reflecting Native values and relationships between Natives and non-Natives. Acquiring the gun, as the Dikaqu did from other Natives, speaks of power based on the ability to accumulate goods and conduct trade. This act also established parity between Natives and Whites based on the tradition that Natives acquired the gun from other Natives rather than the White man. Today as objects used in traditional Native culture, guns, dentalium shells, beads, blankets, scarves, and cloth reinforce Native identity and enable Native people to maintain a connection with their hunting past and consequently a continued sense of autonomy. This ideology indicates why such things as television sets, stereos, and video cassette recorders,

¹⁰ Indeed, on the Indian Art market old dentalium shell necklaces are expensive.

while given away at birthdays, Christmas and weddings, are not incorporated into the potlatch.

Although many people, particularly the elders, know the symbolic value of these objects discussed in this chapter, not everyone places the same value on potlatch gifts or their distribution. There are people who view the objects simply in terms of their cash value alone and, as indicated above, sell them at the first opportunity. But this attitude is not an issue in the Native community because people need cash to live. Other people associate objects and their distribution, with individual power and prestige and they involve themselves in activities, including potlatches, because they can profit either socially or economically. To this end these people will, for example, manipulate situations either through aggressive behavior or supernatural means, not so they can better participate in mutually reciprocal relationships, but to enhance their individual position. It this sort of activity is considered self centered and irresponsible.¹¹

In the same vein people who purchase potlatch gifts with money won by gambling are thought to be irresponsible.

¹¹ The different attitudes towards the potlatch do not follow age categories. Young and old people alike complain about the cost of potlatches and everyone sells gifts to raise cash.

There is a widely shared opinion that potlatch gifts should be purchased with a person's "own money" or money earned through "their own hand" or have a "right" to receive. Acceptable money includes wages and government transfer payments. The sanction against using gambling profits to purchase potlatch gifts may be a result of the influence of the Episcopal Church, which disapproved of gambling as a corrupting influence. On the other hand, it suggests that only by using money obtained through one's own labor can a person invest oneself in the gifts.

Potlatch gifts, then, are multifocal symbols which hold different meanings for people depending on their view of the potlatch and the extent of their participation in the ceremony. But these differences do not indicate a complete disjuncture in the meanings associated with the gifts. Rather, they are part of an ongoing complex revaluation of what is appropriate behavior. In the next chapter we will see how these differences are acted out by the traditional leadership of the village of Tanacross.

Chapter Four

The Tradition Bearers

1. Introduction

Tanacross people today distinguish between two types of leaders: traditional "chiefs" and elected leaders.¹ The principal responsibilities of the older traditional "chiefs" lie in organizing and leading the potlatch, while the young elected leaders, men and women in their thirties and forties, sit on the village council and village corporation board overseeing the economic development of the community.

These two forms of leadership parallel changes in Native culture as well as changes in the relationship between Natives and Whites. Leaders, historically, were known as "rich men"² who were responsible for organizing the acquisition,

1 McClellan writes that the Tutchone also distinguish between elected chiefs and traditional chiefs (1975: 489).

2 In an unpublished dissertation on Upper Inlet Tanaina leadership James Fall (1981) writes that an Upper Inlet Tanaina leader can be best understood as a "Rich Man" who is a "prestigious, skillful individual, of relatively high rank within a descent group, who organizes the economic activities of his kinsmen during peak resource availability, and manages the stored products of his supporters for their benefit and the validation of his privileged status. He uses the stores of wealth to increase his personal prestige even further in an areal

accumulation, and redistribution of resources by which they validated and maintained their prestige and gained approval to lead (cf. McKennan 1959; Guedon 1974; Strong 1972). Today these economic tasks are directed by young elected leaders charged, by law, with acquiring and managing the community's resources included those distributed by state and local government. This has left the traditional leaders the place of "tradition bearers," proponents and exemplars of the "Indian way."

Both types of leadership reflect the contradictions and conflicts of modern Native identity. First, there are the young, educated, elected leaders whose major focus is competence within the White world. None is sufficiently experienced in traditional life to have achieved a competence which would enable them to play a leading role in the potlatch. Their primary sphere of influence includes the village council and Tanacross village corporation.

The village council has its roots in Episcopal missionary and U.S. government policies. In an effort to

exchange system. An individual becomes a Rich man through the management of material and nonmaterial resources, which are largely under the control of the more privileged segments of the society" (Fall 1981: 369). McClellan says that among the Tutchone the word "chief" translates to "man with lots of stuff" (1975: 489) and that chiefs were considered "high people" who could buy many things (490).

formalize leadership, the Church, in 1912, organized the election of a chief and council of elders who, in conjunction with the missionary, kept order in the village. After the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) was extended to Alaska in 1936 (Debo 1970) the council became the legal governing body of the village. Today it consists of six elected members:³ a president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, and two councilors. Their primary duties include administering village improvement grants, made available by federal and state agencies, and representing village interests at the state and regional levels. Councilors also have the authority to pass laws regulating people's behavior in the village, especially regarding the use of alcohol.

Distinct from the village council, the Tanacross Native Corporation was established under the Alaska Native Land Claims Act of 1971. It, unlike the IRA council which is the legally recognized government of the village, is a profit making business with an elected board of directors and president. Assets include land and cash received through the Alaska Native Claims Settlement. Because the village population is small, membership on both the council and

³ Whites are not allowed to run for the village council.

corporation board overlap to a degree. Currently membership of both bodies is composed of young men and women whose average age is about 42 years. Several members have received university training, and all have a wide range of work experience outside the village.

In contrast, the older, more traditionally experienced elders and leaders concerned with competence in the Indian way, which, for them, is a lived reality. Though isolated from the complexities of modern bureaucratic life, principally because of their lack of formal education, traditional leaders have played, and continue to play, important roles in determining the future direction of the village. Currently one traditional leader acts as an adviser to the village council and keeps abreast of all local activity. As advisor he does not have access to resources available to the council or board of directors but is able to exert some influence on how those resources are allocated once they become available in the village.

Traditional leadership derives its authority not merely from a communal respect or nostalgia for the past but also from what it has accomplished. Much of the present land claims settlement, for example, is the legacy of the older generation who feels it was accomplished by maintaining and

asserting the Indian way. Andrew Isaac, traditional chief of the Tanana Chiefs, the nonprofit regional corporation formed under the Alaska Native Land Claims Act, symbolizes this older generation. As one man told me:

Andrew is important because he has hung on to his "Indian life." When Andrew dies the people at Tanana Chiefs will have to settle for the law whereas Andrew is now able to block the Whites by keeping an Indian focus on the issues. (paraphrased from field notes collected in Tanacross, 1987)

Old people fear that if the young people, even with all their education, abandon the "Indian life" they will lose. Unable to compete effectively with Whites the young people will lose the land and, what is even more alarming, will have to become like Whites. Not surprisingly, they regard the "Indian life," or the Indian way, as crucial. It is what the elders and traditional leaders feel competent to teach, and it is the basis for the structure which insures them some control and continued relevance.

Even though there have been substantial changes in the nature of traditional leadership there is also continuity in the ways a modern "tradition bearer" or leader can validate his leadership. Like his historical counterpart the modern leader, through his individual example, leads the village in moments of crisis, especially at funerals and potlatches. He

is expected to be generous, smart, and to possess verbal eloquence or some other skill indicating knowledge and understanding of tradition. The tradition bearer, like his historical counterpart, validates his authority and enhances his prestige through responsible acts which show love and respect for the people. But the actual nature of the modern traditional leader's duties is much more diffuse, and performance varies with the individual. In this respect traditional leadership is a developing institution in which both the people and the leader forge a synthesis on how to fulfill this role.

The traditional leadership of Tanacross is split between two men, Elisha and Jack, who are the ranking men of two descent groups tracing their descent from two almost mythical characters Tseenetle' and Ket-laata'. Because of their backgrounds, both Elisha and Jack play historical roles which are also affected by people's expectations and by each man's personal synthesis of the Indian way.

Although each man in his own way is a "traditional leader" the focus and activity of their leadership is very different. As the older of the two, Elisha has already attained status as a leader; he is a well-respected elder who has given many potlatches and "can talk well for his people."

The impetus of Elisha's leadership rests in his synthesis of Christian spirituality and the ideals of the Indian way. Within this synthesis the potlatch becomes an expression of Native spiritual values which override any individual expression of prestige.

By contrast, the thrust of Jack's leadership reflects his concerns for the material welfare of his community. He appears to have no commitment to Christianity, while his interests include both the economic development of the village and the respect and prestige offered a traditional leader. To this end he is energetically involved in various village activities ranging from the Christmas party to the organization of the annual village sponsored dog sledge race, the annual "survival camp", and potlatches. For Jack, then, the potlatch becomes an important means to enhance the community's well being.

The histories of these two men, Elisha and Jack, exemplify much of the history of leadership in Tanacross, which is also a history of Elisha's and Jack's families. Without the appropriate background evident from their descent group, neither man could legitimate or validate his leadership. The differences in leadership arise out of the history of the people and their changing relations with EuroAmericans.

2.Changing Leadership 1850-1912

Historically Upper Tanana society was based on a system of rank. At the top were "rich men" who, through marriages with three or more women⁴, had influence over a whole village or a number of smaller villages⁵. The importance of these "rich men" is reflected in the fact that they are identified precisely in the genealogical record (Guedon 1974: 141) as the progenitors or "grandfathers" of the people. Next in rank were less influential sub-chiefs who had only one or two wives and represented their people's interests on the local level only. Also included as men of rank were shamans or "sleep doctors" (cf.Guedon 1974: 141; Strong 1972 chap.3, pp. 25-27)

4 Some rich men had up to six wives and were considered "smart guys" who did not work but left that to their poorer relations and followers. The competition and jealousy between these men was said to hev been considerable (McKenna collection, box 6, U of A Archives).

5 The importance of the Chief and his place were reflected in the type of houses constructed. When an old man, i.e., leader decided to stay in a place for the winter he directed his people to make a bark house. These large, semi-subterranean structures could house a large family of several wives, children, and other relatives such as a chief would have. Bark houses were not only larger but more permanent than the more modest teepees built by lesser men.

A "rich man's" position and authority was based both on ascribed status and achievement.⁶ One of the leader's greatest assets was his sib affiliation (cf. McClellan for the Tutchone 1975: 490). Belonging to a high-ranking sib gave the leader access to knowledge acquired through physical and mental training received from older male relatives, particularly his mother's brothers. Furthermore, not only did a leader inherit knowledge but he also inherited the symbols of leadership such as dentalium shell necklaces, which made it easier to legitimize his authority. Moreover, if a leader was a ranking individual of a numerically well represented and high ranking sib⁷ his ability to achieve and maintain a position of power was greatly enhanced. But a leader also had to show remarkable ability at managing resources to sustain his leadership over his sibmates. If he was particularly able,

6 Boelscher (personal communication), in defining rank for the Haida, says there are two aspects of rank. The first is a formal (or ascribed) aspect contingent on birth, one's ancestors and how many potlatches they have given. Another aspect, called by the Haida "fitness for respect," is based on a leader's social knowledge and ability to lead in rituals. This also includes knowledge of informal relationships.

7 The issue of whether sibs are ranked has been brought up by Heinrich (1957) who says they are. Certainly in Tanacross the Dikagu and Al-ce-den-da are the two highest ranked sibs. Within the upper Tanana region the Dikagu are considered the "millionaire tribe, high priced people" as indicated previously (Guedon 1974: 69).

he could attract a number of marriage partners and in this way extend influence over his wife's siblings as well.⁸

Today sib affiliation, or "formal background," knowledge, discipline, and the ability to handle problems are still often mentioned as prerequisites for leadership. As the young man who wrote this description of what is expected of a modern traditional leader points out:

The people of the village don't all at once race toward leadership[,] each and everyone had to have reputation of formal background and discipline[.] Village leaders are [those men] who hold the interest of their people and have [the] capability to handle all small to biggest problem, or problems, within village or elsewhere[.] [L]oving for their own has been one of the requirements [as well] (from a written statement collected in Tanacross, 1987).

The major responsibilities of the old fashioned "rich men" involved organizing and managing economic activities, particularly the communal caribou hunts, trading expeditions, and redistributing the products acquired from these activities (Strong n.d. chap 5: p. 29). It was also the leader's responsibility to feed his followers, find wives for them, to give them his aid and protection (Strong 1972 chap 3 pp. 25-27), to settle disputes, and to make speeches concerning their

8 It must be remembered that we are talking about groups ranging from 10 to 50 people, if the earliest population figures have any validity.

welfare. In return, a leader could call on his relatives to donate goods for a mortuary ceremony, for support in war, or to back him up in case of a disagreement. In essence the leader and followers shared a reciprocal relationship in which the leader was expected to care for both the spiritual and material needs of his people who responded with their labor and support in critical periods such as war.⁹

Two such leaders were Tseenetle' and Ket-laata', who were headmen for the Dikagu sib in the mid-nineteenth century. Of the two, Tseenetle' appears to have been the most important although Ket-laata' is the only one mentioned in the historical record. Tseenetle' was called "boss" and Tsey shyann, meaning "old grandpa," and it was he who directed the people in building the caribou fences and in the great communal hunts. Tseenetle' lived at Dixthada or Dea thad but was from a place called Flint Rock, about four miles south of Ketchumstuk.¹⁰ Tseenetle' is considered a great leader, but he

9 Balikci's (1963: 62-63) description of Vunta Kutchin chiefs parallels that of the upper Tanana leader. He writes that there is a "succession of polygynous tribal chiefs, economic leaders, (owners of the caribou surrounds) moiety chiefs, war captains, religious leaders or shamans who acted on behalf of the whole community in crises periods."

10 At Ketchumstuk there were several other clans including: Chaz, Nalcine or crow people (Guedon 1974: 68), Al-ce-den-da who were said to have come out water weeds found around Midway Lake near Tetlin, Dikagu and T'chel u. The T'chel u grandfather was from Flint Rock as well.

is also considered to have had a violent temper as indicated by his killing of the two young boys mentioned on page 72.

No one knows when Tseenetle' or Ket-laata' died, but by the beginning of the 20th century their maternal nephew had become a leading man. In 1900 the Tanacross people were apparently divided into two local exogamous bands centered on two semi-permanent villages: Mansfield and Ketchumstuk. The two bands had overlapping subsistence areas and close affinal ties. The Mansfield band was led by Sam Thomas (b. 1851-d.1939?), a member of the Dikagu sib, and the ranking elder brother of a core group of siblings who were maternal nieces and nephews of Tseenetle'. Both he and his brother married upper Ahtna women who, along with several of their siblings, came to live at Mansfield.¹¹

11 I believe the relationship between the upper Ahtna and Mansfield people rested on creating marriage alliances for subsistence and trade reasons. The area just north of Mansfield is a major pathway for caribou migration and was utilized by the upper Ahtna people at the invitation of their Mansfield partners. At the same time the Copper River is home to major salmon runs and it appears that Mansfield people may have gotten fish from the upper Ahtna people. In the late eighteenth and all through the nineteenth century Copper River people had access to Russian and later American trade goods that came from Cook Inlet and Prince William Sound. These were traded north into Tanacross territory. In the 1880s the trade was reversed when Americans built trading stations on the upper Yukon. The major trail linking the Copper, Tanana and Yukon Rivers went by Ketchumstuk and Mansfield.

At the same time, all or part of the Ketchumstuk band appears to have been led by another rich man named Isaac (b. 1849-d.1912) who is said to have been headman of the Al-ce-den-da sib. Originally from a village located at the mouth of the Good Paster River, down river from Tanacross, Isaac along with other members of the band, moved into the Ketchumstuk area in the late 1870s or 1880s. There they came into contact with the Mansfield people, and eventually Isaac married one of Sam Thomas's sisters. By about 1900, the core group of siblings, with Sam Thomas as the ranking male, had made marriage alliances with upper Ahtna and Good Paster people. From these marriages are derived the major families of modern Tanacross.

As "rich men" both Sam Thomas and Isaac were responsible for managing resources, particularly the long caribou snare fences that crisscrossed the region. Isaac was called the "boss" for a snare fence and large caribou surround near Ketchumstuk which (Paul 1974 (1957):16), while Sam Thomas had several snare fences which he may have inherited from his uncle Tseenetle'.¹² Both men were able to mobilize and

12 One fence was near the Little Dennison River, one at a place called Wolf Creek, another located in the present vicinity of Tok Junction and a fourth at a place called Soldagarten (Soldier's Garden) near Tanacross. This last Thomas built near the end of his life when he was blind and lived in the mission village of Tanacross. Apparently this fence was rather short and used to snare both moose and caribou. The snares were said to be made from old telegraph wire.

organize the labor of their kinsmen which Strong (1972:chap.3,pp. 25-27) believes was the key to a leader's position.

Isaac's prominence was enhanced through his involvement with the Episcopal Church (Stuck: 1916). According to Church records, he was responsible for the establishment of the mission at Tanacross which was begun in 1912, the year Isaac died. As a result of his involvement, the Church bestowed the title "chief" upon him, much as trading captains or trading chiefs were named by the Hudson's Bay Company. Isaac's importance to the missionary cause is reflected in the references to Chief Isaac appearing in the Episcopal Church literature of the time. Sam Thomas, by contrast, appears in one brief note with an accompanying photo.

Isaac's significance to the Native community is indicated by the large potlatch held in his honor at Mansfield after he died in the winter of 1912. The potlatch was attended by guests from Mentasta, Tetlin, Ketchumstuk and Moosehide, a village located near present day Dawson City (Stuck 1913: 85). After his death, the missionaries, who had just arrived, called an election and Chief Isaac's second son Walter, a member of the Dikagu sib, was elected, the first having declined. The intentions of the missionaries in instigating

the election are fairly clear. They sought to break the influence of the traditional leaders, whose authority depended on their ascribed status and personal achievement, and assert the moral and secular authority of the Church through by designating a leader through democratic means.¹³

The newly elected "chief" was not considered a "rich man," and because he was a younger man, he apparently deferred to his ranking maternal uncle Sam Thomas in most traditional matters. The new chief became the first elected leader who, as head of the village council made up of a number of leading men, met with various outside entities. In this capacity he was involved with John Hajdukovich's abortive attempt to establish a reservation around Tanacross in the 1930s and he negotiated with the United States military when it decided to

13 The Reverend F.B. Drane wrote in 1918 that "[i]t is a day when the people are looking for a new leader." He went on to say that "[h]ere at Saint Timothy's they see that the cause of right is upheld and that even the most powerful man of the old caste is rebuked when he advocates some unjust measure. They [Native people] see that each man is given a fair consideration and that prominence does not make him more favored." Furthermore, the "child-like nature of our Indians makes them naturally look up for leadership. Many of their former chiefs were strong men, but in most cases they held their power as medicine men. Now when the young people see how kind and impartial are the mission ways of doing things they take eagerly to our counsels." (Drane, Spirit of Missions No.3 March 1918: 199).

upgrade the Tanacross airport at the beginning of World War II, and

Before Chief Walter died in the 1960s he ignored the electoral process imposed by the missionaries and appointed his elder brother's son, Andrew, a member of the Al-ce-den-da sib, as chief. The appointment was made because Elisha, the chief's son, was considered too young and immature to be chief. Subsequently, Andrew became heavily involved in land claims negotiations in the 1960s and 1970s. Today he is not recognized as chief of Tanacross because he does not live in the village, but he is considered a traditional leader. Elisha, however, gradually grew into the role of leader and became head of the village council in the late 1960s. He is now widely recognized as an important elder and a leader in Tanacross.

Even though the "chief" seems to have served a different function than the "rich man," the recognition of Isaac as "chief" by the Church and subsequent election of his son created a long-term tension in the community. At an earlier time competition must have existed between two such obviously dynamic men as Isaac and Sam Thomas. Today there are those who maintain that Isaac should not have been considered "chief" because he was neither related to

Tseenetle' or Ket-laata' nor was he from the area. Rather, Sam Thomas should have been chief because he was the nephew of Tseenetle' and really from Mansfield. Other people, however, argue for some kind of connection between Isaac and Tseenetle' which placed him in a position to be chief.

