CONTEMPORARY KWAKWAKA'WAKW POTLATCHES ■ GLORIA CRANMER WEBSTER

O my children, I am glad to see that you are obeying the laws that were given to our ancestors. You know that if we make a mistake in this ceremonial, it means that our lives will be cut short. When I was a young man, I saw my grandfather kill a man who broke the rules of the red cedar bark.

Tugwama'lis, a chief of the Gusgimukw, spoke these words to his tribe during potlatches held at Tsaxis (Fort Rupert) in the winter of 1894. The proceedings were recorded by Franz Boas, assisted by George Hunt. Three tribes participated both as guests and hosts—the Kwagu'ł of Tsaxis, the 'Nak'waxda'xw of Ba'a's (Blunden Harbour), and the Gusgimukw of Xwatis (Quatsino).

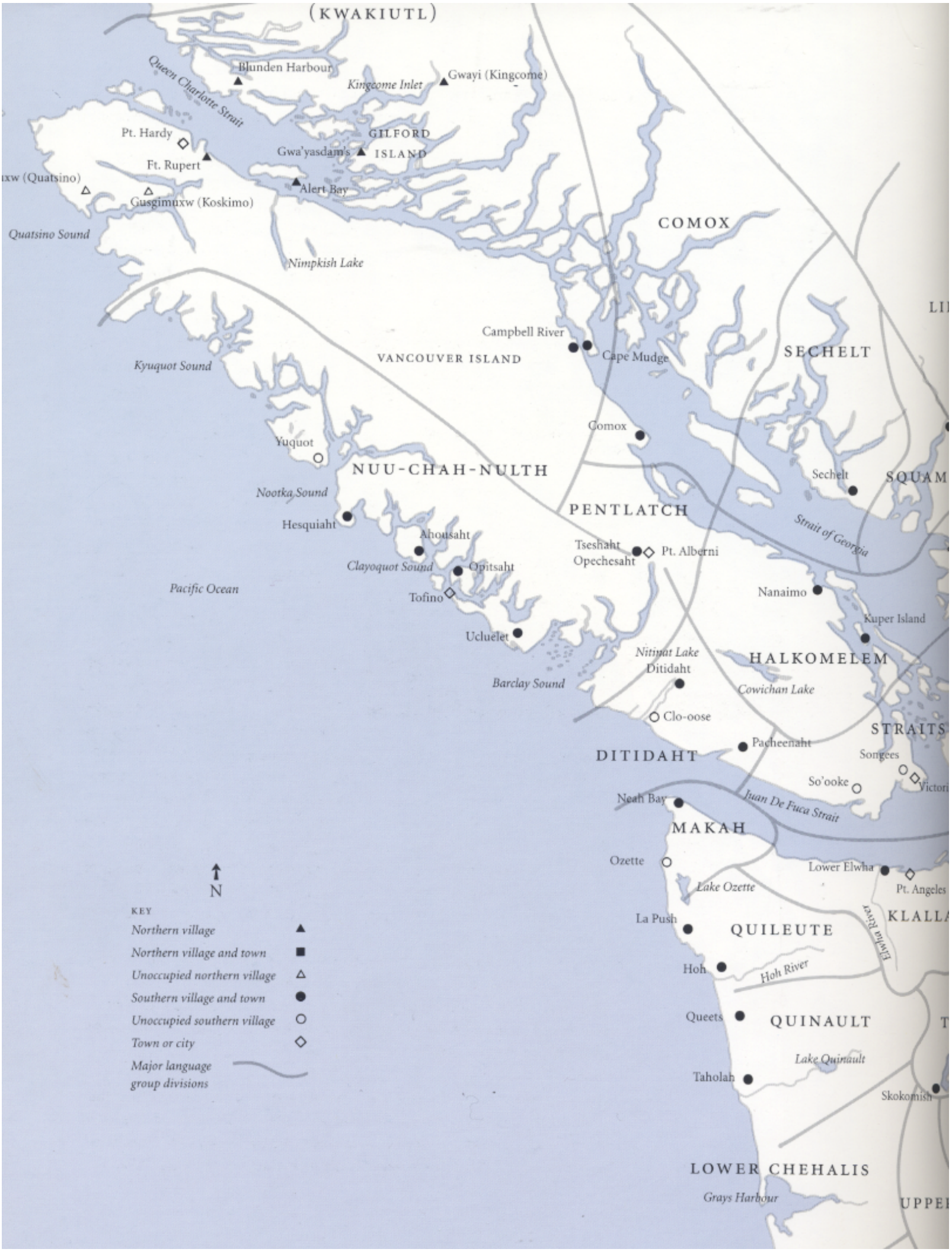
An indication of how much our ceremonies have changed may be found in the detailed descriptions Boas wrote a century ago. Many of these changes were due to the impact of colonization, about which much has been written. At the time of Boas's visit to Tsaxis, our world was already being transformed, judging from another statement by Tugwama'lis made several days later:

You have seen part of my younger days, for you have seen my father. But you have not seen my grandfather. I have seen him. His rules were strict, but those of my father were a little less rigid. Our rules of the Winter Ceremonial are much less strict than those of olden times.

In addition to Boas's material, other information about early potlatches exists in the memories of people now in their seventies and eighties, whose experiences include participation in ceremonies before and after 1921. In that year the culture of the Kwakwaka'wakw was devastated by the federal law prohibiting the potlatch. Forty-five people, including the highest-ranking chiefs and their wives, were arrested for breaking the law by such acts as making speeches, singing, dancing, and distributing and receiving gifts. When the Indian Act was revised in 1951, the section relating to potlatch prohibition was simply deleted, not repealed, as our people had hoped. For thirty years, from 1921 to 1951, the potlatch had gone underground, but never died out completely among the Kwakwaka'wakw, as it did in other areas of the Northwest Coast. There was, however, a significant loss of knowledge during this period, about which our old people say, *"Luł p̓adax'idan's 'nalax"* (when our world became dark).

The effects of such loss may be seen at contemporary potlatches, which have changed drastically from those in earlier times. Among the changes is the absence of big houses in many villages. Until two years ago, only one big house stood in each of four reserves: 'Yalis (Alert Bay), Gwa'yasdam's (Gilford Island), Gwa'yi (Kingcome Inlet), and Kumuxs'i (Comox). In June 1992 a big house was

Cat. no. 74, detail.


(KWAKIUTL)
Queen Charlotte Strait
Blunden Harbour
Kingcome Inlet
Gwayi (Kingcome)
Pt. Hardy
GILFORD
ISLAND
Gwa'yasdam's
Ft. Rupert
Alert Bay
xw (Quatsino)
Gusgimuxw (Koskimo)
Quatsino Sound
Nimpkish Lake
COMOX
Campbell River
Cape Mudge
VANCOUVER ISLAND
SECHELT
Kyuquot Sound
Comox
Yuquot
NUU-CHAH-NULTH
Sechelt
SQUAM
Nootka Sound
PENTLATCH
Strait of Georgia
Hesquiaht
Ahousaht
Tseshaht
Opechesaht
Pt. Alberni
Clayoquot Sound
Opitsaht
Pacific Ocean
Tofino
Nanaimo
Kuper Island
Ucluelet
Nitinat Lake
Ditidaht
HALKOMELEM
Barclay Sound
Cowichan Lake
Clo-oose
STRAITS
Pacheenaht
DITIDAHT
Songees
So'ooke
Victori
Neah Bay
Juan De Fuca Strait
MAKAH
Ozette
Lower Elwha
Pt. Angeles
Lake Ozette
La Push
QUILEUTE
KLALLA
Elwha River
Hoh
Hoh River
Queets
QUINAULT
Lake Quinault
Taholah
Skokomish
LOWER CHEHALIS
Grays Harbour
N
KEY
Northern village
Northern village and town
Unoccupied northern village
Southern village and town
Unoccupied southern village
Town or city
Major language group divisions

completed in Tsaxis, in which two potlatches have been held to date. On other reserves that do not have a big house, potlatches are held in community halls or in big houses in other villages, mostly in 'Yalis. Regardless of where the potlatch takes place, the speaker for the host still welcomes guests to "the house of my chief," even though that chief may be from another village.

