

## BLACK MARKET IN PREROGATIVES AMONG

### THE NORTHERN KWAKIUTL\*

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The data in this paper refer primarily to the Owikeno or Rivers Inlet Kwakiutl and concern the illegal or surreptitious transfer of ceremonial prerogatives to alien tribes, chiefly to those groups of the same stock living to the South. The Owikeno were at one time perhaps the most numerous of the Kwakiutl-speaking tribes. Their prosperity resulted largely from the fact that theirs was the greatest salmon stream between the Fraser and the Skeena Rivers. Owikeno wives were much sought after by neighboring tribes for the Owikeno were extremely rich in the vast array of names, legends, songs, dances and all other items of the complex system of rank, privileges and prerogatives of the area, and these were normally acquired by advantageous marriages.

But the disasters attending contact with the Whites struck the Owikeno with exceptional force. Their villages were not easily accessible and the restraining arm of the missionary and Indian Agent was scarcely ever felt. Neither mission nor school was ever established in their territory, nor did the Owikeno follow the example of many of their neighbors and attach themselves to a trading post or mission. Tribal morale fell to a low point. In 1935 a potlatch ended only with the burning of the entire village where the survivors had isolated themselves. Worse, all the ceremonial regalia were destroyed as well. Today only about twenty adults survive, but they and their children still retain the rights to all the names and the attendant prerogatives of their ancestors for these intangibles are in native theory eternal and indestructible. They may be in abeyance but they are not extinct. Those not in use lie dormant, so to speak, and may be revived at any time by an heir giving a potlatch and assuming the title in question.

Since the rights to literally hundreds of prerogatives now reside in the handful of survivors, each of these survivors holds at least potential or partial rights to more names and the attached prerogatives than he can possibly assume for no name may be assumed without giving a public festival (or potlatch) costing from a hundred to several thousand dollars. Furthermore, there is an elaborate but obscure code regarding the ethics and rights of potlatching. Much of this in turn revolves around concepts of social status, which again rests on intangible but elaborate stan-

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dards. There are definite limits to which a man may aspire, however great his ambition or his willingness and ability to potlatch. Attempts to go beyond these limits would entail a loss of "face" as devastating as loss of "face" in China or Japan. The result is that a large number of titles heavy with prestige go begging for want of a candidate who is at once willing, able and worthy of assuming them.

Through centuries of inter-tribal marriage it has come to pass that almost all the natives from Seymour Narrows to Prince Rupert are in some way related, or claim to be. Accordingly, each has a potential or remote fractional share in many of the prerogatives not only of his own tribe but of other tribes. But there exists a fairly definite scheme of priorities which usually prevents indiscriminate assumption of titles by unworthy, unjust, or alien claimants.

Among the Owikeno these titles and the associated prerogatives are called suyaema, which translates as, "things which one may lay hold of", or almost, "things that men live by". Each adult among the survivors holds undisputed claim to one or several titles and a few persons of high rank could lay claim to many. As one man phrased it, "My suyaema are without number and beyond counting," - meaning that he had prior or secondary or other rights to a great many titles and prerogatives both active and dormant.

No right-thinking Owikeno would consider selling his prerogatives. They may be given in a marriage, lent, given away in a potlatch, or disposed of to settle a financial or even a moral obligation, - but sold, never! "We Owikeno do not sell our suyaema", they say, referring with contempt to that practice among some neighboring tribes.

The aspirant to a name should make sure that there are no objections to his assumption of the dormant title. If there are none he proceeds to lay his plans. The attendant ceremonies are called "bringing out" or "showing". This clinches the right to the title since its assumption is done at a public festival, i.e., there are witnesses. A title not thus validated is worthless or, in effect, still dormant. Proof of just claim also involves a statement publicly made by the claimant or his "speaker" as to how the claimant came to inherit the right to the title. The usual mechanism or form includes the telling of a legend concerning an ancestor and how this ancestor came by the things in question. Usually a supernatural experience of this ancestor is related. These legends (and here is the crux of the matter) contain much detail such as names, descriptions and events which supposedly only a rightful heir could know. Above all they contain detailed references to local places which no alien or false claimant could conceivably duplicate. The distribution of gifts is in part a pay-

ment to the guests for honoring the host by listening to all this and witnessing the ritual.

In recent years some members of the tribe reputedly have sold several dormant Owikeno titles to aliens. These have not been the names of highest rank but names which nevertheless are decidedly worth owning. What they really sell are the legends which authenticate the titles, and which could not possibly carry the mark of authenticity without the attendant details. Those who thus acquire the treasured prerogatives have only to "bring them out" be means of a potlatch. The price is usually several hundred dollars. This may be used by the black marketeer to finance a potlatch at which he or members of his family assume other dormant titles or add to the "heaviness" of those already held.

There is neither kin-group nor tribal mechanism for preventing the unscrupulous from thus disposing of the treasured items; neither is there a means of punishing them. Public opinion has lost its force. Those who may have had equal or even greater claim to the title can do nothing beyond spreading gossip about the supposed transaction. The illegal trader in prerogatives may be called a "grabber of suyaema" with the connotation of "stinker"; but accomplishes nothing. In former times a feud of an inter-tribal war could have resulted. But now gossip is soon forgotten by all but those directly concerned. The unprincipled seller had at least a fractional claim to the things in question - as is proved by his knowledge of esoteric details. The buyer learns the details well enough to sound convincing when he assumes the title. The false claim becomes in time a true claim. The falsity is forgotten or ignored. An Owikeno title has been lost and no one can prove that it was a "black market" operation.