Although couched in historical terms, this dispute concerns competition over prestige and prominence in the village today. On some occasions the village becomes aligned along the descent lines emanating from these old chiefs, now represented by Jack and Elisha. These divisions, not always apparent, are real because they do effect people's actions. Furthermore, this dispute is important in terms of traditional leadership because there is no clear status distinction between the present tradition bearers. Currently Jack and Elisha are both prominent men who represent two distinct leadership patterns.

3. Contemporary Leadership

A man in his sixties, Jack's close cropped hair is shot with gray. He is of middle height, with a stocky build and clean shaven face. He is employed part time by a regional program located in Tok and is married with five children and ten grandchildren. Jack attends church infrequently, is a

regular poker and bingo player and has stopped drinking. He hunts moose during the season, but he does not trap or fish. He is fluent in the Tanacross language and fairly fluent in English.

During the late 1960s and 70s Jack became the "crew boss" for the Tanacross forest fire crew. As such Jack learned some skills as a leader and acquired experience dealing with Whites at various levels, from crew member to fire management personnel. From these experiences Jack has developed a particular rapport with Whites. For example, he often invites White people from Tok to attend village feasts, both in a show of generosity and to maintain friendly contacts with the White community.

Jack has a particular interest in the general development of the village, and on that score he participates in a variety of activities. As an elder he acts as an adviser to the Tanacross village council. He is also instrumental in organizing various village activities such as the annual dog sledge race, the two river-boat races sponsored by the village, and the annual Christmas and Fourth of July parties. According to Jack, these activities are important both for keeping up community spirit and for enhancing the prestige of the village, since people from other villages are invited.

During the summer Jack takes a prominent part in the organization of the annual "survival camp" held for the Tanacross children at the old village of Mansfield.

Jack's involvement in these affairs is based on his personal ability to organize and mobilize a wide network of people including family, relatives, and friends. To organize an event he begins by involving his immediate family, especially his children, then nephews and friends, whom he feels comfortable asking for help. His major support, however, derives from his eldest daughter, a member of the Dikagu sib, who display the organizational abilities of her father. She often assumes the responsibility for organizing community events when no one else will, and she is the only young person who speaks publicly at potlatches and other gatherings. Beyond his children Jack also relies on a wide network of sib relations and maternal relatives from which he derives legitimacy and strength as a tradition bearer.

This network is apparent in Jack's participation in funerals and potlatches. In a funeral and potlatch for his paternal aunt, for instance, Jack, active as the principal organizer, collected donations, purchased food, and organized the construction of the coffin, grave fence, and moose hunt. To facilitate transportation of the food purchased in Tok Jack

borrowed a truck from a local White entrepreneur married to a woman from the village. At the same time he borrowed the truck, Jack enlisted the man's help in cooking breakfasts for the potlatch. For constructing the grave fence Jack enlisted the help of his son in-law, and a local White man who lives in the village and is a skillful carpenter. When organizing the moose hunt Jack first called on his sons and then expanded his request to include distant relatives. Although Jack initiated many of the activities, most people participated through their own volition.

Additionally Jack also saw to numerous details including purchasing shovels and axes used for digging the grave and the paint and nails for constructing the grave fence, coffin and over box. He also represented the village and family in negotiations with the local magistrate over the burial of the body, but he played no public role in the church funeral service. In effect, Jack mobilized every resource and connection he could to make the funeral and subsequent potlatch a success.

In the early stages of preparing the funeral, Jack automatically took the lead by collecting the donations and arranging some of the details. He then began building a consensus around his leadership by visiting the other Al-ce-

den-da headman, Elisha, and discussing with him who should participate and what should be done. During this discussion it was plain that Jack was in charge and that Elisha, after stating his position, would follow his lead. In deciding the time of the funeral, Jack discussed it with various other leading people, including Elisha's wife Lila, who is Jack's sister-in-law and an important Dikagu woman.

Beyond his organization of the funeral Jack was also very much involved in the potlatch. During potlatches, various headmen take different roles depending on their abilities or predilection. Jack's forte is singing, drumming, and dancing, and he often shares the lead, along with Andrew and several other men, in these activities. With other men and women he sits in one corner of the community hall warming his voice and practicing until the whole group bursts forth with song as members of the audience get up to join in. Once out on the floor, Jack's enthusiasm and energy are apparent as he encourages people to dance and sing.

At one potlatch, staged by two widows, who had no one to lead for them, Jack filled the role of dance leader. When the potlatch hostesses and their families came out on the floor to open the dancing, Jack urged them on with his drumming. He then handed the drum to the grandson of one of

the women, encouraging him to lead the dancers. Jack then joined the crowd on the dance floor but continued to urge on everyone by singing. Whenever the singing died away Jack, in a voice heard above everyone else's, started a new song to keep the singing from flagging. If people stopped dancing Jack gently pushed and shoved them, trying to get them moving again. In this way he inspired people to "break out the good time."

Although an accomplished singer and dancer, Jack is apparently not knowledgeable enough to lead in the potlatch song. In Tanacross this is left to two very old men, neither of whom is from the village. Jack and younger leading men and women always accompany these two men and, through their example, learn how to sing the potlatch song.

In addition to singing, Jack often assists the hosts in distributing their gifts by pointing out people who should be acknowledged. At one potlatch, after the more important gifts had been distributed by the hosts, Jack gave away blankets in stacks of five. At another potlatch he helped the hosts draw up a list of recipients, watched them give the major gifts away, and then helped them distribute the rest.

The one thing Jack does not do during a potlatch is speak publicly. This silence is indicative of Jack's current

capacity as a leader. He is confident in his ability to organize behind the scenes and to sing and dance, but he is still lacks the knowledge, and possibly the confidence, required for giving a speech.

Although Jack is very active he is often criticized for trying to act like a leader while at the same time acting irresponsibly, particularly because he plays poker. Playing poker is considered an untrustworthy activity that indicates self-interest rather than an interest in the welfare of the people. Jack has also been accused, privately, of purchasing potlatch guns with poker money. While no one really knows for a fact whether he did this, the rumor is enough to affect his standing. In fact, many people seem to feel that Jack is really interested only in himself and his own family. Nevertheless, Jack does lead because he is energetic and is willing to work at organizing village activities. Jack's practicality, conspicuous energy, and willingness to adapt tradition to the current world is in contrast to Elisha's quieter, spiritually oriented leadership.

At seventy five Elisha is ten or twelve years older than Jack. His hair is just beginning to turn gray, and in the last couple of years he has become more sedentary in his habits and has gained weight. In 1971, when I first arrived in

Tanacross, Elisha was the school custodian, a job he retired from about thirteen or fourteen years ago. During his retirement he has worked at other jobs, including a short stint on the Alaska Pipeline project, but his main occupation, until recently, has been trapping. Only in the last two years has Elisha given up trapping, but he continues to hunt moose during the season.

Elisha has already attained the status of leader and elder through much the same process in which Jack is currently involved. In the past Elisha was very active on the village council. He has also given a number of potlatches for relatives including three of his adult children who died in accidents. Through this turmoil Elisha has forged a leadership which centers less on activity than spiritual guidance. This is not to say that Elisha is not involved in the village or that he is uninterested or unconcerned with the prestige that derives from leadership. Rather, Elisha's involvement in the village is much more low key than Jack's. In essence Elisha attempts to lead by example.

This means that he attends Church regularly as well as a Bible study class conducted in the Tanacross language by a local Wycliff Bible translator. He does not gamble or drink, though he once did both. Elisha attends potlatches where he

dances and sings, but he is never conspicuous in these activities. He does, however, make speeches, which are informed both by his understanding of Christianity and his knowledge of traditional ways. Consequently in a speech he may, depending on whom he is talking to, combine Christian tolerance and expressions of love with very subtle references to his prestige and position as a leader. If, for example, he is talking to non-relatives, as he did at a potlatch in Chistochina, he is very modest because he realizes that it is important to avoid trouble, particularly with non-relatives. But if he speaks to his relations, his sib-mates, as he did one time at funeral for a murdered man, he is very blunt and forceful. As one woman said, Elisha will speak his mind and not be afraid to "just tell you off." This honesty and sensitivity to people and situations gives Elisha enormous prestige and validity as a leader even though he no longer actively leads in village affairs.

Unlike Jack's, Elisha's networks do not extend into the White business community but the White Christian community. Here we can see a basic difference between them. Jack has used his connections outside the village to acquire material support for the village, whether as prizes for a village raffle or a truck for hauling groceries. Elisha, on

the other hand, looks to the White Christian community to provide spiritual answers for some of the current problems facing Native people.

In attempting to understand the present situation of Native people Elisha has developed categories of how to live. Though distinct the Indian Way, the White man way, and the Christian way, are not mutually exclusive.¹⁴ According to Elisha what is good about White people is they take care of themselves. They are concerned with making a good living and being responsible for themselves instead of fighting, drinking, and getting into trouble with the law. The problem is, Whites are too self centered and concerned only with money. Native people, on the other hand, especially the young, do not act responsibly, either towards themselves or others. If a person takes care of himself, makes a good living, behaves and does not go to jail, he "might get back on the Indian way," that is, he might start to straighten himself out. To be an Indian, however, a man must also act responsibly toward his relatives and meet his obligations as a member of the community. If an individual can do this he can then give himself to God and "turn to be a Christian." In essence then,

14 Guedon (1974 : 230) recorded a potlatch speech in which the speaker said there were four ways to go: hell, heaven, Indian and White.

Elisha is saying that Native people should take care of themselves, their relatives, be responsible to the community and believe in God.

The problem as Elisha sees is a lack of belief. People do not believe in anything, neither in being Native, Christian, or for that matter, in being a White man. This skepticism has made him very critical of his own people, and this criticism has earned him reproach in turn. Elisha believes that no Native person really understands the potlatch, nor is anyone really interested in living like "real" Natives. In his view people have trivialized the potlatch to the point that it has no more meaning than a community dinner in Tok. Elisha's perception is different; to him the potlatch is "alive," it is so powerful that it can actually kill someone if he does not pay attention to the supernatural restrictions that accompany the performance of a potlatch. As he puts it:

That's the way the potlatch go, potlatch is awfully great, really important to the Native life. Really be careful for all the young girls got to watch themselves, like young girls have month sick, not supposed to be coming in there, otherwise, if they do, don't watch themselves they going to die quick, some way they going to get into trouble and die. For that part there's lots of njii [meaning the potential for bad luck] in potlatch. Potlatch have more nijj than anything, any kind of njii in the world. They got take care, certain way for long life. If we don't take care right, the people going to die outa that place (interview recorded in Tanacross September, 1988).

What Elisha sees as the absence of belief, either in the taboos of the Indian way or in Christianity, is one reason he thinks Native people are having such a difficult time now. Lack of belief pulls them into alcoholism and other destructive behavior. Despite these strictures on his people Elisha has not withdrawn from participation in the potlatch nor village life. He insists that the potlatch is important, and he often says that he goes to potlatches to learn from the speeches made by men older than he.

4. Perceptions of Modern Leadership

There is no consensus concerning the traditional leadership of the village. Some people say there is no chief, while others say that Elisha is the old chief, and Jack aspires to be chief. Much of this disagreement has historical roots and is also based on the perceptions people have about the kind of men Elisha and Jack are. As one woman put it, Jack is too ambitious, and Elisha was now just getting to the age where he could be chief. The most important attribute for a chief, she thinks, is the ability "to talk well." Elisha would be a good chief because he can speak his mind. Furthermore, she said, you could sense when a person would make a good chief.

The woman's reservations about Jack stem from his overly aggressive involvement in community affairs, some thing a good chief does not do. Despite these misgivings, many people feel that Jack, because of his age and experience and Elisha's health, has to be the next traditional leader. As one woman said, during a potlatch, she was afraid the people would be lost after the old people died, and Jack was the only one who could "hold the people up" or continue with the old ways.

Ideally a leader is supposed to "love" the people, be "friendly," and kindly", be able to settle disputes by talking to people, and "talk well" for the people in general. Leaders should also be competent, know how to take care of themselves and those they lead. One man described the need for a traditional chief this way:

If no chief, we don't get anybody to boss, to teach us. They have to have a good man to watch the children, tell us what to do, tell us how to make party [i.e., potlatch]. He let us know to everybody where to go hunt, when they go hunting; he watches and checks them when they come back... You got to have one chief (Guedon 1974: 145).

For some people neither Jack nor Elisha fills this bill. Once able to control the village, the traditional roles and expertise of the elders and leaders have been eroded by external political and economic forces. The current challenges of economic development, investment and political leadership

on a wider stage are beyond the abilities of the present leadership. They have neither the knowledge nor experience. One young woman told me that today Tanacross needs a strong leader, one who will stand up for the rights of the people. She believed in the past people respected the old chief, but he made no decisions because those were all made by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Now there is no strong leader who can make sound investment decisions concerning the land and money Tanacross has, or who can make decisions for Native rights.

These ambivalent comments on the state of the current leadership reflect the paradox of contemporary Native life. On one hand, people want someone who is aggressive and able to look after their increasingly complex economic interests. On the other hand they also want someone capable of "holding them up," of representing and maintaining tradition. Aggressive, pragmatic behavior is acceptable if it appears not to be entirely motivated by self interest. There is a consensus that economic development is essential and that well organized village activities, including potlatches, bring prestige to the village. Within the ritual context there is also a strong sense that the actions of the elders are necessary in providing a coherent vision of the Athabaskan world and insuring continuity of the group. But the spiritual and

emotional expressions of the potlatch should not be reduced to economics nor exploited in the quest for personal prestige.

Tradition becomes important in this context because it is perceived to be above economic and social competition. Furthermore, tradition serves to maintain a coherent backdrop upon which people can gauge their own and other people's behavior. But while tradition serves as an objective for ideal behavior, it is felt to be too confining. For example, the restrictions on young women participating in the potlatch are no longer acceptable to many of the young women influenced by feminism. Additionally, these restrictions are not now practical since young people are actively encouraged to participate in the potlatch and it is the young women who are taking increasing responsibility in village activities and the potlatch. Finally, tradition is thought not to be concerned enough with the practical aspects of modern life.

5. Summary

Traditional leadership continues to be a vital aspect of contemporary village life. How this leadership leads, that is, what cultural message it creates and communicates is open to continual negotiation. We have seen how two leaders, using tradition and individual experience in the non-Native world,

have developed personal syntheses of the "Indian way." In their respective practice each has indicated what they feel to be the road of the future for the Tanacross people. In the next chapter we see what constitutes the "Indian way."

Chapter Five

Images of Native and White

1. Introduction

This chapter concerns the images Tanacross people have of themselves and of Whites. Derived from the major conceptual opposition of Indian versus White, these images are further categorized into the oppositions of "real" versus "modern Native" and "old Whites" versus "new Whites" or in broader terms, 'us' versus 'our' past. It is in these broad terms, Indian and White and present versus past, that the potlatch becomes important as a point of mediation. The potlatch represents the past and defines "real" Native life which is non-White. By participating in the potlatch Native people try to maintain and reproduce what they consider to be some of the "real" aspects of their culture: kinship, reciprocity, generosity, "love and respect," and

competence.¹ In these themes, which embody the "Indian Way," people not only maintain the image of their Indianness but their distinctiveness from Whites. But this simple explanation belies the ambiguous and contradictory nature of the situation.

Although "new" or contemporary Native people practice the potlatch, they consider themselves less as "real" Natives and more like Whites. This paradox was graphically described to me two days after I arrived in Tanacross to do field work. Jack, an older leader active in the potlatch, held up his hands about two feet apart. One hand stood for the old way of life while the other was the White man's way. "His people," he said, "were situated somewhere in between: though he is closer to the Indian way his children are closer to the White man's way. Natives are 'lost' because they do not live like 'real' Indians, and they are not 'strong enough' or 'know how' to lead that kind of life again. Still they can never be White people."

"Instead of living in tents like 'real' Indians" Jack said, "we live in houses; instead of moving from place

¹ Savishinsky (1970) has isolated similar values for the Hare. He writes that they place strong emphasis on kinship ties, generosity and emotional restraint. Similar conceptions of "Indianness" have been reported by Lithman (1984: 167) who has formalized them into an "opposition ideology."

to place, we live in one place and have summer cabins; instead of a 'few groceries' we have plenty of store food; and instead of 'walking 50 miles a day on snowshoes' we sit at home." Furthermore, "people have social security benefits and retirement plans." Paradoxically, Jack maintains that "an Indian could never be White, nor a White, Indian."

Though modern Indians are not "real," there are aspects of "real" Native culture which Jack believes must be continued. The "tribes" or sibs are important because people have to know whom to marry. The potlatch is important as well, though Jack did not say why. Kin ties are important, and he emphasizes this by telling me that he is related to almost all of the people in Tanacross as well as people from the neighboring villages of Tetlin and the Copper River. ²

Jack's view, I think, reflects the general perception of most Tanacross people. Another man, for instance, told me that today there are no "genuine" Indians. Instead people are 1/2 or 3/4 Native depending, not on blood, but on how far away they are from the "old time." In the future he thought Native life would become progressively more White and that all the information stored in libraries

² Finally, when the interview was over and I began to write a few notes he exclaimed, "now I was going to make some money off of him!" (Paraphrased from an interview recorded at Tanacross December, 1986).

would not help the people live the Indian life. This pessimism reflects not just an apparent loss of culture or exploitation by Whites, but an acute sense that people have lost control of their own lives. By viewing their "traditional" or "real" culture as timeless, bounded by specific material conditions and unvarying values, Native people are attempting to maintain some coherence in the face of the ambiguities and contradictions that beset their present lives. The past, embodied in the "Indian Way," acts as an anchor which, even if people feel they themselves changing, is a point from which to gauge that change and a way of life to emulate and maintain.

Maintaining the ideals of the "Indian way" is a response to the feeling of being lost; it is based on a specific model of social relations emphasizing kinship, reciprocity, generosity, love and respect. By asserting the importance of these aspects of Native life, Jack, and many others, maintain a notion of society in which the individual person takes on meaning only in the context of a web of relationships. In a recent article on Yupik Eskimo personhood, which I find applicable to notions of Athabaskan personhood, as I understand them, Ann Fienup-Riordan (1986) writes that all social relations are based on a definite

hierarchy according to degree of relation and age. Maturity comes with increasing awareness of natural and supernatural relationships and the prescriptions and proscriptions for proper behavior. A person in pursuit of his own individual gratification, without regard for others, loses sight of his/her role and as a result, loses, either figuratively or literally, his humanity.

Both as "tradition" and a model for action, the "Indian way" constitutes a positive image. But it is also a reminder of how people really are; though Natives see themselves as striving to maintain the Indian way, they believe they are becoming more like Whites. This irony is enhanced by the internal contradictions within Native society produced by economic competition and a constant reinterpretation of traditional values. Although there may be a consensus on certain aspects of Native identity, it is constantly being reinterpreted as individuals relate to and interact with the broader economic political and cultural changes occurring in North American culture.³ Consequently the Indian way not only reflects resistance to White culture but creates contradictions within the Native community.

³ These broader changes include such diverse elements as the feminist movement, drugs, the American Indian Movement (AIM), the dominance of political conservatism, and Christian fundamentalism.

According to some villagers, these contradictions have several sources. One is "jealousy" over economic success. "Jealousy" over money causes people to become stingy and uncaring, i.e. like Whites. People become envious over someone else's ability to purchase a new car. Another source of contradictions is differences in experience and age. Old people are usually conservative and advocate being competent first in the Indian way and then in the White man's world. For them, all aspects of the Indian way are relevant. Most middle-aged people tend to be less rigid about the Indian way. For them, competence in the White world takes precedence because it is the world they work in. Though not completely irrelevant, the Indian way does not hold their full attention. It is, in many respects, an ideal to be respected rather than a way of life. At the extreme end of the spectrum are those who see the Indian way as completely irrelevant. These are principally young people whose major concern is to get out of the village, which some compare to a corral. One man went so far as to declare that soon there will be no Indians because Native culture is only concerned with the past, and all of the young people are

going to run away.⁴

Young people are leaving, and they have one major destination: the world of the White man.⁵ However, the relationship between Natives and Whites is fraught with misunderstandings and contradictions. As one woman said, Whites demand that we live like them but when we try, they give us a hard time. Furthermore, Natives know they have been and continue to be subjugated by Whites even though the ideology of the United States insists that everyone is equal. Though people, mostly the young, move away from the village, they retain a profound and ineradicable attachment to it. Very few Native people move away from the village for

4 It is difficult to generalize about these divisions in terms of the age of any one individual. The man who felt Indian culture was only concerned about the past and compared the village to a corral is in his mid-fifties. Although he has lived in Fairbanks for over 20 years, he frequently returns to the village and is considered to be extremely competent in the woods. On the other hand, one of my most knowledgeable associates, who taught me much about the potlatch, is a man in his 30's who never hunts or traps. There are also a number of old people who do not participate in anything "traditional." Likewise, most teenage boys do not participate in "traditional" activities such as the potlatch, but several do hunt and trap and have varying degrees of bush knowledge.