Today potlatches are much shorter than those of earlier times, and the time of year is no longer restricted to the late fall and early winter months, as was usual in the past. Now a potlatch may take place at any time of year, and many occur during the early summer, before the fishing season begins. Most rarely last longer than one day, usually beginning in the late morning or early afternoon and ending sometime late in the evening or early morning. A few may be spread over two days, with the *t'seḵa* ceremonies held on the first day and the *tła'sala* on the second day. Occasionally, people complain that potlatches are too long, and one wonders how such people would have survived in earlier days, when ceremonies took days and even weeks to complete. The shortness of potlatches today has resulted in many changes to procedures.

'Namugwis (David Hunt) at the Chicago World's Fair, 1893, dancing as a *hamat'sa* in red cedar-bark style regalia and a beaded apron. Behind him, on the left, are Kidiłame', sitting next to her husband, He'masi'lakw, of theTłat'łasikwala (Hope Island band).

Some of those changes affect the *hamat'sa*, which has always been considered the most important of the dances performed at a potlatch. The initiation of *hamat'sa* dancers is now much abbreviated—the initiate's appearances all happen within the space of minutes, rather than days, as in the past. The initiate no longer *xas'id* (disappears) before entering the big house in a wild state. When my grandfather, 'Namugwis (David Hunt), became a *hamat'sa* in 1894, he disappeared for four months, spending some of his time trapping for furs in the forest behind Ba'a's, unseen by the 'Nakwaxdaxw. During this period, he appeared briefly at a potlatch being held at Xwamdasbe' (Hope Island), then disappeared again until it was time for him to return to Tsaxis. He was the first *hamat'sa* to be initiated there for some time.

Four years earlier, tragedy had struck the Kwagu'ł. Several canoes were traveling back from a potlatch in 'Yalis and ran into bad weather just as they were approaching Tsaxis. Among those who had not gone to the potlatch were parents of a recently deceased child. When the bereaved father saw the canoes capsizing, he made no effort to rescue the people, saying, "Let them die with my child."

Every family in the village was affected, and the chiefs decided that they would remain quiet (i.e., hold no ceremonies) for four years. When the period of mourning was ending, T'lalili'lakw went to the chiefs and said that it was time for her oldest son, 'Namugwis, to become a hamat'sa. The chiefs agreed and

The Hunt family Raven pole at Fort Rupert village, 1914, carved by Charlie James. Erected ca. 1905 at the house of David Hunt, George Hunt's eldest son and grandfather of Gloria Cranmer Webster, this pole was carved to memorialize the connection between the Hunt family and the Gaanax.ádi clan of the Tlingit from Fort Tongass, Alaska. The original of the Gaanax.ádi Raven pole was taken from Fort Tongass to Seattle in 1899 by a group of businessmen and erected in Pioneer Square. A copy was made in Saxman, Alaska, in 1938 to replace the fire-damaged original, and now stands at the Pioneer Square site.

preparations began, including the construction of a big house. In front of it was erected a totem pole, a replica of one which had stood in Tongass, Alaska, the birthplace of Anisalaga (Mary Ebbetts), grandmother of 'Namugwis. She was married to Robert Hunt, an Englishman employed by the Hudson's Bay Company. They settled in Tsaxis, where she and her children participated actively in the ceremonial life of the Kwagu'l.

In recent years there has been some criticism that in the old days Kwakwaka'wakw women had no voice in decision-making. It seems clear in this case that two women were, in fact, responsible for fairly major decisions affecting the whole village. Other stories told by our old people confirm that women were powerful in their society. Their authority was dependent on their position in the community. T'laliłi'lakw was the only sister of high-ranking Kwagu'ł men and Anisalaga, although a foreigner, was accepted as a respected member of the community, recognized for her contributions to the Kwagu'ł and other tribes in the area.

Today, the influence of women in potlatch decision-making is still very strong. As in many societies, among our people women outlive men, so we have more of them still with us to provide direction and guidance. A significant number of older women did not attend school, and their traditional knowledge is much more extensive than those who received some kind of education at residential or other schools. The latter were away from their homes and families during the years that they would have been learning about ceremonial matters, rights and privileges, as well as more practical things such as food gathering and preparation. It is sad to hear them say, *"K'iyosegan k'odłał"* (I don't know), when asked for information.

