

Name _____
Date _____

Potlatch

A potlatch is a ceremony traditionally held by Native Americans of the Northwest Pacific Coast. This ceremony was practiced in different ways by different Native peoples, including the Haida and the Salish, and it continues to be practiced today by some of these groups. One common feature of the potlatch is that the host always gives a gift to every guest. This gift giving serves many functions in society. Historically, the potlatch was a social occasion, but it also determined a person's position in society and allowed the wealth of the community to be shared more equally.



In the past, a potlatch was a big party that lasted several days. Guests came for the speeches, the singing, the dancing, and the feast. A good host was expected to provide more food than the guests could possibly eat. The main event of the potlatch, however, was the gift giving. The host presented gifts to each guest based on social rank. This means that more important people generally received larger gifts.

People held potlatches for many different reasons. A potlatch could mark a birth, death, or marriage. Hosting a potlatch makes a statement to the community about the host's wealth and social position. Sometimes a person who had been publicly embarrassed held a potlatch to regain honor in the community. A potlatch could also be a way for rivals to compete to see who had more wealth.

Ultimately, the potlatch served two main functions: to confirm the social position of the host and to redistribute the wealth among people in a community. Since potlatches were usually hosted by wealthier people, they were a way for these people to share their wealth with those less fortunate. In this way, the potlatch was both a powerful economic and social tool—and of course, it was also a great party.