5 People leave the village for various reasons: military service, to attend high school at the Bureau of Indian Affairs school in Chemawa, Oregon, vocational training or university. Three young people, who are now in school, said they will join the military after school so they can get out of the village. The young lady said she wanted to join the Air Force to get away from the village. She would like to come home on the weekends but not live there.

long periods of time and even fewer cut off their relationships completely.

2. "Old White" and "New White": Changing relations

Native people have drawn, from their historical experience, two contrasting images of White people, characterized as "old Whites" and "new Whites." Old Whites are those who lived in the upper Tanana region prior to World War II while new Whites are more recent arrivals. Relations with old Whites were based on a sense of equality and reciprocal obligation which Natives feel is lacking in their relationship with new Whites. Native perceptions of these old relations is illustrated in a story about the trader John Hajdukovich, who once extended considerable credit to Chief John for the purchase of potlatch goods. All winter, according to the story, Hajdukovich worried about how the Chief was going to pay what he owed, how he was going to catch enough fur. When summer came and Hajdukovich came around he was greeted by Chief John who told him to come to his cache. There he pulled out sacks of fur, so many that Hajdukovich owed the Chief money. ⁶

This story illustrates a number of themes in historic Indian-White relations. The relationship between

⁶ Paraphrased from field notes.

Chief John and Hajdukovich is viewed in terms of generalized reciprocity in which the equality of each participant is acknowledged (On generalized reciprocity see Sahlins 1972; cf. Bently 1987: 42). Chief John not only repays Hajdukovich, he actually gives more than he owes, so, in Native parlance, he "beats" the trader who becomes indebted. But Whites are also seen as greedy. Hajdukovich "worries" about his money, a typical attribute of Whites, while Natives are viewed as competent and moral; they always fulfill their obligations by repaying their debts. Additionally, the relationship is based on a face to face interaction; these men knew each other. It is this intimacy, which also involves a respect and equality, that many Native people feel is lacking in contemporary Indian-White relations.⁷

Reciprocal relations between old Whites and Natives extended to other spheres as well. Missionaries, miners and

⁷ This contemporary Native image of equality is in stark contrast to the image missionaries presented at the time. In November of 1931 the missionary E.A. McIntosh wrote that the traders combined "and are going to squeeze the people proper this winter. One of them is U.S. Commissioner [Hajdukovich] and he says he is going to levy on everything they have for their debts. He says some of them owe as much as \$800.00 and he is going to collect" (McIntosh correspondence Ep. Church Archives RG 62-42 Folder 7 1930-39). Here the Indians are portrayed not as equals but as debtors or victims, about to be squeezed by the evil trader.

traders, for instance, are remembered for helping Natives to learn English and about the outside world. They also gave Natives "groceries" when they were hard up and pieces of dried meat which Whites did not want.⁸ In return Natives gave Whites moccasins and mittens and taught them how to get along during the winter. But the most important attribute of "old time Whites" was their apparent respect for Native people. This respect was evident, at least in Native eyes, because old time Whites lived like Indians, ate Indian food, spent time with Natives, and lived off the land like "real" Indians. Because old Whites lived like Natives, they "knew how hard life was for Natives and so they respected Native people and felt kindly toward them." ⁹

Native perceptions of Whites changed after the end of World War II. According to Elisha "White people changed [and] they were not as kind as old Whites, not as friendly [or] cared for Native people." Elisha qualified this statement when he said that "new Whites" are good to Natives "[p]robably a lot more good to Native, [but] it doesn't show because Whites don't stay around."¹⁰ Elisha acknowledges

⁸ Miners used to hang their meat and it sometimes dried out and acquired a particular taste which the miners did not like but the Native people did.

⁹ From tape recorded interview at Tanacross, 10-88.

¹⁰ From tape recorded interview at Tanacross, 10-88.

that new Whites assist Natives in many ways. What has changed, in his view, is the social distance between them. Before the war Natives and Whites inhabited an overlapping universe of shared experiences based on life close to the land and characterized by face to face interactions. After the war this universe was fragmented and Native people became socially, economically, and politically marginalized.

Whites who moved into the area took military and civilian jobs in the new town of Tok Junction. Face to face relationships became limited to a particularly narrow social sphere which Whites dominated, such as bars and stores. Only the missionaries¹¹ and a few White social workers continued to meet Native people in the village. Consequently, the social distance between Natives and "new" Whites increased to the extent that they no longer know each other, and as a result, both Natives and Whites have constructed largely negative images of one another (cf. Braroe 1975).

¹¹ The Episcopal Church continued to provide a priest at Tanacross until the 1960s. During the 1950s the Rev. Bob Green served at Tanacross. Because Green was able to help the village through the postwar transition he had a profound impact and today he is remembered in almost mythical terms. His most important contribution, I think, was his attempt to bridge the widening gap between the Native and White community. But he also fostered, either consciously or unconsciously, the traditional paternalistic attitudes of the Church.

Whether or not older Native people agree with Elisha's perceptions, and I think most would, today most Natives characterize contemporary Whites as individualistic and selfish. In Native terms Whites are said to be "jealous," worried only about money and "jealous" of one another's success, something village people also accuse each other of. Whites are also thought to be "jealous" of Natives for getting land and money and receiving social benefits from the federal government.

Whites are also viewed as being concerned with "making a good living" and of taking "care of [their] money" and getting "into business and get rich." Whites are interested primarily in taking "care of [themselves]" meaning as individuals and not as members of a circle of consanguinal, affinal and sib relationships.¹² This apparent selfishness is directly related to the potlatch which is an expression of these relationships. White men, according to Elisha, "don't handle potlatch" meaning that Whites, when they make money, do not use it to maintain reciprocal obligations or to honor their relatives. Elisha observed

¹² Niels Braroe in his book Indian and White (1975: 151) writes that Plains Cree criticize all Whites for being miserly and unwilling to extend help. Whites "don't take care of anybody, just take care of themselves. Indians different. We care for each other, share what we got."

that if an "Indian made a lot of money and didn't use it for potlatch then some Indians might make fun of him."

This negative image of the White man contrasts with the attitude Native people have toward the former's general economic success which they attribute to an apparently natural business ability and a competitive, ambitious nature. These characteristics are both admired and criticized. On a broad level where, for instance, Native regional and village corporations created by the Alaska Native Claims Act have to compete to stay solvent, competitiveness and business acumen is admired and in fact demanded. On the village level, however, these same characteristics are condemned, and in regard to the potlatch particularly, competition is considered an anathema because the potlatch is about "love" rather than "jealousy" or competition.

Finally, Native people believe new Whites have no respect for them. This disrespect, evident in racist lore, of which Native people are well aware, portrays them as generally dirty, drunk, and having an inferior culture. In response Native people have attempted to maintain a positive image by publicly reproducing the "real" Indian values of kinship, generosity, and reciprocity, love, respect, and

competence which are the Indian Way. Within this framework the Indian Way becomes both a bridge between the past and present and an ideology stressing the superiority of Native life, the old over the young, and experience in the Indian way over the education of the White man.

3. The Indian Way

a. Kinship:¹³ A major theme in Native 'discourse' on the Indian Way, kinship is integral to placing people within a hierarchical structure based on age and degree of relatedness. In contrast to Whites, Native people think of themselves as relying on their relatives for assistance rather than on only themselves and on "money." Kinship, then, is a key symbol in the image of "real" Indian culture and community.

Knowing and maintaining the intricate genealogical ties which unite village and region are important because people have to know whom to marry and to whom potlatch gifts are to be distributed. In Tanacross the ideal and most politically advantageous marriages are considered, by the elders, to be between cross cousins of the Dikagu and Al-

¹³ The literature on Upper Tanana kinship consists of McKennan's discussion (1959), an article by Albert Heinrich (1957), and Marie-Francoise Guedon's published dissertation (1974).

ce-den-da/Naltcine sibs. Explaining the marriage system, Elisha said that by raising his wife's children, who are Dikagu as she is, "he worked for nothing" because when the children grew up they would "go back to their head people." Elisha's work would come back" through his son's children, who "are worth more" to him because they would belong to his sib.

By maintaining the exclusive marriages between Alce-den-da and Dikagu, each sib reproduces and reinforces the other by creating two powerful localized lineages allied by many marriages (Heinrich 1957; Guedon 1974: 86).¹⁴ In this configuration both parental links become significant, and the most prominent people in Native society are those who can boast of being the product of a long line of correct marriages. Furthermore, a superior lineage gives prominence even to the poorest of people. One man points out:

[B]ecause I come from those people, because I come from those people like Sam Thomas [a Dikagu headman] and his daddy and all those people at Mansfield, because they are my grandfather, if today Indian feel like those days, even if I am poor, they know I am poor man, people will respect me, just on account of those people before me. That's the Indian feeling of those people, even if I got nothing... I still come from those people and people just respect me for that (interview recorded November, 1987, emphasis added).

¹⁴ Guedon (1974: 87) reports a similar situation has occurred in Tetlin where the Dikagu and Naltsine have intermarried for several generations.

As the narrator says, however, people do not "feel like those days," i.e. as they did in the past. For many people, especially the young, the intricacies of correct behavior dictated by the kinship system seem increasingly irrelevant. Although many people may believe that knowing and maintaining the "old ways" is irrelevant on one level, on another level the kinship system is a very significant symbol of community. Community based on kinship derives, in part, from people's image of the past. In the following quotation a senior woman from Dot Lake, Alaska, explains the importance of relatives and how people helped each other when she was young:

People visit from place to place telling each other of news about what is happening in their area. No man miss [a visit of] his own relative, they go to let them know what problems they have and they can send runners to tell others what is going on. People know everything, so when people got trouble they let everyone know and they all help each other. People help each other if they get hard up for food. Relatives help each other, all people, hand to hands one another. No person push, no person against (interview recorded February, 1988).

This recollection of relatives helping each other, widely shared among members of the Native community, is bolstered by the close family connections of the village. In Tanacross, for example, there are twelve families tied together by blood, marriage, and sib affiliation. Of these,

five families predominate, creating the core of the village structure which is descended from one group of siblings and their affines¹⁵ and representing three exogamous matrilineal sibs. Of these the Dikagu and Chaz are said to be "related," meaning they are in the same moiety, while the Al-ce-den-da/Naltcine are in the opposite moiety.¹⁶ Because of these close relationships the village is viewed as a "big family" (Guedon 1974: 129) providing a network of consanguinial and affinal ties in which everyone has a place or niche insuring both emotional and material support. (see figure 5.1).

¹⁵ Out of a population of approximately 107 people I am certain of the sib affiliation of 80 people. There are 32 Al-ce-den-da/Naltcine, 32 Dikagu, and approximately 16 Chaz.

¹⁶ It should be noted that some people separate the Al-ce-den-da/Naltcine sibs while others say they are practically one and the same. Elisha, for instance, says he has the right to call himself either, while his paternal first cousin, William, calls himself Naltcine only. I suggest that Naltcine is the moiety name and potlatch name (cf. Guedon 1974: 67). The situation is further confused because Guedon places the Dikagu, Al-ce-den-da, and Naltcin in the same "Naltinsa" moiety while the Chaz or "Tc'iaaz" are placed in the opposite moiety. Also note that the Al-ce-den-da are considered unique because they allow intramoiety marriage (Kari 1986: 47). Although each of these sibs are found throughout most of interior Alaska in Tanacross the Chaz are said to have come from down the Tanana River and there is a large hill called Chiin Chattle which stands for a Chaz headman. The Naltcin and Al-ce-den-da sibs are also considered to have come from other places such as the village of Ketchumstuk and down the Tanana River. Only the Dikagu and possibly the T'che'lu sibs are considered indigenous.

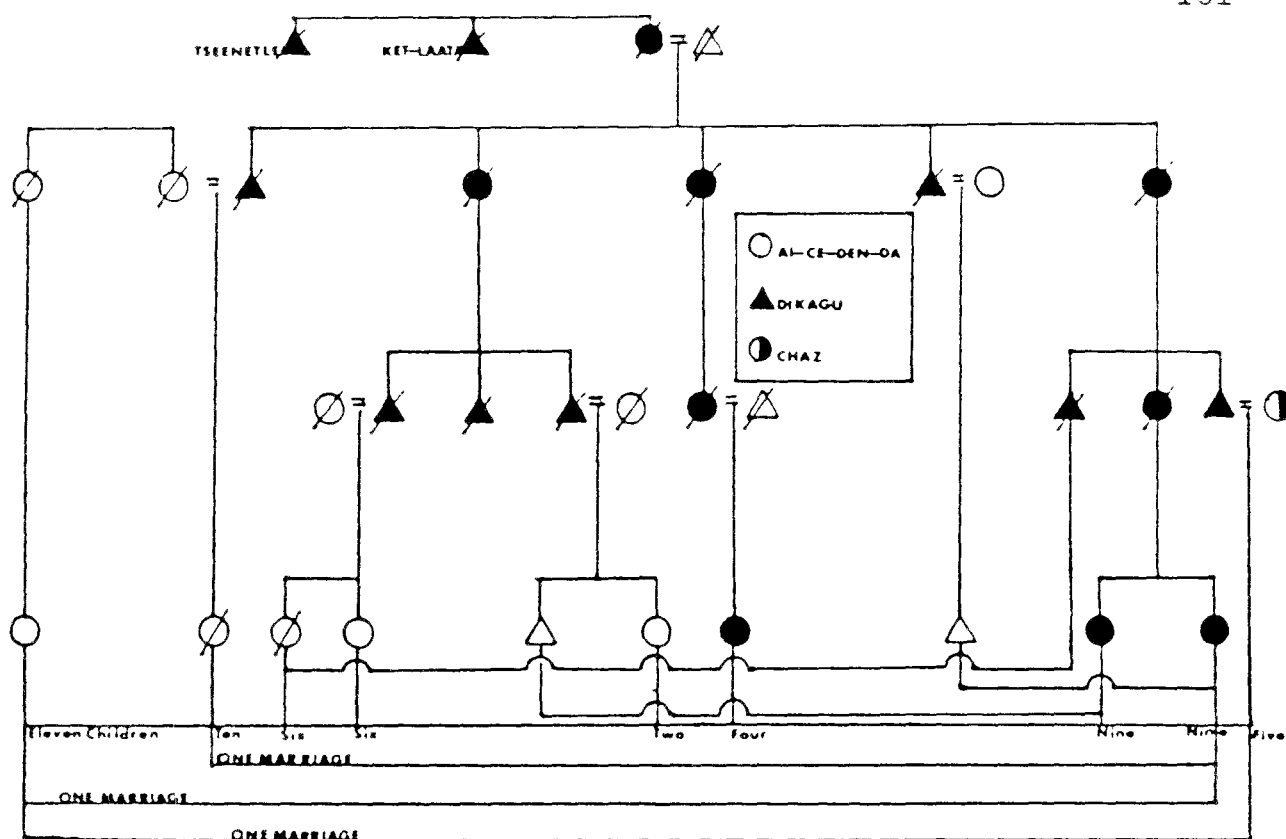


Figure 5.1 Relationships between nine of the twelve families in Tanacross.

By contrast, individuals in White society are believed to be isolated rather than part of a network of relationships. White people obviously have relatives; people in the village always ask me about my mine. But the Native perception is that Whites are less dependent upon them. Thus Native people see Whites as cut off from their relatives, and dependent upon strangers whom they have to pay for any assistance. They view themselves as part of a network which is reciprocal and unstintingly generous.

b. Reciprocity and Generosity: Elaborated and formalized in a variety of ceremonies, ranging from communal meals to the potlatch,¹⁷ reciprocity and generosity are fundamental principles of the Indian way. This perception was articulated by a woman who told me that to share "even down to the last piece of bread because you will get it back" was the Indian way. Reciprocity unites Native people within the same moral universe (cf. Bently 1987: 42). Yet this unity is fissured by competition over economic resources and the difficulties in making a living on the margins of capitalism. People continue to share, but because of outside constraints and individual self interest they share less.

In Native culture the most important reciprocal relationships are between members of opposite moieties. When an individual dies, his\her paternal relatives (members of the opposite moiety) build the funeral structures, act as pall-bearers, and finally bury the body. At the subsequent potlatch these people continue to fulfill their obligations by sharing the grief of the mourners (potlatch hosts),

¹⁷ Historically, a number of ceremonies were held which involved the reciprocal exchange of gifts, like the winter ceremony (cf. McKennan 1959; Guedon 1974) which has been replaced by a Christmas festival which includes an exchange of gifts. Like the winter ceremony this exchange is not based on moiety or sib affiliation but on village membership, and the names or gift recipients are pulled out of a hat.

lifting their spirits through dance, song, and oratory and acknowledging the status of the mourners by accepting their gifts. In return, the mourners are obligated to compensate those who performed the funerary services and to acknowledge their status with a formal distribution of gifts. In effect, this balanced reciprocity creates an image of equality as each side becomes indebted to the other.

In stark contrast is the Native view of Whites as having no obligation to anyone, let alone Native people. Even more vivid is their perception of a powerful and intrusive government. One of the most telling examples of this notion derives from people's view of their current relationship with the U.S. and Alaska State governments. People feel that in exchange for giving up much of their land and old way of life the government has an obligation, not only to help, but to treat Native people as equal and patriotic citizens.¹⁸ One older woman expressed this opinion when we discussed land negotiations in which the village was involved:

Today, for ever, years ago I sign for citizen. Skip, that

¹⁸ Indian people's patriotism is reflected in their veneration for the American flag and the colors red white and blue. The flag, for example, was used as a sign of leadership and strength by the Mansfield people. Today a man who makes dance sticks often uses red, white and blue because he wants to identify with something strong, i.e. America.

old man who came out from states, tell us good for us to sign for citizen and we did it because he was a friendly, kindly man and he tell us that the state will bring his big store and we will never be hard up. You going to have a better time.

Now we have bad problem because someone boss for us and tell us what to do. If he don't bother us, don't matter where we want to hunt, pick berries, not fair to push one another. So today we belong to state, government feed us the greatest help we get from government because we lose our relative, no father, no mother, no aunt, nobody alive with us, just a few people, not much people. So why now the people have to share with us, not push us, treat us right, share with us, not against us. We not against nobody (interview recorded February, 1988).

As the woman says, people feel they are part of the state, but this relationship, fraught with conflict, produces contradictory feelings in many Native people. Most people in the village, believing that patriotism is "a good thing," express gratitude for what the American government has done in providing social services and protecting Alaska against communist aggression. This attitude is tempered by the realization that Native people are discriminated against and that they have been generally ill treated. People see a contradiction between their feelings about America as their country and what has happened to them. The contradiction especially nags young people who have had some university training.

One young woman in her 30s explained, "patriotism is the right thing, a good thing and the people are grateful

for the government protecting them against communism." But "there is no justice," she said, "no democracy, people are stripped of everything, their culture, their old way of life, their beliefs." She "felt cheated by the American government and that her people were being pushed toward extinction." Much of the frustration Native people feel with Whites is caused by their refusal to fulfill their moral obligations to treat Native people as equal. Native people point out that they not only fulfill their obligations as citizens but are themselves much more generous than Whites.

Native people, however, also think they were more generous in the past than they are now. This is the sentiment expressed by a man in his early 60s in an anecdote about the generosity of the hunters in times of need:

It's when I was a boy people kind of look after each other, if you got nothing to eat somebody will help you, I remember them always do that. If you run out of food somebody will always see that you're not starving.