It seems worth noting that more women are becoming *hamat'sa* than in earlier days, when women rarely became such dancers. The only exceptions then were when a family had no young male candidate for the honor, or when the legend explaining the dance specified a female. In our family, we have a female *hamat'sa*, who represents the wife of the chief of the undersea world. She appears with a variety of sea creatures, including a seal, sea lion, killer

whale, salmon, and herring. They enter through the front door of the big house, indicating that they have come up out of the ocean. On either side of the entrance, women of the family dance in place, wearing Chilkat blankets, to show that this *k'is'u* (privilege) comes from the north. Because she is from under the sea, this *hamat'sa* is silent and does not cry "Hap!" as most dancers do. Today, it seems that a woman becomes a *hamat'sa* because she wants to and for no other reason, although there may be eligible young males in the family to whom the dance and name would be more properly given. It is a sign of the times, I suppose, that feminism has entered the world of the potlatch.

The length of early potlatches was due, in part, to the explication required for each of the *k'is'u* displayed. The loss of traditional knowledge during the dark years often means that this kind of long explanation is not offered today. Even at the ceremonies recorded by Boas in 1894, it seems that this omission was beginning to be evident, as he notes: "At this point, the Kwagu'ł chief Nakap'ankam asks pointedly about some of the privileges being transferred."

The difference between then and now is that no one openly challenges the potlatch-giver's right to certain privileges. Instead, following the potlatch, people will ask each other, "'Widzi gayutłax?" (Where did he get that from?) There is much discussion about who really owns the dances shown or names given. There are often emotional expressions of regret that our world has changed so much that people act improperly.

At these times, I am reminded of my late aunt, who used to boast that we are not like other people, for we do not have long arms. What she meant was that our family is so rich in *k'is'u*, that we know exactly what we own, we have no need to reach out to take what we cannot legitimately claim. Judging from what is often seen at contemporary potlatches, some people, especially first-time potlatch-givers, are developing very long arms, leading to even more confusion in our rapidly changing world. Feelings of animosity arise as well, frequently accompanied by expressions of ridicule directed toward the person who presumes to take what does not rightly belong to him. Most of this is avoidable, because we have knowledgeable old people who can advise those who are mere beginners in the complex system of potlatching.

It has been said before that many of the treasures that Boas saw being used at the first potlatch he attended ended up in museum collections around the world. A later generation of Kwakwaka'wakw saw treasures now in the Hauberg collection being used ceremonially in their own home territories. Contemporary carvers, to some extent, have been able to fill in the gaps left by earlier museum acquisition, but there are times when the appropriate ceremonial gear is just not available, so people either do without or substitute another piece which may not be entirely appropriate. An example missing at today's potlatches is the skull rattle, such as the one now in the Hauberg collection. It was used only by the attendants during the appearance of the *hamat'sa*. Nowadays, such attendants carry any kind of available rattle for the *hamat'sa* and continue to use the same rattle for all the dances that follow. The distinctive *hamat'sa* neckrings and headrings illustrated in *The Social Organization and Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians*, one of which is similar to a piece in the Hauberg collection, are no longer used. Instead, ordinary neckrings are later worn by other dancers. As recently as twenty years ago, the

hiligaxste' (female attendant of the *hamat'sa*) usually danced wearing her own special headdress, often a *gwaxwiwe'* (raven forehead mask). Unlike the *gwaxwamł* (raven *hamat'sa* mask), which is meant to cover the face of the dancer with its red cedar bark trim, the *gwaxwiwe'* is worn on the forehead. The suffixes of the terms are the clue: *-iwe'* refers to the forehead, *-amł* to the face. Today, the *hiligaxste'* most often wears an ordinary red cedar bark headband no different from that worn by less important dancers. Some dances require the wearing of a plain blanket, and people who have never attended a potlatch before often wonder about the significance of a button blanket worn inside out. The only meaning it has is that no plain blanket is available. All these types of substitutions are becoming increasingly accepted, hastening the loss of meaningful parts of ceremonial gear.

In his 1894 account, Boas lists a number of hereditary offices: speaker, assembler-master of ceremonies, tally-keeper or name-keeper, and song-maker (see cat. no 93). Of these, only one position remains, a combination of speaker-master of ceremonies. As anyone can now attend a potlatch, an assembler is no longer required to call the guests to their rightful places—people sit anywhere in the big house. Because gifts are not distributed in order of rank, there is no need for a person to call the names of the recipients in their proper order. No potlatch host has his own song-maker anymore, for new songs are rarely composed. The only instance I know of concerns the female *hamat'sa* described earlier, which had not been seen for a long time and no one remembered the song for it.