One time, around 1938, Titus Isaac family move up to Long Cabin...and we kill caribou whole day, lots of 'em around. But first thing old man thought about is people at Tanacross. He said we left down there, there is no fresh meat around, who had better run down there with a load, he told us."

[W]e came into my daddy's house [in Tanacross] with fresh meat, sure enough they need it...[i]t's all dumped in pan, in wash pan, all dump in that and clean table cloth laid out and it cut in pieces. This family to that family. After we went [walked] thirty-five miles to get that to them it's all

given away except one dog pack they kept for themselves. That's how much people think about each other. I think they really think about each other. Way up there [in the bush] that old man he remember that really good fresh meat is really needed (interview recorded November, 1986).

Generosity, especially toward the elderly and unfortunate, was a virtue parents wanted to instill in the young. An old woman relates how her

mother told me don't pass poor one, don't follow that strong people, happiness people, you mistake. You see poor one, don't go by, you stop, give a little hand, give water, or something to eat then you be O.K. My mother hands go to all poor one, kid's mother die, kid's father die my mother always help them, fix their moccasin, clothe them, all that stuff momma did it. So she taught me real like that, I cannot get away, I cannot leave it, I gotta do what momma told me (interview recorded February, 1987).

As the woman says, she was told not to follow the "strong people, happiness people" i.e. people who disregard others but to stop for the poor and unfortunate; otherwise, she would make a "mistake," meaning she could lose her good fortune. Luck rests in helping other people, who, if she ignores them, may cause her good luck to vanish by thinking about her in a malevolent way.

An obvious inference from both of these accounts is that the past was much more golden than the present, and this point of view is not mere sentiment. As a Tanacross man points out, if sharing is not as easy as it once was:

People still do that right now [share], but they use to do it a lot [more]. [Now] If you got moose today that's yours...when you get moose now if you give it away you just can't get another one, you know [because of the Fish and Game] (interview recorded November, 1986).

However much generosity has declined, it remains a practical and symbolic expression of traditional value within and between villages. Today, in the village, birthdays, and holidays such as Christmas, New Years, Easter, and the 4th of July, are occasions for individuals or the village as a whole to put on feasts. These festivals reinforce Native people's favorable image of themselves, and that image is enhanced when people go out of their way to help indigent White people whom they meet either along the highway or in the town of Tok. In these instances sharing becomes a symbol of superiority, in that Native people show Whites they are capable of great generosity, even to strangers.¹⁹

Although generosity, sharing and kinship patterns are strong images of "real" Native life, they are considered by some people to be communistic, a label which makes many Native people, who are very patriotic, feel uncomfortable. The president of the village council said he didn't know how

¹⁹ I am aware of several instances when young White hitchhikers were brought into the village, given a meal, clothes and some money.

he could be anti-communist and still support some of the communal activities of the village government. He cited the example of the village laundromat owned and operated by the village council. If the village were truly capitalist, he said, it should be run by a private operator. As if to illustrate the failure of public ownership he pointed out the facility is out of money and in disrepair.²⁰

c. Love and Respect: The dual themes of "love and respect" continually appear in Native discussions about social relationships. Although "love and respect" are often used interchangeably, each word signifies related but still different ideals. Love is sentimental, an affection, a fondness based on personal and kinship ties. Love is also an ideal of brotherly or paternal love. It may be expressed in words or a gesture. For example, if parents greatly love a child they sew dentalium shells on the child's clothes or give him a necklace of shells. One young man explained that when he received a beaded sash for a Christmas present he was "bound by love" to those who had given it to him. Wearing such a sash at a potlatch is also symbolic of love and respect for one's ancestors and is considered diichaagh

²⁰ Paraphrased from field notes recorded in Tanacross.

or "something really great." One Tanacross man compared it to wearing a poppy or flag pin on veterans day. The words "love and respect" are also used to describe the symbolic significance of potlatch gifts. Blankets, for example, are said to be used to wrap the guest in "love." As I was told several times 'the potlatch about "love;" "love" of the person for whom the potlatch is given and "love" for the guests. One young man went so far as to disavow any similarities between the upper Tanana potlatch and northwest coast potlatches of which he had read. He said 'there was no competition, no ostentatious give aways as in the northwest coast potlatches. Instead the upper Tanana potlatch was about love and respect.²¹

Respect denotes esteem and regard for a wide range of entities, from other human beings to supernatural forces. Respect is trusting an individual to be responsible, not only to him or her self, but to all other human beings and animals (cf. Ridington 1988: 107). An example of respect for others is the help Native people offered Whites during the Gold Rush. In 1899, a horde of gold seekers went through Tanacross territory on its way to Dawson. Native people

²¹ Paraphrased from field notes recorded in Tanacross, 1987.

helped many prospectors, feeding them, and showing them how to prepare and cook the carcasses of moose or caribou.

"Love and respect" can be understood as oppositions to competition and "jealousy" but they also serve as an "ideology" used to cloak competition. Sergei Kan, in discussing the 19th Century Tlingit potlatch, has suggested that while "love and respect" are "basic cultural values" expressing the proper relations between moieties and the living and the dead (1986: 197), these same values serve as a rhetorical device masking competition over power and prestige (1986: 201). By couching competition in these terms, the Tlingit are able to avoid open confrontation and argument (1986: 203). Like the Tlingit, the Tanacross concept of "love and respect" expresses an ideal relationship which does not fully reflect reality. But the rhetoric is a means of mediating or avoiding conflict.²²

While competition is denied in the potlatch it does occur. Historically, it was enacted through potlatch

²² Competition is now really between Natives and Whites. Although competition continues to be an aspect of the potlatch, as we shall see in later chapters, the major competition is now over land and resources and pits Indian against White. The Indian Way becomes one weapon in this competition and is thus a particular type of "Native" tool (Ridington (1978: 2) states that the Prophet Dance of the Beaver is a particular Indian way of dealing with adaptive change brought about by contact). Also note that this competition can be construed as "symbolic competition" as described by Schwimmer (1972).

oratory, public challenges, and the number of gifts distributed. In the modern potlatch much of the overt rivalry is absent. Nevertheless, there is an underlying tension based on individual, family, village, and sib rivalry over power and prestige. To validate this prestige and gain renown, individuals and groups attempt to manipulate the potlatch to their advantage. Hosts, for instance, try to stage large and elaborate ceremonies while guests, if they feel they have been slighted, can cause trouble by denigrating the hosts' efforts. Disagreements can also arise over such matters as etiquette (as we shall see later) or a burial. At one funeral, for example, a conflict arose over where to bury the deceased. One group wanted the body buried in one place, because the deceased was originally from its area, while others thought he should be buried in his residential village.

d. **Competence and incompetence:** Native people regard themselves as both competent and incompetent. Competence is an integration of responsibility, knowledge and action (cf. R. Preston 1975: 274-275 and S. Preston 1982: 23)²³ aimed at taking care of oneself and those dependent on you. Feelings

²³ Preston has developed this idea using data gathered from the Cree.

of competence survive in people's periodic forays into the bush to hunt, trap, and fish. It is fostered by the village "4H" or "survival camp" held each summer in the old village of Mansfield where the children are taught traditional forms of competence in fishing, hunting, and preparing game.

Feelings of competence also come alive when the community prepares for a potlatch, but it survives in its most vibrant form in the elders' stories about the time they were young. The following story, which Elisha tells, is both a nostalgic recollection of past competence and an instructive tale for the present generation:

One time J., Elisha and G.H. were out hunting around Mt. Fairplay and the little Dennison River. They spotted a moose which J. shot, crippling it. The moose headed straight for the timber and they had to track it. All day they chased the moose, which eluded them by continually moving away even as the hunters closed in. Because the going was so rough the men had to walk on overflow glaciers, so all day they ran after the moose dragging their snowshoes behind them.²⁴

By ten o'clock that night they hadn't found the moose so they discontinued the hunt and walked over the hill to the Little Dennison where they were camped. But there was no glacier to walk on so the walking was very hard, the snow being almost waist high. By eleven o'clock J. said he was tired so they stopped to make tea, the first tea of the day. That restored them somewhat and they returned to their camp

²⁴ "Overflow glaciers" occur when the stream freezes and water flows over the top of the ice and over the banks of the stream. Apparently the hunters sank into the deep snow, even with their snowshoes on, and they could move faster on the ice. They could not use snowshoes on overflow ice; the ice would break the snowshoe frames.

but they had no ax. Elisha walked around and found a particular type of stump which was very hard and could be used to break fire wood.

G.H. said that he had some caribou stomach left and they could cook that. This was the whole stomach lining, so they filled it with water and suspended it over the fire. The lining acted as a container which would not burn as long as it was filled with water. Elisha said that soup cooked this way was "strong" like whiskey and made them feel like they had not even walked at all. Along with the soup they ate a piece of the stomach. In the old time people sometime carried a piece of the stomach, because, as J. said it was good medicine, like a restorative.

The next day J. went out and encountered the moose which had walked into a pack of wolves who had trapped it by forming a circle around the moose. This occurred on a lake where the wolves had been "camped" a long time. J. said that it looked as though the wolves had killed three moose by simply waiting for a moose, killing it and living or "camping" around the kill.

When J. came upon this scene initially all he saw was the moose lying on the ice. He gathered up a bunch of willows using them as a blind to stalk the moose. As the moose became aware of J.'s movement it got up and immediately the wolves got up, one after the other. Suddenly J. realized what was going on. He shot at the wolves, shooting first at the one which was sitting almost nose to nose with the moose, but missed. At that point the wolves started to run towards J. who fired again killing one of the wolves. They turned and ran up into the timber on the small hills surrounding the lake. By howling and barking the wolves realized that one of their mates was missing and a big black wolf stood on top of the hill howling. J. raised his rifle and shot him in the chest.

Elisha got back to camp about 8 o'clock that night and J. was not there. He made something to eat, made his bed and prepared to sleep. At this point G.H. asked Elisha if he was going to wait for J.? Elisha said no, J. would not be back until the morning and he was alright anyway, why should he wait up for J.. Sometime during the night J. came back to camp and Elisha awoke to a conversation between J. and G.H. J. had brought home a piece of meat which they ate.

That was the end of the story. Elisha finished by saying that A.D., F.P., and E.O., all of whom are men in their fifties, were raised on the "hard life", out of doors. Elisha's two middle sons were born near the end of that life; people were still going out but not that much. But after his eldest daughter was born (she is about 42) that life was just about over (from fieldnotes recorded in Tanacross).

Though the story is nostalgic, it is not sentimental. It was a "hard life," as the story teller said, and one that not many Tanacross people would like to relive.²⁵ Nevertheless, in that life people knew exactly what they could and could not do. They knew what consequences their actions might have and they took responsibility for themselves, as well as others. The sense of competence this story illustrates is a legacy which equips the people, to some extent, at least, to cope with the present and perhaps the future.

²⁵ Tanacross people say they cannot go back to the old life. This does not mean, however, that they do not like to be out in the bush hunting or that they do not like wild food. As I pointed out earlier they have made an effort to maintain the old village of Mansfield as a refuge or retreat from the White dominated world. Like many other groups of Native people Tanacross people feel the bush can "heal" people. Some villagers, for example, talk about sending drinking people up to Mansfield to dry out.

The story also presents an image of competence no one can dispute, providing a sustained link to the past. Yet, this image is frequently overshadowed by the wide spread perception, among both Natives and Whites, that Native people are incompetent. This is implicit in the belief that Native people are not "strong enough" and do not know how to live their old hunting life again. It is also implied in the belief that there are no more "genuine" Natives. People condemn themselves as incompetent for not being able to maintain the old ways, but they also condemn themselves for not being able to succeed on the White man's economic terms. Some hold the pessimistic view that Native people are incapable of ever being successful and will eventually lose both the land and money gained through the Alaska Native Land Claims. One person explained he was "not proud of Natives; they haven't gotten anywhere in the 16 years since the land claims. If Whites had been in the same situation, they would have gotten somewhere."

4. Conclusion

In asserting the ideal values of the Indian way, Native people are attempting to maintain a text on what decent and seemly social relations should be. The ideal

emphasizes the virtues of love and respect, generosity, reciprocity and competence to mobilize ideas into action for the common good. These are values which link the present with the past and serve as a model for the future. They serve to maintain the distinction between Native and Whites based on a opposition between the Indian way and the White way. As ideals they also throw into stark contrast the contradictions that beset the reality of contemporary Native life. It is within this context that the potlatch becomes important as a point of mediation. As a representation of the ideal, or traditional Native life, participation in the potlatch is a way to maintain and reproduce what are considered to be some of the "real" aspects of Tanacross culture.

Chapter Six

THE UPPER TANANA RIVER POTLATCH I. Funerals and Preparations

1. Introduction

In Tanacross culture there are a number of occasions in which the community draws together for purposes of celebration. But no celebration has the intensity of the death related rituals of the funeral and potlatch. It is during this period that the community sets itself "'outside of time' in order to negotiate the premises upon which social life is based"..." re-creating and communicating among themselves what they see to be the building blocks of their joint existence" (Rasnake 1988: 175).

Although intertwined, funerals and potlatches are distinct in purpose. The potlatch marks the separation of the deceased from society and is the last public expression of grief. It is also the public acknowledgement, by the hosts, of members of the opposite moiety who fulfilled their reciprocal obligation by burying the deceased and sharing the grief. Funerals, on the other hand, are concerned with the physical treatment of the body and entail the

preparation of the corpse, the building of a coffin, the grave fence, and a Christian religious service. Potlatches which follow funerals are called funeral potlatches. These may be followed by another, held at a later date, if the spouse, child or sibling of the deceased feels one potlatch is not sufficient. These later potlatches are often called memorial potlatches. Unlike funeral potlatches, which are organized by the community under the direction of a leader, memorial potlatches are the responsibility of an individual who works to purchase the necessary food and gifts.

In addition to those held in connection with the death, potlatches are also held when a young person kills their first game or when someone wishes to honor another person such as a spouse who has recovered from an illness or an elderly parent. These potlatches are structured much the same as mortuary potlatches and are also called potlatches or "parties" but do not have the same emotional intensity.

This chapter begins with the description of a funeral for an old woman. Within the context of her funeral Tanacross people recreate a model of tradition that is both "real" and flexible enough to accommodate the range of individual and external forces which shape contemporary Athabaskan culture. Mediated through a combination of

tradition and expediency, competition continually emerges as a dynamic spirit behind the preparations for the funeral.

The second section of this chapter concerns the preparations for a memorial potlatch held some years after the funeral. Competition again emerges as the individual host seeks to make the most lavish potlatch possible. Yet, while these preparations are, initially, the responsibility of the individual, they are not simply the seed of individual rivalry but, as in the preparations for the funeral, a vehicle through which the community and the individual merge.

2. The Funeral of an Elder.

The old woman died in the early hours of a winter morning surrounded by her relatives, which meant most of the people of the village. To be at her side was, as someone said, the very least they could do for "grandma."¹ Born into the Dikaqu sib, in the late 1880s, at the beginning of sustained contact with Whites, the old woman symbolized the history of modern Tanacross. As a reflection of her status, the village had, some years before, held a celebration in

¹ The term "grandma" refers to all old people above the paternal generation regardless of sib affiliation.

her honor.² At her death the whole village, again, became involved in preparing her funeral.

Several hours after death the corpse was dressed by women of the opposite moiety in funeral clothes consisting of black skirt, white blouse, beaded moccasins, mittens and necklace. It was then wrapped in two Hudson's Bay blankets. Afterward, as tradition required, the body was removed from the house through a window to avoid the polluting influences of the doorways and taken to the community hall. Because the hall is heated the body was later moved to the Church and a large red Bible placed next to it. Dressing the corpse immediately reaffirmed reciprocity between moieties and set a tone of cooperation for the rest of the funeral preparations.

The arrival of guests from other villages, throughout the morning, was also an affirmation of traditional obligation and cooperation both between villages

² This celebration was reported, along with a photograph, in an Anchorage newspaper. Celebrations are frequently held to honor significant elders in the community. The village of Northway has a birthday party every year for its "chief," Walter Northway, which is attended, not only by local people, but by Natives and non-Natives from Anchorage and Fairbanks. The party has been reported in the Anchorage or Fairbanks newspapers as well as the Doyon region Newsletter. In 1981 there was a potlatch in Tanacross for Andrew Isaac, the "traditional chief" of the Doyon Region, attended by a number of local and regional politicians.

and opposing segments of the society. The guests' first stop was the deceased's house. There they expressed condolences to the family and were welcomed with a light meal of soup, sandwiches, and coffee prepared in the house by several young women. These greetings, reflecting the occasion, were subdued but not tearful.

Just after the woman died, Jack, as a member of the opposite Al-ce-den-da sib, and the deceased's nephew, i.e., brother's son, assumed responsibility for organizing the funeral. Jack's role was to create a sense of cooperation and facilitate activities that would lead to completion of the preparations. To this end he collected cash donations, which he carefully counted and kept in a large roll in his front shirt pocket, and called the local office of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game for permission to kill a moose, which Alaska State law allows,³ and then asked six or eight young men, including his oldest son, to go hunting. Since the corpse was not embalmed Jack also had to arrange, with the magistrate in Tok, for the village to hold the body until the funeral. In this instance Jack mediated the needs of the community with those of the state. By immediately

³ In the mid 1970s the Alaska Surpreme Court had ruled in accordance with the religious freedom act that Athabaskan people could kill a moose out of season for potlatch.

acknowledging its authority, Jack indicated that the village had now met its obligation and was free to continue as tradition dictated, which is exactly what it did.

To build a consensus around his leadership, and avoid another avenue of conflict, Jack visited his sibmate Elisha, the other leading man in the community. Together they discussed digging the grave, building the grave fence and coffin. They agreed to comply with the wish of the deceased to be buried next to her husband in the old graveyard across the river, though Elisha was concerned it would eventually be washed away. It was also decided that anyone could help dig the grave and build the grave fence, since "this was not really old time." This decision departed from tradition because members of the opposite sib or moiety are supposed to do these things. However, Jack felt that since so many people in the village were related to the deceased everyone should be encouraged to participate. Furthermore, saying this was not "old time" Jack intimated this should be a community event rather than an expression of sib prerogative and prestige.

Once securing support from his sibmate, Jack contacted a local merchant, married to a Tanacross woman, for the purposes of borrowing a delivery truck to haul

groceries and barrels of gasoline for the snow machines and pickup trucks used in the moose hunt. He also enlisted the man's services, along with those of his wife and children, to cook breakfast for the guests. Once these arrangements were completed Jack took the donations he had received to Tok to purchase food; wood and paint for the fence; tools for digging the grave, and a length of yellow plastic rope to lower the coffin into the grave. On returning to the village Jack deposited most of the groceries in the community hall but he gave several canned hams, coffee, mayonnaise and bread to his older daughter so she could prepare sandwiches for the men who were building the grave fence and coffin.

After the women had prepared the corpse, the major tasks left were to build a coffin and grave fence. For this Jack enlisted the help of his son-in-law and a local White man, an expert carpenter married to a Tanacross woman. By mobilizing his own family and engaging the White man Jack avoided creating tension over sib prerogative and stimulated participation by producing a situation in which people could take part on their own accord. In total, 21 men, mostly from Tanacross, actively participated while men from other villages came to watch or give a hand, depending on their inclination.

Usually the immediate relatives of the deceased purchase a coffin from an undertaker in Fairbanks. But on this occasion the deceased had specifically asked to be buried in a homemade coffin, which is the old fashion way. She had stipulated a plain box, but the men lined it with a Hudson's Bay blanket and put a Pendleton "chief's" blanket on the outside to honor the deceased. While some men worked on the coffin others constructed the traditional fence used to mark the grave. Made of lumber, the fence was constructed in the design of a picket fence, measuring seven feet by four, with a cross placed at one end to mark the head of the grave. Both the cross and tops of the pickets were cut into a decorative pattern using a hand-held electric saber-saw. These decorations vary according to the gender of the individual whose grave they mark. Women's decorations are rounded while those of the men are pointed. After the fence was finished it was painted green, except for the tops of the pickets which were painted white.