Kadzitła, or marriage ceremony, at the village of Hegam's (Hopetown), British Columbia. L. to r.: William Robertson (seated), Daisy Robertson, Annie Nelson, Ethel Pearson, Charlie Williams, Audrey Cadwallader, Annie Cedar, Robert Joseph, Peter Smith, Tom Willie. Behind Annie Cedar, Elsie Williams, with Deborah Speck at far right. The bride and groom are Audrey Cadwallader and Charlie Williams.
Photo Steve Brown.

Among the Kwakwaka'wakw, the 'Nakwaxdaxw and the Gwa'sala of Tak'us (Smith Inlet) have long been known for their ability as artists and composers. My family turned to Wa'kas (Ed Walkus) a well-regarded Gwa'sala song-maker. He listened carefully to my aunt telling the legend of the *hamat'sa* and the creatures who dance with her. After sitting quietly for a while, he began to sing, following the legend exactly.

Unfortunately, that kind of creativity has almost disappeared, as part of the changing world we live in. As a result, the same songs are sung at almost every potlatch. The rationale given is that we are now so few that we must share what little we have. To be sure, it is right that we support each other in our efforts to hold on to what we have left, but we should not overlook the resources that exist in recordings made by people such as Mungo Martin in the 1950s. These are available for those who really want to learn what belongs to them.

Babagwaxa, from the word for "man," *bagwanam*, is only seen once in a while at a contemporary potlatch. It is an old custom whereby a boy or girl about ten years of age is led into the big house by four chiefs and taken to the front of

the house. The host chief, who is said to be *dła'wisala* (standing in front of, i.e., the child is standing in front of the chief), announces that the child is assuming a man's name and is to be recognized as a man. In the case of a male child, the act also signifies that he is ready to become a *hamat'sa*. In the days when family connections were better known, a child might *babagwaxa* in several villages where either of his parents had close relatives. In each case, he would receive a new name associated with that branch of the family, to be used in that village during visits. It is only among the old people that *babagwaxa* still has meaning. For the most part, only women in their seventies or older have men's names, and a few of them are impressive speakers at potlatches.

A fairly recent addition to contemporary potlatches is the *kadzitla*, the traditional form of marriage among the Kwakwaka'wakw. The practice had almost disappeared during the heyday of the missionaries, who insisted that, unless people were married in church, they were living in sin. In December 1933, twenty couples trooped into the Anglican church in Alert Bay to be properly married. Among them were several old people well past child-bearing age, who had been married in the traditional way decades before. My parents, who already had four children, were part of the group, although my father had *kadzitla* my mother several years earlier. Today, young people who do not speak our language and have little knowledge of our culture seem to think that *kadzitla* strengthens their identity in some mysterious way. Sometimes the bride is non-Indian, leading to the question of what she can possibly bring to the marriage that is of value. To get around this problem, she may be temporarily adopted by another tribe, so that she has a "father" to speak for her.

An authentic *kadzitla* involves the transfer from the wife's to the husband's family of a number of names, dances, goods, and money. In the past, on rare occasions, depending on the status of the couple, the wife's family might include the gift of a mountain from its territory. This happened twice in our family, with one husband being given a mountain in Dzawadi (Knight Inlet) and the other a mountain in Gwa'yi (Kingcome Inlet). Sometimes, a copper is *sapidayu* (*sapa*: to throw a long object) from the wife's family, but it is bought back immediately because the family values it. The price for the copper is then added to what will be distributed at the end of the potlatch. In earlier times, a *kadzitla* involved competitions to win the bride. These might be tests of strength, such as young men lifting a sack full of rocks and trying to carry it over some distance to where the bride waited. Another contest had the young men running up a steeply inclined plank on top of which was a platform where the bride sat. The winner of any of these competitions could then claim the young woman. Today, there are no such activities at a *kadzitla*; instead, tribes in order of their rank circle the floor, attempting to entice the bride. No elaborate speeches are given prior to the tribal group approaching the bride, as would have been done in former times. The speaker for a tribe might have described the hardships experienced in reaching the bride's village due to bad weather. "But we have come in our magic canoe, which paddles itself, and we never fail to win what we come for," is typical of the statement one would hear, when people still observed the proper protocol of a *kadzitla*.