Work on the coffin and fence began around 1:30 P.M. and went on until about 5:00 P.M. when it was finished. During construction the atmosphere was relaxed; people talked and joked while they worked, drank coffee, and ate the ham sandwiches provided by Jack's daughter. Once the

work was completed everyone went to the community hall for supper. Food consisted of a small quantity of moose meat, which had been donated, since no moose had yet been killed, and canned fruit, tea, soup with Spam, cabbage, potatoes, carrots, ham sandwiches, and chicken soup, which Jack had purchased earlier in Tok.

During the supper Jack conferred with his first cousin, or "cousin sister," who was the daughter of the deceased's older brother. He told her that the coffin was finished, that it looked good, that everything went well and that there had been a "good feeling" during the work; there had been no argument or ill feeling which meant that everything was going correctly and that people were satisfied.

The death of the old woman had created a liminal state (Turner 1974) in which daily concerns and conflicts were set aside so that the village, and larger Athabaskan community, could draw together to restate and reaffirm both its traditional links to the past and its sense of community. Reciprocal relations between sibs of the opposite moieties had been reaffirmed at the outset with the proper treatment of the body. Competition had been negated by Jack's insistence, and Elisha's assent, that traditional sib

prerogatives be set aside. Yet, overlaying this sense of community was a tension caused by the fact that both Jack's and the village's prestige hinged on the ability to conclude successfully the funeral preparations and to demonstrate a proper respect for the deceased and guests.

To alleviate some of this tension, and to take advantage of the infusion of cash provided by the large number of visitors, a poker game began during the night and lasted until the early morning. Poker games, frequently played at funerals and potlatches, serve both as entertainment and a way to make money. Players included people from several villages, including Tanacross. The game is always held in a private residence for which the owners are compensated. Poker money comes from government transfer payments, wages, and from cash received as a potlatch gift. On this first night, however, only those not intimately connected with the funeral played since it would be considered disrespectful to do otherwise. Or to put it another way, it might be said that someone took advantage of death to make money.

At 5:00 A.M. the following morning two of the young men Jack had sent out hunting shot the first of four moose eventually killed for the funeral and potlatch. Before first

light they had partially butchered a cow moose with calf. Later that morning several of the men accompanied the hunters back to the kill to finish the butchering and bring the rest of the meat back to the village. This was done at the direction of an older, more experienced man in his early forties. First the animal was flayed and then butchered on top of the skin to prevent the meat from getting dirty. After skinning, the carcass was split into four quarters, and the ribs cut away from the backbone. Because the young hunters were inexperienced they had ruptured the stomach, filled with undigested willows, and spilled some of the malodorous contents, but luckily not on the meat. Everything, including the skin, was carried home.

During the butchering the men joked about being arrested because State law allowed them to kill a bull, not a cow, and killing the moose along the highway made the hunters vulnerable to arrest. The situation was ambiguous. In the winter neither cow nor bull moose have horns, and it is difficult for an inexperienced hunter to distinguish them. Faced with this, the hunters had chosen to disregard the law and kill any moose they saw. Hunting on the highway they had become juxtaposed between their world and the White world. A symbol straddling both realms, the dead cow moose

was illegal game yet ceremonial meat. While not essential in practical terms, providing moose meat for those attending the funeral and subsequent potlatch is a demonstration of the village's competence and makes a significant difference between a simply adequate and highly successful event. Later in the day two more moose were killed north of the village by men hunting with snow machines. Now that there was meat the final task was excavating the grave.

To facilitate digging the grave Jack had purchased three axes and three shovels. Later, during the potlatch, these would be given away as gifts to several of the young men of the opposite moiety in public acknowledgement of their participation. Like the preparation of the corpse, digging the grave is supposed to reflect the moiety structure of the indigenous society. But in this instance another village elder, Frank, who is a Dikagu sib, the same sib as the deceased, took the initiative and enlisted the help of several people including his old friend Elisha, a White man who was a friend of Frank's daughter, and me.

Frank's choice of helpers illustrates the difficulties in organizing the village and one strategy used to surmount them. Frank knew that his nephews, the young men he could rightfully ask for assistance, were unreliable

because they had been drinking. He knew others would not help because he had no authority over them, since he was not a relative. Once the project got started though, Frank knew that others would join on their own accord. Consequently, Frank's initiative, rather than undermining Jack's leadership, kept the momentum of the preparations from stalling at a critical juncture, and provided Frank with a chance to become involved on his own terms. Nevertheless, digging the grave became a confused and an unnecessarily prolonged affair.

The deceased had stipulated she wanted to be buried in the old graveyard across the river, next to her husband and nine children. Since few of the graves are actually marked we spent some time looking for the site and after several hours of discussing the matter made a tentative decision. But since no one was really sure it was decided that Elisha should go back to the village to find out exactly where to dig. After consulting with several elders Elisha returned to say that it was all right to dig where we had chosen. So we hacked out a square in the frozen earth with the axes provided. After removing the topsoil, we started a fire using wood and old tires to thaw out the ground, but because it was getting dark, we stopped work and

returned to the village, leaving the fire to burn all night. As it turned out this was the wrong spot.

Early the following morning Elisha organized a crew of four to finish the digging. As we were shoveling out the thawed earth, Jack's son-in-law, Jim, asked if we were digging in the correct place. If we were, he said people in the village would help. This produced some acrimonious debate between Jim and the digging crew, and he apologized, saying he had not come to start trouble or cause hard feeling but only to make sure we were doing the proper thing.

Jim's question nevertheless caused considerable consternation. Some people felt that the wishes of the deceased would have to be disregarded because the funeral was the next day. A few people expressed the opinion that it would not only show disrespect but cause bad luck, or Njii, to dig in the wrong place, and they refused to dig the grave unless it was done right. To settle the confusion Sam, the deceased's oldest nephew, showed the workers the proper site.

At this point 12 more people became involved in digging. The composition of the work party reflected both the diversity of social relations that link the village to

the outside world and the traditional aspects of participation. They included a Tlingit man, who lives with a Tanacross woman, three White men, including myself, several people of mixed blood, together with a number of people from other villages. Most of the participants, however, were young men of the Al-ce-den-da sib encouraged by their elders who stood by and watched the digging. Since valuable time had been lost, it was decided to dig with a chain saw. As soon as we broke through the frozen soil, we used picks and shovels on the unfrozen earth. People attributed the ease in which we dug the grave to the fact that it was in the correct place. Others also said it was easy to dig because the deceased was a good, kind, person, and that mean people had hard graves to dig.

While some people worked on the grave others cleaned up the graveyard, cutting brush and limbing trees. The old people kept a large fire going, along with a lively conversation, in a mixture of the Tanacross language and English, which consisted of stories and the older men teasing the younger men and boys. Sometimes the teasing became particularly pointed causing confrontations which Jim smoothed over by pointing out that no insult was intended. Later in the day Jack distributed coffee, pop, sandwiches,

chewing tobacco and cigarettes when he came out to check on the progress of the excavation.

The significance of caring for the corpse, building the grave fence and coffin, and excavating the grave is tied to how a person's identity is carried forward in time. As the oldest member of the community the old woman represented the generation responsible for producing and nurturing all the present generations of Tanacross people. Her identity was carried forward in the grief of those whom she "held" or nurtured. To become involved in preparing her funeral was to honor and increase her value, not only as a human being, but as a person responsible for the lives of all those still living. By linking themselves to the deceased, and hence all her generation, through the labor of the funeral, Tanacross people were able to formulate and recreate their shared identity (cf. Myers n.d. 19). Through these expressions of mutual concern and care of love and respect, they also reaffirmed their identity in contrast to what they see as a fragmented and individualistic White society. By laboring for others in a community effort rather than for oneself they endeavor to maintain their wholeness as human beings.

Placing the grave in the appropriate place was a matter of demonstrating respect for the deceased and

affirming social links between the past and present. It was also a matter of prestige. Responsibility for successfully carrying out the deceased's wishes lay, ultimately, with Jack and members of the opposite sib. To avoid criticism and to validate his position as a tradition bearer Jack was bound to carry out the deceased's request. Furthermore, because the deceased was his paternal aunt Jack felt a personal obligation, since in honoring the deceased he also honored his father and his father's sib.

However, not all situations were so neatly resolved. At one point Elisha and Frank had a discussion about one young man, a non-Athabaskan person living with Elisha's niece, who had contributed both his labor and a moose to the funeral. Because the young man lived with his niece, Elisha had an interest in whether he would be compensated. But apart from a personal interest Elisha also believed it was the correct thing to do. He therefore suggested that the worker should be "paid" or rewarded with a potlatch gift for his considerable contribution. This was, after all, the responsibility of the Dikagu, since the deceased was their relative, and Frank agreed.

As a Dikagu elder Frank was theoretically the leading man for all the Dikagu in the village.

Traditionally, this would mean that under his direction these people would participate and provide some gifts for the subsequent potlatch, thus enhancing Frank's prestige as a leader. But Frank is self-effacing and not a particularly dynamic leader. Furthermore, family ties take precedence over sib affiliation and since the deceased was a member of Jack's family he would be pivotal in influencing the distribution of gifts.

In the end the young man never received a gift, and it was rumored that someone had manipulated the distribution of the gifts to his disadvantage. In fact, this situation eventually produced criticism because several people, including Lila, Elisha's wife and an important Dikagu woman, felt the young man, as well as a number of other people, were inappropriately compensated for their contributions. This is exactly the kind of criticism to be avoided because it diminishes the value of the potlatch and the prestige of those who give it and those for whom it is given.

This incident illustrates two points. First, while cooperation is essential for completing the preparations it does not obviate the underlying competitive tensions between various segments of the community. Second, the increasing involvement of non-Athabaskans leads to ambiguous situations

which are actively exploited to the advantage of different potlatch participants. In this instance the young man made a substantial contribution which should not have been ignored. However, his ambiguous relationship to the village, and the fact that family ties gave the advantage to certain segments of the community, allowed him to be overlooked.

To this point the preparations for the funeral had been led exclusively by the Native community. The performance of the funeral service was, however, entrusted to the local Episcopal priest, assisted by a Native Christian fundamentalist minister from Copper Center and a local Wycliffe Bible translator fluent in the Upper Tanana language.

As is often the case the funeral was held in the community hall because the church was simply not big enough to accommodate the assembly. To transform the hall for the service a cross and candles were brought over from the Church. Then just before the service, someone hung up long pieces of cloth, which covered a large portion of the walls and several windows. When asked why this was done, several people gave various answers. One said that different families had different magic or medicine, while another said it was a partial display of what would be given away at the

potlatch later that evening. A third person, when asked if it had anything to do with magic, answered with studied indifference. I think the cloth was both a display and a sign made in remembrance for the deceased. Later, after the funeral, the cloth would be torn off the wall and used in the dancing and singing as a signal that the mourning period had ended.

During the funeral the congregation sat on Church benches and folding chairs set out in rows facing a dais and table. The coffin was placed on the table diagonally across the room separating the congregation from the officiates. On top of the coffin were several arrangements of plastic flowers. The Native fundamentalist minister from Copper Center started the service with a prayer in English. He was followed by the Episcopal priest who read the liturgy, also in English. Then the Wycliffe translator sang two songs and read from the Bible in the Upper Tanana language. The service was concluded by the Episcopal priest at which time the congregation filed past the open casket to pay its last respects. Then the pall bearers, men from the opposite moiety, hauled the coffin on a sled to the grave.

Those who had relatives in the cemetery, one of three located near the old village, brushed snow off the

grave houses and generally tidied up the area. The Episcopal priest and the Wycliffe translator read the burial service. Then the coffin was lowered into the grave with yellow plastic rope and in a final act of respect each person present threw in a handful of dirt. Finally the grave was filled in and the grave fence set so that it was level with surrounding graves.

Christian funeral services have become a vital part of traditional Tanacross mortuary ritual practice. A major reason for their importance is that Native people believe they need a non-Native priest to interpret Christianity correctly. In addition Native people tend to view the Christian burial service as a sign of equal status with Whites. As one Tanacross man put it, Christianity is like being "civilized." In this respect the service should emulate, as closely as possible a White funeral with cross, candles, and flowers. Also the dress of the participants, especially the deceased's relatives, should correspond to that worn at a White middle class funeral. And the mourning should be subdued. Thus, the service underlines the fundamental equality of Indian and White, based not only on the overarching concept of universal Christian love, but the shared ritual legitimized by the presence of the priest.

Yet, while the interment of the corpse has been Christianized (cf. Goldman 1975) the continued reverence for the authority of the Episcopal Church is based on the deep respect felt for the elders who first accepted the Church. One important facet of this acceptance was the attractive concept of an after life. Old people, today, talk about their relief when learning from the missionaries that becoming a Christian meant being reunited with relatives in heaven. In this context the meaning of the service has been reformulated to express the importance of cross generational kinship ties or the unity of generations, which is also one aspect of the potlatch. Displaying the long bolts of cloth served to bridge the funeral to the subsequent potlatch, binding them in the common purpose of honoring the deceased, and by extension all her generation. This further emphasized by Jack, who wore, over his blue suit, a wide beaded sash which, like the cloth on the walls, was a statement of honor for the deceased.

As we have seen the death of an individual involves the total community. The tension between tradition and expediency, between personal and group goals which characterized the funeral are also evident in preparations for a memorial potlatch that may be held years after a

funeral. What is different is that these arrangements, initially, do not involve the whole community; but social pressures and the economics of modern potlatches dictate that individuals eventually accommodate themselves to the group. Nevertheless, memorial potlatches remain intensely personal commitments. The individual's goal is to prepare the largest and most lavish ceremony possible because it demonstrates his feelings for the deceased and adds to his personal standing in the community.

3. Preparations for a Memorial Potlatch

In the summer of 1987 a woman whom I will call Helen made a memorial potlatch for her son who died of cancer several years before. At first her preparations were semi-secret, since she wanted no help. She told me that she had literally starved herself in order to save money for the gifts. In the meantime she had purchased all of the gifts and food she could afford and had finished all the beadwork she planned to give away. But she alone did not have the resources to feed all the guests over a two or three day period. It was, therefore, essential that she make some arrangement to share expenses for the feasts.

Helen arranged to share expenses with people outside her family, but her primary arrangements were with her

granddaughter, Lucy, who planned a potlatch in memory of her daughter. By combining efforts both woman hoped, initially, to make the potlatch a family event. In this way the prestige derived from a successfully staged potlatch would not have to be shared. However, because of the lack of resources they agreed to combine efforts with two other women.

Suzie, a young woman in her early thirties, was preparing a potlatch to commemorate the recovery of her brother from a serious accident. Like Helen she had told no one of her plans, outside her immediate family, but had accumulated a variety of gifts and food. Suzie's major support came from her mother, a very knowledgeable elder, who assisted her by making several gifts. The third person to join Helen was Jean, a woman in her early 60s, who was preparing a potlatch for three different people, including two little boys, not her sons, who had caught their first fish.

While family considerations play a primary role in the organization and preparation of potlatches an important consideration in combining efforts is sib solidarity. We saw this when Jack made it a point to consult with Elisha, for example, and when he consulted with his cousin sister, or

first cousin, about the progress of preparations for the funeral. In the case of Helen's potlatch all of the women were members of the Al-ce-den-da/Nalcine sib. By collaborating, the women could stage a much larger and more elaborate ceremony, not only enhancing their individual prestige but the prestige of their sib as well. This consideration had prompted some villagers to say that only people in the same sib should make potlatches together, but others expressed the opinion that it was better for opposite sibs to combine. That way, the competition between sibs was minimized and the distribution of gifts was more balanced as everyone got something.

Family and sib linkages are the basis for social action within the village but successful action requires a wider network of support. In preparing for the funeral potlatch we saw that Jack mobilized a wide range of people, both Native and non-Native, village resident and nonresident. While Helen's network was not as extensive as Jack's she was able to mobilize a diversity of people, including myself and my research assistant, who cooked a turkey for her and helped serve food during the feast. In similar fashion Lucy, Helen's daughter, asked for assistance from various people. She had decided that to honor her

daughter properly she should have her grave fence rebuilt by the White expert carpenter married to a Tanacross woman, and an unrelated friend. Once the project got started others joined, including Elisha, Jack, Frank, and myself. Additionally, throughout the actual ceremony Jack assisted the hosts by encouraging Helen's grandsons to drum and sing. It was this type of assistance, coupled with the host's prodigious efforts, which made the potlatch a success.

The wide range of participation transformed Helen's efforts into a community event. As the need arose more people became involved. Some opened their houses to the guests for a place to stay; others cooked food, and still other's helped clean the community hall. Thus Helen's potlatch had become an opportunity for the village to enhance its image as a hospitable and traditionally able community. While this was a community objective the potlatch essentially remained an individual endeavor in which prestige and satisfaction would fall ultimately to the four women who had made the primary investment.

In economic terms potlatches require considerable investment. Most money comes from wages, government

transfer⁴ payments and donations. None of these sources of income alone is sufficient to cover the cost of a potlatch.⁵ Helen, for example, is employed parttime throughout the year, as is Jean. Suzie works full time, while Helen's granddaughter and husband are both seasonally employed. Additionally, all receive various transfer payments. I should add that although each had various other financial commitments such as car payments and utility bills, all of them, like most Native people living in the bush, own their homes outright, which leaves an undetermined amount of their cash as potential surplus for the potlatch. Nevertheless, as noted above, the preparation for a memorial potlatch

4 Transfer payments received by people in the village include: Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) given to single parents and grandparents responsible for their grandchildren; Social Security payments; Supplemental Security Income (SSI) which supplements social security; Alaska longevity bonus given to people over 65 who have lived in Alaska for 25 consecutive years, which was \$200.00 a month in 1980; Food Stamps, available to those below a certain income average; Energy Assistance which was a single payment in 1980 varying between \$250.00 and \$400.00 (Haynes 1980: 34 ; Unemployment Insurance; Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend which is a single payment varying from year to year: in 1982 the payment was \$1000.00 for each man, woman and child; in 1988 the dividend was over \$800.00; village corporation annual dividend and an annual dividend from Doyon limited, the regional Native corporation organized under the Alaska Native Land Claims.

5 In some circumstances such as an unexpected death, transfer payments are used to cover immediate expenditures. In the case of a funeral potlatches they can also be used for donations, some people's donations being contingent on whether they get their 'check' on time.

requires considerable personal sacrifice.

Among the many expenses the largest are guns, blankets and food. For purchasing the major gifts of guns and blankets a host has two options. The first is to buy everything from retail outlets. The second is to purchase some of the guns and blankets from relatives and people who may want to sell some of the gifts they have received at potlatches. Although Helen had the option of purchasing guns from her relatives for a cost of \$150.00 each, she chose to purchase all 17 of her guns in Tok at a cost of \$200.00, a special price given her by the proprietor of the local sporting goods store. When asked why she did this, instead of buying from friends and relatives, she said 'she did not want to pay the cheaper price as she loved her son so much.'⁶ For Helen the guns were the objectification of her feelings for her dead son.

While Helen insisted on purchasing new guns she did buy used blankets at potlatches for a cost of \$10.00 each. She also distributed a number of beaded items, including woven beaded sashes and various kinds of necklaces, which she made herself. In addition she purchased a quantity of food including several turkeys, cases of soda, cases of

⁶ Paraphrased from field notes.

vegetables, flour, sugar, tea, cases of fruit, and two beaver carcasses which she served to the elders. As with the beadwork, the beaver served to create an image of a richer ceremony, especially since beaver meat is seldom served at potlatches.

While I have no exact figures for Helen's potlatch, I can estimate the cost. Her biggest expenditure was the 17 rifles which, at \$200.00 each, cost a total of \$3400.00. She distributed 175 blankets at an average cost of \$10.00 each, for a total of \$1750.00. Together these items cost Helen \$5150.00. This figure does not include the cost of the food, or labor in making the beadwork, or the materials, or the cash distributed. Helen and her three co-hosts distributed 550 blankets, for a total of \$5,500, and 40 guns, at an average cost of \$175.00 each, for a total of \$7000.00. In aggregate these gifts cost \$12,500.

This cost compares with two funeral potlatches for which I have figures. At the funeral potlatch for the elder Tanacross woman, held earlier in the same year (1987), 40 guns, worth \$7000.00, were distributed, as well as 600 blankets, for a total of \$13,000.⁷ Again this does not include the food, which included portions of three moose,

⁷ I did not count the number of HBC blankets given away.

nor the gas provided for the hunt, nor the cash given away. I would estimate that the total cost of this potlatch came to \$20,000. For a funeral potlatch held on the Copper River in December of 1986, the hosts spent \$4800.00 for food, and cash gifts. They distributed 41 guns at an average price of \$225.00, for a total of \$9,225.⁸ In addition 705 blankets were distributed, totaling \$7,050. In sum, the cost of this potlatch was \$21,075.00.

The costs of the two funeral potlatches represent an aggregate of donations made by people from a number of different villages. In the potlatch held on the Copper River the cost also included a monetary donation made by Ahtna Incorporated, the regional Native Corporation. Donations for the potlatch which followed the older Tanacross woman's funeral came from both the host group or members of the moiety of the deceased, and the guest group or members from the moiety opposite the deceased. The host group donations represent moiety solidarity made in honor of the deceased to assist the mourners in making a successful potlatch. Such assistance is usually rendered in blankets, guns, and cash. Donations from the guest group, on the other hand, are

⁸ Guns in the Copper River region cost more. For instance, people from the Copper River charge \$200.00 for a gun bought at a potlatch, rather than \$175.00.

always made in cash and meant to maintain social linkages between villages and non-related people. Cash eliminates the possibility that a guest might receive his own gift and allows the host to make use of the donation anonymously, thus maintaining the host-guest relationship. All donations made at a funeral potlatch are recorded by the host and publicly acknowledged just prior to the distribution. No such acknowledgements are necessary at a memorial potlatch since there is no donation, except in labor, which is often acknowledged through the distribution of the gifts.

4. Conclusion

Given the seeming preoccupation with accumulating gifts, scholars such as Goldman (1975), McKennan (1959), and Ringel (1979) have argued that the potlatch has been reduced to an exhibition of individual aggrandizement characteristic of a market economy. In Tanacross, however, external economic forces have not transformed the potlatch into an arena for individual rivalry (cf. Ringel 1979) but have led to the maintenance of social relations as individuals seek to cooperate in order to potlatch. I do not mean that individual achievement goes unrecognized but that such endeavors are not simply defined by the market economy. In

the funeral, for example, each individual contribution is noted and publicly acknowledged but it is the totality of the group's effort that has most significance. Furthermore, while memorial potlatches are the result of individual accomplishment they are transformed by village participation into collective expressions of group identity.

In the context of the funeral and preparing for a memorial potlatch we have looked at two sets of relationships: those which create linkages within the village, and those which link the village to the larger world. In the case of the funeral, the discussion centered on the leader's attempts to mobilize the community in a ceremony befitting both the deceased and the village. By reaffirming relationships, securing a consensus on his leadership, and creating non-competitive situations, he mediated competition between sibs and families. In the case of the memorial potlatch the four women joined in a cooperative effort to defray the costs of a potlatch and to stage a ceremony that would honor the participants. In both cases, however, competition was a motivating factor since both individual and village prestige, hinged on the ability to demonstrate respect for the deceased and competence in carrying out tradition.

The funeral and preparations for the memorial potlatch became a blend of tradition and improvisation. The traditional linkages between opposite moieties were reaffirmed in the funeral when women of the opposite moiety took care of the corpse. On the other hand, everyone was allowed to help prepare the grave fence, coffin, and grave to accommodate the diversity of the village population, including Whites. The participation of the Christian ministers legitimized the funeral service and reflected the close relationship between the Church and community, while respectful participation of Whites in general recreated the image of social relations between Native and White as Natives believe they should be.

These same linkages present in the funeral and preparations for the memorial potlatch are maintained and formalized through the sequence of events which comprise the potlatch which is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Seven

THE UPPER TANANA RIVER POTLATCH II The Feast, Dancing & Singing, Oratory, and the Distribution of Gifts.

1. Introduction

Relationships recreated during the funeral and preparations for the memorial potlatch are carried forward, reaffirmed and formalized through the feasting, singing, dancing, oratory, and distribution of gifts. By these formal procedures the hosts repay the guests for their endeavors during the funeral thus maintaining reciprocal relations and enhancing their prestige. At the same time, in the formalized enactment of tradition, the community maintains continuity with the values of the Indian way and reaffirms its distinct cultural identity. While recreating an image of commonality the proceedings are spiked with competition over power and prestige between sibs, villages and families

Feasting, singing and dancing goes on throughout the preparations for the funeral. Immediately following the funeral service a final feast is held, followed by dancing

and singing and culminating in the distribution of gifts which concludes the funeral potlatch. Individual grieving can go on, however, and eventually precipitate a memorial potlatch which is held some years after the funeral. Then, there are again three days of feasting, singing, dancing and cratory and on the last night a distribution of gifts.

The descriptions in this chapter are drawn from three different potlatches I attended while conducting field work at Tanacross. Two were funeral potlatches held at the death of elderly women. The first of these was held in December of 1986 in the Ahtna village of Chistochina while the second, as I described in the preceding chapter, was held in January of 1987 at Tanacross. The third ceremony was the memorial potlatch held by Helen and her three co-hosts at Tanacross in June of 1987.

2.The Hall

All potlatches are held in a community hall which serves not only as a "potlatch house" but also a bingo hall and a site for the community Christmas party as well as various feasts and funerals. As a large, well lighted, centrally heated, building the community hall is well suited for a potlatch. The Tanacross community hall, for example,

has five rooms: a main hall, approximately 75 feet long by 30 feet wide, a storage room, kitchen, and two bathrooms. On one wall of the main room are color portraits of village elders who, photographed in ceremonial regalia, stand as icons to tradition. In a similar vein a woodcut, provided by the Tanana Chiefs, the non-profit regional corporation, depicts a group of men dressed in skin chief's coats. These are the original Tanana Chiefs who began negotiations with the government over land in the early 1900s. The outcome of their efforts is symbolized by the American flag and two red, white, and blue dance sticks hanging on an opposite wall. Together, these represent the rights, equality, and power vested in citizenship which Native people demand in their quest to determine their own destiny.

This quest is reflected in the montage of black and white photos of the Tanacross dog race which hang on another wall. They illustrate the Native participation in a sport which has brought some prosperity and statewide recognition to Native people as well as a sense of pride to many others. Finally, at the far end of the hall, pushed up against the wall, is the bingo paraphernalia. Both the dog race photos and the bingo equipment represent the diversions of modern Native life. What is troubling to men like Elisha is that

these diversions now share the same space with the potlatch and reinforces his feeling that the ceremony has become trivialized or commercialized (cf. Goldman 1975). On the other hand, this variety also reflects the dynamic of the ceremony, which like the red, white, and blue dance sticks, is adapted to the relationships which link Tanacross to the external world.

3. Feasting

Sharing food is an important vehicle for expressing social relationships. It communicates sentiment, affection, familiarity, and good will. Through the feast the host creates an impression of an endless supply of food expressing both his love and respect for the guests, as well as his competence. Since the guests are the host's paternal relatives and potential affines, feeding them becomes a demonstration of affection for the host's father, and of good will toward possible marriage partners. Additionally, by feeding his potential affines, the host symbolically nourishes future generations. By distributing more food than anyone could possibly eat, the host demonstrates his competence, and the surplus, which people carry home, is a reminder of the his generosity long after the event.¹

¹ Tanner (1974) describes a parallel relationship among an Algonquin group.

Wild food is most esteemed because it is symbolic of Indianness. Moose meat especially is symbolic of implied rights to land and the management of local resources based on cultural imperatives. In speeches made by the elders wild food is often referred to as "our food." For Tanacross people killing moose and eating its meat is a reiteration of their traditional hunting life and of individual competence and autonomy. The success of a any communal meal or potlatch is measured in large part by the amount of moose meat served. In Tetlin, for instance, Halpin (1985: 34) observes that "moose meat is coveted" and "a real meal is only one with wild food, particularly wild meat."

Although wild food is central to a potlatch feast, strong black tea, pilot bread (a form of cracker) and pannock, (a form of bread) have also been incorporated as traditional food. This menu of Indian food, reflecting the diet of the traditional culture of the 1920s and 1930s,² is always supplemented by a wide variety of store food including soda pop, eggs, canned hams, Spam, potatoes, rice, carrots, frozen chicken, spaghetti, various prepared meats, and bread, all of which are purchased either in Tok or in

² This food is that introduced by and shared with "old Whites." It is an historical link between Natives and Whites and indicative of their once close relationship.

Fairbanks. The emphasis on traditional food contrasts with the variety of store food used as a supplement. This contrast indicates the dynamic between a dependency on external goods and an autonomy based on the competence to hunt. Emphasizing Native food in the potlatch is a form of resistance against both the state's right to impose laws and the increasing loss of traditional knowledge and competence.

Because preparing and serving of food requires considerable community participation they are a factor in mediating competition. As we saw in the last chapter widespread participation transformed individual effort into community endeavor. At every potlatch a breakfast of fried eggs, bacon, ham, Spam, potatoes, coffee and tea is prepared and served each morning in the community hall. The lunch menu consists of sandwiches, soup, occasionally wild meat, and tea. During the evening feasts all the guests are served a diversity of food ranging from moosehead soup to spaghetti. Food for these evening feasts is prepared in the community hall, out of doors, and in people's houses. Cooking is not limited to the potlatch host but is carried out by the host's friends and relations who cook food on their household stoves. All meals are prepared jointly by men and women, the former cooking moose soup and some wild

game over open fires, while the women cook other foods inside, such as salmon, roast turkey, ham, salads, and donuts .

Men, between the ages of about 20 and 45, gather to spend the whole day socializing, butchering and cooking meat out of doors, especially in the summer. The men separate the meat into piles for frying and boiling. They empty the boiling meat and bones into large pots of water placed over a wood fire. After the meat becomes tender they add packets of soup mix along with rice, turnips, and various other raw vegetables. The moose head, the most traditional of food, which is considered the piece de resistance of any potlatch, is also cooked this way.

The evening feasts are the most important meals served at a potlatch and, depending on the circumstances, they are attended by between 100 and 250 people who are all fed at the same time. If the host and deceased are important, highly regarded persons, the potlatch will be well attended and all the guests, regardless of age, attend the evening feast. Most residents from the host village also attend, but there are always some people who stay away because they are drinking or because of shyness or lack of interest. It is difficult to estimate the number or gender

of people who do stay away. Most often it is the young men, between the ages of 20-45, who prefer to watch television or visit with friends. Many of these same people are nevertheless involved in some aspect of the preparation.

In every village the evening feast is served on the floor on long strips of paper, which is 'traditional' and marks its distinctiveness from all other communal meals which are served on tables. After the paper has been laid out, young men and women hand out tin cans filled with sugar, salt and pepper shakers, plates, knives, forks, and styrofoam cups. At Tanacross, potlatch food is usually eaten off crockery rather than plastic plates. Since the evening feast is a communal meal, it is scheduled for a specific time while breakfast and lunch are served over several hours, people eating when they feel like it. The importance of the evening feast is also reflected in the large variety of food served, including beaver, mountain squirrel, ducks, and moosehead soup, and by the fact it is always blessed with a Christian prayer led by a local minister or lay person. Although moose meat may be served at breakfast and lunch, if there is enough, these meals are usually limited to several kinds of commercial food.

In Tanacross, the host's family and friends serve the food from large containers carried up and down the rows

of guests. The fact that young women now serve and cook food is a major departure from tradition. Historically, it was considered Njii or "bad luck" for young pubescent women to have anything to do with food served to men. The task was left to young men and older women. The change is frequently commented on by older people who feel this breach in tradition is just one example of the breakdown in the traditional moral order.

The guest's status is reflected both in the seating arrangement and in the order of serving the food. Village elders and middle aged guests sit on benches and chairs along the walls; young men, and women and children on the floor in the middle of the hall. Old people are always served first. Service usually begins with huge pots of strong tea. If the hosts are slow in serving it, some guests may start singing 'we want tea.' Following the tea, cardboard boxes of moose meat are served to the elders, who pick through the selection for a fat, meaty piece. Next are pans of fried meat, boxes of dried or roasted muskrats, boiled ducks, pans of Copper River salmon, a variety of salads, pilot bread, bread, sandwiches, styrofoam cups of blue berries, cranberries and Jello, plastic bowls of moose head soup, fried chicken, and pans of spaghetti. Unless

there is enough wild food to go around, the children receive only store bought-food, particularly spaghetti which is considered "kids" food." By the end of the feast, the elders' plates are piled high with food which is wrapped in tin foil and stuffed into plastic bags to take home. On the final night of any potlatch, all of the store food and cooked wild food is given away.

After everyone finishes eating, the now soiled paper is rolled up along with all of the empty paper plates and cups and the floor swept and mopped. At this point there is a lull in the activity as people take their excess food out of the hall to their houses, cars or lodgings.

4.Dancing & Singing

During one potlatch at Tanacross, after the evening feast was completed, several of the leading men sat in the corner of the hall quietly talking and occasionally spitting a stream of tobacco juice into a Coke can or styrofoam cup. After about 15 or 20 minutes, one of the old men from the village mischievously complained aloud that the hosts were "stingy for a drum" and that he should go off and get his own. Ignoring this, the men continued to wait until two young women each brought in a drum and laid them on the

floor, where they were picked up by two of the men. Lightly tapping the drum heads, checking to see if they are tight, the men began to warm their voices. Finally, as they found a common tune, they, and all the men around them, burst into song.

Singing and dancing are always accompanied by the drum called Ch'elxal, which is a tambourine variety made of moose skin stretched over a birch frame. Usually, men are the drummers, although on some occasions young women will pick up the drum and use it. Not everyone has the ability or predilection to be a good drummer, and the importance attached to a man's ability to drum and lead songs is reflected in what people say about the drum. As one man said, "it leads the potlatch," is like an important person, and like a person, "makes noise...and good news in the dance." The sound of the drum is compared to a leading man making a congenial speech for "good favor and good feeling." Its reverberations make people "feel friendly" and enables them to have a "good time." Without the drum "it does not look [or feel] like a good time." In essence, the drum reminds people of the importance of potlatch, and when people hear the drum, they know something important is going on.

Since the drum is so important there are rules pertaining to its use. Only people who have led a good clean life, it is said, can use the drum. It has to be treated "right," and you cannot "rush with it." The drum has power to arouse people's emotions. To abuse that power by hurrying means that if the drummer makes mistakes, he can upset the harmony he endeavors to create through his drumming.

Dancing, or Ch'uuljus, and singing, or Ch'eedutiigidiyaa are integral to the potlatch. At funeral potlatches songs are sung in a particular sequence beginning with 'sorry songs,' followed by 'dance songs' and much later by a 'potlatch song' sung over the gifts immediately prior to distribution. At a memorial potlatch the same sequence is followed, except there is less emphasis on singing sorry songs. If the potlatch is entirely concerned with celebration the sorry songs are eliminated. The terms 'sorry song' and 'dance song' refer to dancing and singing done together, while potlatch songs are sung standing still.

Generally speaking dancing and singing are part of the reciprocal obligation fulfilled by the guests. In exchange for food and gifts the guests are expected to sing for the hosts both as entertainment and as a way of support in mourning and to have a good time. In fact dancing is so

important that outstanding dancers are singled out and given potlatch gifts. Guests from different villages compete with each other and with their hosts to see who are the best dancers.

No one is "supposed to hang back" from dancing. Guests are expected to dance hard because the movement of the dance helps to "break out the good time." That is why people say that to dance at someone's potlatch is to do "a favor for the hosts."³ Through intense dancing, visitors are said to "accomplish" something and satisfy both themselves and their hosts. This is particularly important at funerals where guests are expected to lift the spirits of the mourners by breaking out the good time, and loosen up the bad luck, which would otherwise remain with you.⁴

Sorry songs eulogize the dead. They vary in intensity, depending on the circumstances of death and the

³ Both Mckennan (1959: 134) and Guedon (1974: 212) record that a guest's participation in the potlatch is done as a favor to the host because they care.

⁴ A story I heard illustrates this point. Several years ago, there was a funeral potlatch held at Northway, and the people danced, but they "couldn't break out the good time." Suddenly someone rushed into the hall and said there was some trouble outside. Everyone went out to find one whole family had been asphyxiated in its car right in front of the hall. After the dead were taken care of, all the people went back into the hall and danced really hard and were finally able to break the spell of bad luck. After this, everything was all right (Story recorded at Northway July, 1987).

feelings of the composer. Because grief is a particularly powerful emotion, somewhat independent of human will, it has to be physically expelled from a person's mind and body before it becomes unhealthy.⁵ The structure of the song and accompanying dance provides for such release. Each sorry song creates an image of the deceased and arouses the feelings of loneliness and loss. Repeated over and over, the lament is interspersed with a chant.⁶ As the mourners sing, they pull their arms away from the body to the rhythm of the drum in an attempt to pull the grief out. At times this action is reduced to an up and down motion of the hands dramatizing a sense of fretting. In circumstances when the pain is particularly intense, other dancers gather close by the mourners in physical support.

To expel their grief mourners used to dance and sing for days on end; now dancing is limited to three days. At a funeral potlatch the mourning process begins with a sorry

⁵ Grief seems to have been less constrained in the past. When a person was told of the death of one of his/her relatives he/she was watched carefully. Sometimes the messenger threw his arms around the person pinioning his/her arms so that if his/her grief overcame them he/she would not hurt himself. In his/her grief a mourner might cut himself or herself with knives and singe his/her hair in open fires.

⁶ Kan noted similar expressions of grief among the Tlingit. He writes that four special "crying songs" were sung followed by four prolonged oo sounds which is said "to expel sadness" (Kan 1986: 200).

song made expressly for the deceased. During this first song only the hosts and the relatives of the deceased dance. This initial dance expresses sib solidarity by distinguishing the mourners from the guests. Following this song all the guests join in and a succession of different sorry songs are sung, punctuated by an occasional dance song. In singing a series of sorry songs, close relatives of the guests are reminded of their own loss which enables them to empathize with the emotions of the hosts.

At one potlatch in Tanacross, for example, a sequence of sorry songs began with one made especially for the person who had just died. It was followed by songs for a young man who died in a house fire 10 years before; a boy who drowned in the river while attempting to draw water and Elisha's father, who died in the 1960s.⁷ The song for the person who had just died was made by William, one of the few remaining song makers in the upper Tanana region. Sorry songs are composed with reference both to a particular quality of the deceased and some "lonely" sound such as church bell or river boat whistle. For example, a sorry song for Chief Isaac was made to the sound of a river boat whistle while another song, made for a young man shot by the

⁷ Guedon (1974) records that these same songs were sung at a potlatch she attended in Tetlin in 1969.

Anchorage police, was made to the sound of a church bell with the refrain "the church bell calls for you, where are you?" Some people broke down because "they understood what the song meant."

The sequence of sorry songs not only enables the guests to identify with the host's emotional pain but links the past with the present. The first sorry songs establish a common relationship among the potlatch participants based on shared grief. Each succeeding song extends the grief back into time drawing together both the living and the dead. Like sharing the labor of digging the grave and building the coffin, grieving becomes a way of recreating social links between generations and enabling hosts and guests to express their shared identity.

By choosing the songs, the lead singers are able to control the grieving process, keeping it within socially acceptable bounds. As one person put it, the mourners "sing WU WU back and forth, singing the sadness away and then out comes the calico!" Thus the mourners' mood is expected to change when they dance joyfully with long strips of calico which are a sign of a good time.