Time, or lack of it, has affected another aspect of contemporary potlatches. Before the Kwakwaka'wakw became clock-watchers like everyone else,

the duration of a potlatch was of little concern. It was important that relatives be properly recognized by participating in the dances, with the rank of the dance dependent on the closeness of the relationship. Now, with people worrying about catching ferries or planes and getting back to their jobs, everything is rushed. One example of this is the way in which the women's dances are performed. In order of their tribal rank, women are invited to dance in large groups. At the end of the dance, the speaker announces: *"Hexse'am dłidłagamsukis dłidłagami."* (Their names remain the same names as before.) No consideration is given to the actual kinship tie between the individual dancer and the host chief. It is primarily a matter of courtesy.

In recent years, performances by outsiders have become part of potlatches. Several events have included Maori or Hawaiian visitors who have been invited by the host family and have added their own dances and speeches. Occasionally, leaders of these groups are given names by the host.

Distributing gifts signals the end of the potlatch, and the manner in which this is done is often unacceptable to our old people, who remember when gifts were given to individuals in order of their rank. When we give a potlatch, our old people always remind us that we must remember who has given other potlatches that we have attended and at which we were well treated, the wives or widows of those hosts, and people who have traveled long distances to attend are also people who receive special consideration in the value and amount of gifts and money given. As well, we must remember to provide gifts for those who are not actually at the potlatch, giving their gifts to a close relative for delivery. Above all, we must ensure that no one leaves the big house empty-handed. Too often these basic principles are ignored, because the people distributing the goods and money do not know who people are and what gifts are appropriate to their position. Those who are *babagwa̲sa* are treated like ordinary people, and it is an insult for the wife of a chief to receive the same gift as a woman who is not a chief's wife. Obviously, the old people have a lot to say about such incorrect distribution of gifts, because they know the proper way, and they find it hard to understand why someone who goes to the trouble and expense of hosting a potlatch does not take the time to make sure that everything is done properly.

The language of the potlatch has changed as much as other parts of the ceremony. Reference to Boas's records gives some idea of the powerful way in which chiefs spoke. The speeches were full of extravagant praise for the potlatch host, who might be described as a mountain from which great quantities of wealth fall. "His property runs from him in streams, and if one of his rivals should stand in the way, he would be drowned by it," is an example of the kind of statements made in those early days.

During the years that the potlatch went underground, people would entertain themselves with a less serious ceremony called *gwa̲myasa*, which has been translated to mean "a play potlatch." Participants were given names completely different from the serious ones given at proper potlatches. *K'a̲mdza̲kw* (salmonberry), *tłama'is* (beach), and *łałk'u* (duck) are among the play potlatch names used. Gifts were given that would make people laugh. At one play potlatch in Fort Rupert, a husband sewed his wife's spoons onto his blanket; then, when he finished dancing, he removed the spoons and gave them away to the guests. Later his wife retaliated by tearing up his canvas tent into strips and giving them

away as if they were Hudson's Bay blankets. The same kind of extravagant speeches heard at real potlatches were given, often by young people.

Play potlatches, if they are held at all today, occur as part of a school program, and the only language used is English, so that a training ground for eloquent and articulate speakers has been lost. That loss is evident in most speeches made at contemporary potlatches. They are short, lacking the power expressed by earlier orators. Some people speak only in English because they have little or no fluency in Kwak'wala. Some use the opportunity to make political statements that have no place at a potlatch. When the chiefs are invited to speak, it is for the purpose of thanking the host for his generosity and to praise him for his determination to follow in the path laid down by his forefathers. Speakers who know the host's family history will refer to it and acknowledge kinship ties where they exist.

We have a fairly good idea of how potlatches happened a century ago as well as information about those that came later. We can speculate on what a potlatch might look like a hundred years from now. It is possible that with the rate of language loss, the whole ceremony will be conducted in English. Perhaps masks and dances will be shown, but no one will remember what they mean or where they come from. It may be that new dances with new masks will be created, with new stories and legends to go with them. All of these possibilities are a worst-case scenario. On a more optimistic note, it is more likely that what will be seen in the future will not have changed very much from what we see today. The basis for my optimism has to do with the increasing concern among active potlatch participants that some of the recent changes are unnecessary and based on ignorance or arrogance. With the help of our old people, who are still with us, we can find the right path again and become even stronger.