Dance songs are joyful, loud, playful and sung whenever people feel like dancing.⁸ Bodily movements accompanying dance songs are flamboyant, particularly for the men. Their feet planted wide apart and holding either a scarf or pieces of toweling or tissue paper, the men jab the air to the beat of the drum. They sing about familiar topics including the village of Tanacross, the dangerous business of fighting forest fires, the beautiful women of Northway, and driving to Fairbanks. This last is based on the sound of a running automobile (cf. Guedon 1974: 222). The excitement and anticipation of now mundane events, like driving to Fairbanks, are recalled and familiarized through the medium of song and dance, as are non-Native holidays, like Christmas and New Years. The dangerous business of fighting forest fires, considered an especially traditional form of Native wage labor, is further incorporated into tradition

⁸ According to oral history the Han, who live on the Yukon River to the north of Tanacross, introduced new dances to the Tanacross people in the form of "war" dances. Moosehide, the Han village near present day Dawson City (Yukon Territory), was called the "headquarters" for dance and the chief of Moosehide and his younger brother, whose name was Esau, were said to have practiced their dancing in front of a big mirror and "they danced like spruce hen on the hillside, no different." This infusion shaped the Tanacross potlatch into the ceremony it is today and developed a whole new aspect characterized by active and vibrant dancing, indicating a celebration of life juxtaposed to the stately grieving of the mourning laments (Information from an interview taped at Dot Lake, Alaska, February 1987).

when the exhilaration produced by the danger of the fire is shared and reexperienced in the context of the potlatch.

Women form a circle around the men and either stand still while moving their arms, or dance in a shuffling counter-clockwise movement. They often playfully pull men on to the dance floor at the same time. To keep the dancing going, the drummers and lead singers sing one song after another until they are exhausted.

Because singing and dancing are so integral, not only to the potlatch, but to Native cultural expression, adults make an effort to encourage the children to participate. On special occasions the young people of the host village often dance for the guests. At the old woman's potlatch, for example, the evening ceremonies began with the arrival of a group of young people called the Tanacross Singers who paraded into the hall dressed in their felt dance costumes, beaded moccasins, headbands, and beaded sashes. Cloth dance costumes were developed in the late 1960s and adopted by the Tanacross children at the suggestion of the local school teacher in the 1970s. The first felt costumes were made in colors symbolizing the sib of the child. The colors red and white stood for the Dikaqu, Chaz, and Ts'yu' sibs, while black and white stood for the

Naltcine and black and gold stood for Al-ce-den-da sib.⁹ The colors of the costumes have been changed to purple and white signifying village rather than sib affiliation. Chosen because they were close to the purple and gold used for the Tanacross softball team called the Tanacross Chiefs, the new colors indicate the lessening importance of the traditional social structure. While certain tasks, such as dressing the corpse, continue to be based on the dual social system, others are giving way to a village oriented structure, in part because fewer and fewer people, particularly the young people, know which sib they belong to.¹⁰

First, the children sang about Tanacross, joined by a few adults who supported the children's sometimes wavering voices. Soon more and more people joined in until the hall vibrated. Now people shoved and pushed, laughed and shouted,

⁹ The production of these costumes was part of the Indian Education program funded by the U.S. government, which also allocated money for local people to teach Native culture in the school. While classes in the Tanacross language were begun, it was the dancing and singing, which, as a much more conspicuous activity that can be demonstrated to non-Natives, that has survived. During the 1970s Tanacross people traveled to various southern cities to dance and in 1987 Tanacross dancers were recruited by the Tanana Chiefs Conference to dance at the nation's capital in support of amendments to the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

¹⁰ Emphasis on village affiliation is also a result of external pressures, particularly the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act which was created on the basis of village corporations.

as dancers began pulling one another on to the floor. Children, men and women all danced to one song after another. People yipped and trilled their voices. They pulled down strips of cloth tacked up on the walls, each grabbing a section to form a chain of dancers which moved counter clockwise to the music. After several songs, the calico was ripped into sections to be later given away as gifts. As the crowd in the center of the hall swelled, the intensity of the dancing and singing grew. The dancing ended when the exhausted adults had to sit down. During the lull, some people went outside to cool off in the subzero temperatures or relieve themselves. All of the dancers sipped cans of cold pop.

The last type of song sung at all funeral and memorial potlatches is called Xtiit ch'itiik or "give away song"¹¹, or more commonly the "potlatch song." Intimately connected with the gifts it is led at every potlatch by an older man who beats the drum in a rhythm very distinct from both sorry songs and dance songs. Because so few potlatch songs are thoroughly remembered one song is often sung at many different potlatches. Although the songs are personal, that is, made for a specific person, they have a general

¹¹ Guedon (1974: 219) calls it the "lucky song."

intent to spiritualize the gifts so that they will bring good luck to the host and convey the appropriate feelings. The song has to be sung precisely, without faltering or making mistakes, since it is considered Njii or bad luck to make a mistake (cf. Guedon 1974:220). It is to be sung only three times, otherwise, the luck will go too far out and may not come back. When the song is sung, it is sent out or "travels" and then comes back.

The favorable qualities of an individual the song celebrates is supposed to attract supernatural power. The metaphor people have used to explain this kind of power is money. For example, such qualities as the love for the land, hunting, picking berries, and "friendly, kindly" disposition are asked "to be turned into money." Then the song asks for all the "money," even from those who are unknown, to come and "destroy or stir up the body so people don't have to worry about it anymore." Furthermore, all of the money spent at a potlatch is supposed to "destroy the body so people won't miss that person" which is why people say the deceased is considered "very, very expensive." Money, then, becomes an overarching symbol of good fortune and value which, when infused into the gifts, makes them more significant. Money, the quintessential symbol of the White man, is also the

quintessential symbol of power to remove pain and sustain relationships.

Through their combined effort the singers alleviate the mourner's grief and eradicate bad or negative feelings and spiritualize the gifts so that they become complete demonstrations of the host's feelings and intent. These can then be distributed as gestures of love and respect, "so people won't miss that person." Thus, like the sorry songs, the potlatch song becomes a restatement of community based on shared grief.

5.Oratory

Public speeches are a vital exercise in modern potlatches as part of the reciprocal obligation each side, guests and hosts, must fulfill. Speeches can be loosely categorized into four types: condolence speeches, gratitude speeches, etiquette speeches and homilies delivered by elders to the young. Condolences, often delivered formally, are offered by the guests to the hosts, and gratitude speeches, accorded to the guests by the host, are often exchanged, each side using expressions of love and respect which strengthen the harmony and cooperation, or "good favor and good feeling," among the participants. This harmony is

occasionally broken by speeches criticizing the behavior of either the guests or hosts. Like the first two types, these speeches, traded back and forth, illustrate the competition between sibs and moieties over power and prestige.

Often an elder will address a homily to the participants urging the young people to follow the Indian way. These speeches are frequently delivered informally and in a mixture of Athabaskan and English, separating them from the very formal oratory of the old men delivered in the language of metaphor and stylized speech.

Condolence speeches are often delivered formally using genealogical references and metaphors that require considerable knowledge which, in the past, was limited to those of high rank. Today this knowledge is limited to a few elders. One relatively well understood metaphor, currently still used in condolence speeches, invokes the sacred hills and mountains connected to each major village along the Tanana and Copper river valleys.¹² The people of Tanacross, for example, have two such places: Na Dain xoo and the lesser Ma seen sh tsig. Here, a Tanacross elder talks about the importance of these places and how he learned about them.

¹² In fact it appears that a village is not really considered a village, or place of importance, if it does not have a sacred hill or mountain attached to it.

All through my young life.

I heard my grandpas speak of Na Dain xoo and Ma Seen sh tsig.

This too is used.

And the two were kept together and used together for important issues.

By my grandfathers.

Those two places were valued very high by people from all over the Country too.

People who were not in the high important category did not talk or mention those places.

Only smart wise old people did...and only those leaders talked about Na dain xoo and Ma seen sh tsig.

Only them, no one else.

Our grandmothers, aunts and uncles and especially the grandmothers who were married to those great men.

Learned and remembered.

So they could pass the information on to their children.¹³

Each "important place" connects the land to the people and their ancestors. It also symbolizes the moral strength and physical endurance of the "top men" of each sib. In continuing to live literally beneath these named

13 These lines were translated from the Tanacross language by Alice Brean. The breaks indicate normal patterns of Athabaskan speech (recorded at Dot Lake in February, 1987).

places, the people are said to be continually reminded of the power of these men whom they should strive to emulate. In memory, the old men, the "grandfathers," are still alive, are "still there," and when people speak about the hill, it is as though "[w]e call Great-Grandpa and Hill in the same time" (Guedon 1974: 147).

To explain the importance of Na dain xoo, people say that the hill is just like an American flag and has the same importance. One man, for example, remembers how he used to watch the flag ceremony at the military base once located near the village, and how the soldiers' respect for the flag was similar to the people's respect for Na dain xoo. In this way, people explain that the rocky spire of Na dain xoo stands for more people and is greater than the small hill of Ma seen sh tsiq which he compares to the Alaska state flag. This suggests that Ma seen sh tsiq stands for one sib while the other symbolizes the intermoiety marriages between the two most influential sibs in the Tanacross area: the Dikagu and Al-ce-den-da\Naltcine.

Potlatch speeches have their own dynamic. At a funeral potlatch held in a Copper River village the first speech was in the form of condolences offered by a senior headman. In his speech he assuaged the grief of the hostess,

who had just lost her sister, in an effort to establish a tone of harmony and cooperation.

Walking to the middle of the floor, he stood directly in front of the hostess to offer his condolences. In the Upper Tanana language, he said, and I paraphrase, "Don't make yourself too cheap by grieving deeply for your beloved sister. You come from diichaagh, people who are really great. I know who these people are." As he spoke he pointed to Mt. Sanford the 14,000 foot volcano that symbolizes the ranking men of the deceased's sib. He continued; "your people were so great that you do not have to feel bad and you should remember not to let your grief get you down. You should be happy because all of these people came to see you and make you happy during your bereavement." It was later said that the speaker had "hung diichaagh or greatness around her [the hostess's] neck".

This condolence speech fulfilled the speakers's reciprocal obligation to the hostess and her sib. It also reiterated an important feature of the potlatch exchange. With his words, he wrapped the hostess in love and respect which, like the special potlatch blankets given to the close friends of the deceased, were supposed to warm her and lessen her grief. By telling her not to cheapen herself, he

urged her to emulate her ancestors who, in effect were represented by the power and prominence of Mt. Sanford. By acknowledging the status of her ancestors, as well as her own, he sought to make her feel better and to emphasize the harmony and cooperation between moieties on this occasion.

On the day after the funeral, when everyone had again gathered in the hall, F.X., a Copper River man delivered a speech on etiquette, dressed in a bright red beaded cloth chief's coat given to him by the deceased's husband. Speaking angrily in both the Ahtna language and English he criticized as disrespectful the absence of the extended family members from the village after the body was brought back. They should have been in the village to greet the return of the body from Anchorage and to accept any condolences offered by attending members of the opposite moiety. Members of the opposite moiety from other Copper River villages should have been there as well. At this point, he pointedly excused several of the guests, including Jack, because they had to travel long distances. But he ignored others, specifically Elisha, who also had to travel a considerable distance.

His rebuke caused no little tension and was immediately followed by a "tradition bearer" from another

Ahtna village who delivered a conciliatory speech in both Ahtna and English. He said he was late because of family problems and transportation difficulties. Then R. M., a younger Ahtna man, made some further remarks trying to smooth over the increasing friction.

Elisha, speaking in both the Tanacross and English languages, responded to F.X.'s criticism. He prefaced his remarks by saying he was, at 75, a little young to understand all this, a remark both self-effacing and designed to put the younger F.X. in his place. Elisha said he came to the potlatch to learn about the old time and about how people are related, and he thought everyone should forgive one another, not cause worry and bear no hard feelings. All the same, he felt slighted that F.X. had not publicly excused him as he had others. No one had telephoned him or they had called the wrong person. He had not known when the body came back to the village. The telephones were not working correctly so there was a mix up as to exactly when the body was to be returned to the village or when the funeral was to be held. In essence, Elisha said that if F.X. was going to be concerned with tradition then he should follow traditional etiquette, which required that Elisha be

contacted personally.¹⁴ At the end of the speech F.X. apologized to Elisha and tried to heal the breach by calling him brother.

Excusing Jack and ignoring Elisha had been a serious breach on F.X.'s part, insulting both Elisha and his wife Lila. Their status entitled them to be contacted directly by the relatives of the deceased. By not doing so the hosts had negated any obligation on the part of Lila or Elisha who had fulfilled their respective obligations to the deceased. As a member of the deceased's moiety, Lila had donated blankets and money to the potlatch and had come to share her relative's grief. Elisha, as a member of the moiety opposite from that of the deceased, had been present when the grave was dug, had danced and sung and, as Lila's husband, donated money to be used for food, which helped insure the success of the potlatch. By specifically excusing Jack, and ignoring Elisha, F.X. had insulted Elisha's status. Since he is a high ranking member of the Al-ce-den-da sib, he should have been given recognition equal to Jack.

F.X.'s insult was not forgotten after the potlatch. The next week Elisha discussed the insult with his first

¹⁴ Guedon (1974: 211) writes that the ideal way in which to invite important people to a potlatch is to send one or two messengers to the "chiefs" and older people.

cousin William, who had not attended the funeral, in terms of their family and sib. Although William, Elisha, and Jack belong to the same Al-ce-den-da\Naltcine sib, Jack's mother is from the Copper River while William's and Elisha's mothers are from Ketchumstuk. Consequently their primary affiliations are with different maternal lineages of the same sib. By ignoring Elisha but recognizing Jack, F.X. had actually insulted Elisha's and William's maternal ancestors, a great insult indeed. Yet Elisha had acted as a man of rank should. He had not given ground. He had a right to be angry, but he had put his anger aside in favor of maintaining the harmony of the potlatch.

Speeches, such as those of F.X. and Elisha, involve matters of etiquette and prestige. Others, delivered in English, are homilies aimed explicitly at the young and are filled with a sense of urgency and warning. At one potlatch in the summer of 1987, for example, William delivered such a speech. He said in English, and I paraphrase him, that he was forced to make a speech because the potlatch was important, and you had to have a speech for potlatch. He said speeches were for teaching people about relationships, about who you are related to, about your great ancestors. Speeches were also important for teaching the Indian way. He

went on to criticize those who did not believe in the continuing importance of the potlatch.

William's speech is significant on two accounts, First he is saying that, within the present context of relative abundance and the easy life afforded by the state, people should not mistake the meaning of the potlatch to be about things instead of people. This is why he stresses the importance of talking about relationships. Second, William's speech points directly to the on-going internal dialogue about the importance of cultural tradition. He believes the potlatch retains its significance, a view derived, at least in part from his very active involvement in land claims politics. To this end William continually speaks, both at potlatches and any place he can, about the importance of the Indian Way and the importance of the land.

By using the potlatch as a platform for discussing important political and cultural issues William has earned some criticism. Many people feel that because the potlatch is such a deeply emotional ceremony, it should have nothing to do with the external world. For example, when William spoke on about the year 1991, when corporate lands will be become taxable, some of the spectators quietly said that the potlatch was no place to discuss this issue. This view was

reiterated when I asked whether the new Air Force Radar site, scheduled to be built on Tanacross land, would have an impact on the potlatch. Two people stated emphatically that the potlatch was "their life" and unconnected to such developments.

There is no disagreement about the propriety of addressing homilies to the young in the potlatch about the Indian way. Older people feel that the young people are forgetting their culture. Echoing her brother William, Jean, during the same potlatch, expressed her concern over the young people forgetting their language, and who they are. She said she was afraid that after the old people died, everyone would be "lost" and that Jack was the only one who could "hold" the people up. Jack, as the youngest of the elders, would be the only person left who knew how to lead the songs, dances, and make speeches

Similar sentiments were voiced by the former president of the Ahtna regional corporation who attended a potlatch at Tanacross later that fall. After thanking his hosts for inviting him and his people, he commented on how the upper Tanana and Copper River people share each other's grief and are one family. He then said that losing the elders meant a loss of a "cultural resource." The upper

Tanana people have to listen to William, he said, and be guided by him and his knowledge because sometime he will be gone.¹⁵

Helen is one of those people who feels the potlatch is an expressive ceremony beyond the mundane concerns of the changing social, political, and economic environment. However her conservatism is tempered by an acceptance of changes in the potlatch reflected in a speech of gratitude she gave just before the distribution of gifts at her potlatch. Her speech was significant because it was delivered completely in English, both as gesture towards the non-Natives present and the young Native people who do not fully understand the language. Standing in the center of the

¹⁵ During a Tetlin potlatch held in 1969 Guedon (1974: 230) recorded this speech.

When I'll die, you will put that one, drum stick, in my grave. Don't forget.

You have to learn Indian ways. You speak English; have to speak Indian too. Me, I don't go to school too much, but I know Indian language. Know your ways. White man got his way. But you got to learn Indian ways. Don't forget.

They are two ways. Indian way. White ways. Four ways altogether: Hell, heaven, white and Indian. We don't want to be stuck in the middle.

Nobody wants to go to hell! [everybody laughs] All you remember the Bible, what Bible says. Some houses I feel sorry for them. People drink too much. Don't do it. No good that way. Don't forget your own ways. Have a good time, dance, dance. That's why you are here. Make happy.

community hall she said, and I paraphrase, "It was for him," pointing to the picture of her son which was fastened to a Hudson's Bay style blanket hung on the wall. She had done all she could do. Now it was time to let him go. She could not think about or worry about him anymore. She repeated this several times. She expressed her gratitude to both Natives and non-Natives who attended the potlatch and helped her. Eloquent and emotional, Helen shared her grief with her guests. And, by speaking English she included Whites and younger people, thus pulling down, at least for the moment, some of the cultural and linguistic barriers separating the assembled guests.

6. Distribution of Gifts

The distribution of gifts is the climax of all potlatches. As indigenized objects the gifts are multifocal symbols representing both the indigenous cultural system and relations between Natives and Whites. Ideologically, gifts and their distribution are unconnected with power or prestige and instead are symbolic of love and respect between hosts and guests. As traditional objects the gifts are also symbolic of cultural identity based on a specific

historical period which, for Native people, was characterized by Native competence and autonomy and an equality with Whites.

On the last night of a potlatch the gifts, which had been stored in caches, are brought to the hall in pickup trucks and passed through a window, since the thresholds of the doors are regarded as polluted by young women passing through them. Although this precaution is redundant because young women are allowed into the hall, continuation of the tradition reemphasizes the spiritual nature of the gifts. Once in the hall blanket after blanket, in every color imaginable, is removed from huge cloth storage bags and stacked in the center of the room.

Although symbolic of love and respect, the gifts, like food at the feasts, are amassed for calculated displays of abundance. At the potlatch for the old woman, whose funeral I discussed in chapter 6, there were between 600 and 700 blankets stacked waist high in the center of the hall. Yet, because most blankets are relatively inexpensive their quantity is no indication of the size or expense of a potlatch. Rather, the social significance of a potlatch, as well as its size in economic terms, is measured by the number of guns, which are sometimes ostentatiously

displayed.¹⁶ At the funeral potlatch for the old woman there were 40 rifles, which is considered a large potlatch.

After the gifts were stacked, Jack's daughter made a short speech to thank the guests saying she hoped all the help (including the gifts) would be "blessed" and that she was happy people helped out because it really showed people cared for "grandma." She then read off the names of people who made donations. The donations indicate people's affection for the deceased, and because of this the woman asked that they be "blessed," in the Christian sense. She also meant that the gifts be blessed to bring good luck to the hosts and attract other wealth so that those who made this potlatch eventually got back what they gave away.

At this potlatch a variety of individuals gave donations including, guns, blankets, cash and some food. Some of these donations are listed in figure 7.1. The first collections of gifts were supplied by the deceased's closest maternal relative, her granddaughter, a member of

¹⁶ At a potlatch held in the fall of the 1987 the children and grandchildren of the deceased paraded single file into the hall holding two rifles, each one wrapped with a dentalium shell necklace. During the early 1970s all the guns to be distributed at a potlatch were hung on the wall of the community hall throughout the entire three day period of the potlatch. This practice has been discontinued because, as one woman said, someone might steal them. In the 1920s and 30s both blankets and guns were hung outside on specially made fences.

Figure 7.1 The following is a list of the gifts provided by the potlatch hosts and donated by friends and relatives at a memorial potlatch for a Dikagu woman held at Tanacross in January of 1987.

Donor(Sib)	Items donated	Relationship to deceased
Female (<u>Dikagu</u>)	4 guns, 150 blankets & \$300 cash.	Granddaughter of the deceased. Gifts used as part of the payment to opposite moiety.
Group of siblings (<u>Dikagu</u>)	3 guns, \$100, 50 blankets.	Gifts donated to honor their father who was deceased's brother's son. Because these people were the same sib as deceased their donations could be used as payment to opposite moiety.
Wife (<u>Dikagu</u>), Husband (<u>Al-ce-den-da</u>)	5 guns & \$50 cash.	Wife is a sibmate of deceased. Guns used as payment to opposite moiety. Cash from the husband used to purchase groceries.
Female (<u>Al-ce-den-da</u>)	4 guns, 50 blankets.	Woman was a member of moiety opposite to the deceased. This donation was made in honor of the deceased's brother's son who is a sibmate of the donor.
Female (<u>Al-ce-den-da</u>)	2 guns, 20 blankets & \$100 cash.	Woman was a member of moiety opposite to the deceased. This donation was made in honor of the deceased who was the donor's paternal aunt.
Male (<u>Dikagu</u>)	\$50 cash.	Member of the same moiety as deceased. Gift used as part of the payment to opposite moiety.
Male (<u>Dikagu</u>)	\$100 cash.	Member of same sib as deceased.
Female (<u>Dikagu</u>)	5 blankets, 10 scarves.	" " " "
Female (<u>Chaz</u>)	10 blankets, 1 gun.	Member of the same moiety as deceased.
Female	5 blankets, \$50 cash.	" " " "
Female	\$50 cash, 21 blankets.	" " " "

the Dikagu sib. These included gifts accumulated by the granddaughter, donations made by members of her moiety, and donations from friends, like myself. As the basic payment to the opposite moiety for their participation in the funeral, the distribution of these gifts sustained reciprocity between moieties and by extension maintained traditional linkages between potential affines. This was also the focus of a second collection, consisting of five guns, contributed by the leading Dikagu woman in Tanacross. Her donations were meant to increase the size of the potlatch and thus enhance the prestige of her sib.

A third collection of gifts came from Jack's children, who are members of the deceased's Dikagu sib. The stated reason for distributing these gifts was not to honor the deceased, but to specifically honor their father, saddened at the death of his aunt. In a general sense these gifts served to maintain intermoiety reciprocity because they would be distributed to members of the opposite moiety. Their distribution was also meant to acknowledge specific matrilineal linkages between Jack's family and the guests. There were also two relatively large donations that were out of the ordinary. The first was a collection of gifts supplied by the woman who had dressed the corpse and was a

member of the moiety opposite the deceased. Her stated reason for providing these gifts was her distress at Jack's grief. A second collection of gifts was also made by a woman of the opposite moiety and presented specifically for the deceased, who was her paternal aunt.

In effect the distribution of gifts served to honor two people, the deceased who was of the Dikagu sib and her brother's son, who was of the opposite Al-ce-den-da sib. This duality was allowed because in Tanacross these two sibs are linked through exclusive marriages so that each reproduces and reinforces the other, creating two powerful localized lineages allied by many marriages. The deceased was the last surviving member of group of siblings who, because they made these correct marriages, were the progenitors of almost every living Tanacross resident. Additionally, the deceased was Jack's last surviving relative on his father's side. Consequently, several people took advantage of this situation to gain prestige by distributing gifts. While the individuals who made the donations earned prestige the potlatch was technically hosted by the Dikagu sib while the Al-ce-den-da acted as guests. This was reflected in the distribution of gifts.

The distribution of gifts (see figure 7.2) followed the general pattern which placed initial emphasis on moiety

Figure 7.2 Gifts are distributed according to status and participation in the ceremony. The following table lists some of the recipients at a potlatch for a Dikagu woman, their role in the ceremony, the gift they received, and their relationship to the potlatch host.

Recipient	Role in Ceremony	Gifts	Relations to host
Male	Made a condolence speech, sang, led potlatch song.	Gun, necklace, 2 blankets, \$20 cash.	Elder in moiety opposite from deceased. (<u>Nesas</u>)
Male	Danced and sang.	Same as above.	Elder in sib opposite from deceased. (<u>Al-ce-den-da</u>)
Male	Made a condolence speech, dancing and singing.	Same as above.	Elder in sib opposite from deceased. (<u>Al-ce-den-da</u>)
Male	Danced and Sang.	Same as above.	Elder in sib opposite from deceased. (<u>Al-ce-den-da</u>)
Female	Danced and Sang.	Same as above.	Elder in sib opposite from deceased. (<u>Al-ce-den-da</u>)
Male	Danced and Sang.	Same as above.	Elder in sib opposite from deceased. (<u>Al-ce-den-da</u>)
Male	None	Same as above.	White man, former grandson-in-law of the deceased.
Male	Helped dig grave. Danced and sang.	Gun, 2 blankets, \$20 cash, shovel.	Young man in moiety opposite from deceased.
Male	Helped dig grave.	Gun, 2 blankets, \$20 cash, rope used to lower coffin.	Young man in moiety opposite from deceased.
Male	Helped dig grave.	Gun, 2 blankets, \$20 cash, axe.	Young man in moiety opposite from deceased.
Male	Danced and Sang.	Gun, 2 blankets, \$20.	Elder who traveled a particularly long distance.
Male	Danced and Sang.	\$20, 4 blankets.	Participant who traveled a long distance.
Female	Danced and Sang.	Same as above.	" " " "

reciprocity and the age structured hierarchy. Consequently, the first people to receive gifts were the six ranking men and women of the opposite moiety. Acknowledgement of their rank and effort was apparent in the amount and kinds of gift they receive. In this instance they received a necklace, one gun, two blankets and \$20.00. Additionally the deceased's son in law, a White man who had taken care of her for many years, was given the same gifts. Many non-Native people closely attached to the village are thus publicly honored. When this was done the crowd clapped to show their approval.

The second category to receive gifts were the young male members of the opposite moiety who dug the grave and acted as pall bearers. Their gifts differed from that of their elders in that, instead of receiving a symbol of leadership or rank, such as a necklace, they were given a digging tool as a symbol of their labor. Again, to show their approval, both for the young men's participation and the gift, the audience clapped and cheered when the young men received their gifts. Included in this round of distributions were two White men who had helped during the funeral.

Once these distributions were finished, lower ranking guests and visitors including the priest and

missionary were given several blankets. Finally, once the bulk of the gifts had been distributed, the remainder were given out in a some what random fashion to anyone who had not yet received one. At this point relatives of the deceased scanned the audience to make certain no one especially helpful was forgotten. However, to maintain moiety distinctions none from the deceased's sib received a gift, even if they participated in the funeral. Once the distribution ended all those who received something danced with their gifts. Elated, the crowd danced one last dance, people waving their gifts above their heads, demonstrating their appreciation for the gifts and restating their solidarity. The potlatch was now officially over.

7. Conclusion

Structured by an image of tradition the ritual actions of the potlatch emphasize the values of love, respect, reciprocity, generosity, kinship, and competence. At the same time these values and actions are used to mask statements of superiority inherent in the distribution of food and gifts.

Potlatch oratory, more than any other aspect of the ceremony, is a potent demonstration of the underlying

tensions in the ceremony. Through oratory, conflict can become direct. These tensions can be mediated by condolence speeches in which the guests assuage the host's grief and show their love and respect. With his words the speaker wraps the host in love and respect and builds the host's confidence by talking about the strength and courage of the host's "great people" or relatives. In doing this the speaker emphasizes the harmony and cooperation between the potlatch participants. By the same token he cements the unity of the group. Though these speeches are supposed to create harmony, conflicts over prerogatives and prestige can erupt at any time. As we have seen, this can result in a verbal exchange as each speaker attempts to maintain his prestige or to soothe over bad feelings. While conflicts expressed in these speeches are primarily the concern of the elders other speeches are aimed directly at young people.

Feasting, dancing, singing, distributing gifts, all free in large measure of the hazards of speech, forcefully dramatize the most enduring Native values. In the feast, the host endeavors to create an image of abundance and, by providing wild food, demonstrate his traditional competence. By sharing food with guests he meets his reciprocal obligations. In keeping with tradition, the evening feast is

served on the floor, a reminder of the old way and therefore a reminder of a period of history characterized by Native autonomy and competence.

Singing and dancing perform several functions in a potlatch. Sorry songs, expressing grief; control and expel it; in conjunction with dance songs they rebalance the forces which have caused the death of the person. As part of the reciprocal obligations between host and guest, everyone is obliged to dance. With swelling emotion, everyone joins in a display of harmony that marks the potlatch. Singing and dancing lift the spirits, and they are instrumental in creating, if only for a few hours, a sense of communal solidarity.

The climax of every potlatch is the distribution of gifts. We have seen the lengths to which a host will go in accumulating resources for the ceremony. Through the distributions the hosts seek to maintain reciprocal relations and to extend those relations by distributing gifts to as many people as possible. Such distributions speak to the importance of maintaining the fundamental relationships which are the basis for Tanacross society. At the same time the distribution of gifts is also an attempt to reformulate existing relations between Natives and Whites

based on a past model of equality and reciprocity. By accumulating and then distributing goods produced by the White man Tanacross people try to place White economic success in a Native perspective. That is, by accumulating large numbers of objects Tanacross people demonstrate their equality with Whites which they then transform into a superiority by distributing them in a grand gesture of social solidarity.

Distribution, then, within the present political and economic context, becomes an act of resistance against the assimilation and domination of Native society while at the same time asserting a commonality with Whites based on a perceived set of shared values: sharing and love. It is also a statement made by older Natives to younger Natives about what is correct and acceptable human behavior within the context of abundance provided by the western economic system.

Chapter Eight

Conclusion: Continuity and Change

The most significant cultural event in the life of the Tanacross people is the potlatch. I have tried to show it as a dynamic response to political and economic domination, drawing on cultural traditions to critique the present circumstances of the people and to provide a possible vision of the future. The basis for this critique is the duality of competition and cooperation in which competition has come to symbolize the White man's way and cooperation the Indian way.

In discussing the significance of the potlatch in Tanacross history and culture I began by showing, in chapter two, that despite external pressures to abandon the ceremony Native people elaborated and expanded the potlatch. This expansion, as I point out in the following chapter, did not produce a disjuncture in meaning but involved an elaboration of the indigenous conceptual system. This elaboration allowed, for example, the integration of various trade goods which became symbolic, not only of prestige, but of fundamental social relationships.

Leadership was central to this development. But, as I show in chapters three and four, the authority and prestige of a leader did not merely rest on his ability to distribute scarce goods but on his capability to reproduce the social order. This is the same task set for modern tradition bearers, who through their practical and ritual efforts, act as guides in maintaining the Indian way. Outlined in chapter 5, the Indian way is a construction of tradition based on an opposition between Indian and White. In chapters six and seven I show how, in the modern potlatch, actions are structured by the Indian way in order to submerge competition and enhance cooperation. Yet, in spite of this effort competition emerges as a dynamic motivating force.

I also show how contemporary Native people perceive themselves as standing between the old Indian way and modern White ways. Threatened by loss of the old, and by assimilation to White ways, the potlatch asserts and recreates the continuities of the old Indian ways. Yet these are not pre-contact ways. Instead, they are the traditions of the early 20th Century when Indian and White ways were in respectful balance. And, the potlatch reasserts social community among Indians in opposition to the complete

dissolution of collectivities which Native people see in the White world.

The issue of competition in the potlatch has been addressed by several authors. Each has maintained that the meaning of the potlatch was fundamentally altered through the introduction of trade goods which produced a dynamic "struggle" between Native communalism and capitalist individualism (Goldman 1975; McKennan 1959; Ringel 1979). McKennan asserts that in the case of Upper Tanana culture this process resulted in competitive potlatching between leaders which produced a contradiction between the old "semicommunistic" order and the new order based on wealth generated through trapping and trading (1959: 129).

I take the view that, while contact influenced the dynamic between communalism and individualism, Native participation in the fur trade did not produce it. It was already inherent in the dialectical relationship between communalism and individualism which produced the internal dynamic in Athabaskan culture and continues to motivate attempts to redefine the culture and the potlatch. This dynamic, I believe, was a part of a proto-Athabaskan culture common to both the northern Northwest Coast and western subarctic (cf. De Laguna 1975; Kan 1989; McKennan 1969;

Rosman and Rubel 1983). This same dialectical merging of communalism and individualism is found in the Feast of the Dead, a mortuary ceremony of the Koyukon Athabaskans who live along the middle Yukon and Koyukuk River of western Alaska. By distributing the personal property of the deceased, and that accumulated for the ceremony, the host reaffirmed the principles of communalism, praised the memory of the departed, and reflected glory upon himself (Jette in Lyons: 1964: 138).

Trade goods and their redistribution in the potlatch were associated with prestige and enhanced status distinctions. Far from having a single reference, however, foreign goods were indigenized and transformed into powerful multifocal symbols representing fundamental relationships and the maintenance of the social order. Distributed in the potlatch, trade goods symbolized social linkages between potential affines in a moiety system that antedated the historical contacts between the coast and interior.¹

¹ The origins of Athabaskan matrilineality and dual social system have been debated among anthropologists for some time. Boas, (also see Allen 1971) for example, tried to locate the source of matrilineality along the Pacific coast. However, the predominant view today is that matrilineality and a dual social system antedate the fission of ProtoAthabaskans into coast and interior groups. de Laguna (1975), McClellan (1964), McKennan (1969) and Murdock (1955) challenge the notion that matrilineality and a dual social system were borrowed by Athabaskans from the coast during the nineteenth century, along with a fur generated wealth complex.

Furthermore, trade goods became symbolic, not only of individual prestige, but of competition over sib prestige. By obtaining the rights over dentalium shells and guns the Dikagu sib had the right to be acknowledged, in potlatch oratory, as the first people to have brought them into existence. By securing this privilege the Dikagu continually reaffirmed their corporate status as wealthy people.

Although participation in the trade certainly enabled Athabaskan leaders to enhance their status (Bishop 1983, 1987; McClellan 1975; McKennan 1959, 1969) their position as leaders lay not only in the ability to redistribute exotic or scarce goods, but also, as I have said, in their capability to reproduce the social order. It was by providing leadership in communal activities, such as caribou hunts and the potlatch, which insured the group's existence and continuity, that a leader gained prestige and the right to lead. Similarly, modern leaders or "tradition bearers" are expected to demonstrate this same cohesive power (cf. Rasnake 1988: 267) in a symbolic manner by drawing people together in the context of the potlatch. Yet, as they inspire unity, adherence to tradition, and work for the common interest, modern leaders, like their historical counterparts, are also at the forefront of competition and

redefining tradition in terms of their own self interest and experience.

While fundamental alterations have occurred in Native culture through the processes of historical contact, viewing external forces as the primary motivation for change makes it appear as though Native people are divorced from their own history, as if they are not actors in and makers of that history. Native society is not static or responsive only to specific historical factors, such as demographic shifts, the advent of trade, or government sanctions (Codere 1951; Drucker and Heizer 1967). Nor is the contemporary Athabaskan potlatch a ceremony which nurtures Native identity completely insulated from Whites (Stearns 1975), or an ethnic manifestation which serves to identify people in terms of the conceptual system of the dominant society (Veber n.d.: 3). Rather it is both responsive to history and resilient in maintaining and reproducing fundamental cultural values. It is through the potlatch that Tanacross people, for example, have resisted the imposition of a capitalist attitude toward property and instilled the value of social reciprocities and the importance of an Indian society and distinct identity.

Rather than becoming reflections of individual market success (Ringel 1979) or symbolic of "dead currency"

(Goldman 1975) dentalium shells, beads, guns, and blankets were indigenized and became objectifications of power and emotion reflecting both fundamental cultural values and historical forces. Gifts distributed in the contemporary potlatch are not contemporary consumer goods but the objects introduced and identified with the hunting culture of the 1890-1930 period. As traditional objects 30-30 lever action rifles, beads, Hudson's Bay style blankets, scarves and cloth serve as symbols of Native autonomy and competence. In continuing to distribute these, contemporary Native people sustain their relationship with the their past and reproduce a sense of their own history.

While economic competence and individual achievement is recognized, such endeavors are not simply defined by the market economy nor have they turned the modern potlatch into an arena for individual rivalry (cf. Ringel 1979). In fact, economic pressures have led to the maintenance of social relations as individuals seek to cooperate in order to potlatch. What is expressed in the distribution of potlatch gifts is not just the individual's ability to accumulate and distribute objects but a reaffirmation of shared cultural values based on reciprocal obligations which create a web of fundamental social relationships. The host's prestige rests

on his or her ability to sustain these relationships. In this respect the central act of distribution is the key symbol of resistance. By continuing to distribute accumulated goods Native people maintain a distinct image of themselves in opposition to what they perceive as a self centered and nonreciprocating White society.

Central to the maintenance and recreation of tradition in the potlatch is the leadership of the tradition bearers. While no longer prominent in the economic life of the village they are significant figures in village social and cultural life. They provide organizational skills and knowledge necessary to perform the ceremony. Their actions are based on their understanding of the world, forged through a synthesis of personal experience and understanding of tradition. Through the communication of their oratory, songs, and dance, they guide the re-creation of the symbolic world of tradition and the maintenance of a distinctive Athabaskan identity. In performing these ritual demonstrations the tradition bearer legitimizes his role and the broader institutional framework of Tanacross cultural identity.

This identity, based on the ideals of the Indian way, has surfaced out of the historical encounter between

Natives and Whites particularly after World War II. Pre-war relations were thought, by Native people, to be reciprocal and equal. Whites lived as Natives, producing a cultural integration and reciprocal dependence which spoke of equality. With the war this universe collapsed. Strained relations brought about by disputes over land, resources, and hunting rights and a decline in social contact between Natives and Whites caused a redefinition of Native identity based on a set of oppositions between Native and White.

In this opposition Native people saw themselves as community oriented, generous, and relying, not entirely on themselves, but rather a set of traditional relationships based on love and respect. Whites, on the other hand, were individualistic, competitive, self centered and concerned only with money. This opposition also encompasses the duality of competition versus cooperation, individualism versus communalism, love and respect versus power and prestige, Native versus White, and the present versus the past. They also define contradictions of modern Native life and culture. Through the ideal of cooperation, constructed around the traditional themes of kinship, generosity, reciprocity, love, and respect, Native people attempt to create and maintain a certain view of what decent and

acceptable human behavior ought to be (cf. Scott 1985: 23). However, as a tradition and model for action, the Indian way presents contradictory images. People see themselves as coming from a positive past, but moving, almost inexorably, towards a negative future of alienation, economic competition, and materialism.

Within Tanacross culture there is a dialogue about the relevance of the potlatch. None of these views are held exclusively but vary according to the individual's changing perceptions and engagement with ritual activities. There are those people, for instance, who see the potlatch as personally relevant and removed from external forces. These same people may also see it as a vehicle for stressing Indian values but not as a basis for political action, as others might. In this respect the Indian way and the potlatch become a legitimating factor in the pursuit of political rights for self determination. On a narrower scale many people view the ceremony also as an important vehicle for community cohesion and action, and in this sense the potlatch becomes one of many village activities, albeit the most important one. At the same time there are those who feel the potlatch has lost its significance as a cornerstone of a belief system which can sustain people. Finally there

are some, mainly young people, who feel the potlatch is completely irrelevant to a modern way of life.

The potlatch is in no sense the last gasp of a dying culture. The very fact that the potlatch produces debate, the fact that so many people participate indicates its vitality. Within the diversity of views there is a consensus that the potlatch is still a central part of Native life. In it people can recreate those social linkages based on the ideals of tradition, and by encouraging and seeking the participation of Whites they can recreate relationships with them on the basis of equality and reciprocity.

The potlatch has survived a kaleidoscope of historical change, yet it continues. Clearly it serves a profound need in the human endeavor to understand who he or she is, and that in the context of Tanacross culture this is achieved within a framework of ceremonial and social relations. As one man told me, "we have to stick together, otherwise who will bury us, who will make the [grave] fence? Someday, who knows, maybe I will make your fence."

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