RANK, WEALTH, AND KINSHIP IN NORTHWEST COAST SOCIETY[1]

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NORTHWEST COAST society was organized on no idealistic premises of the equality of man. Each individual had his place in the arbitrarily calibrated social structure of his community. However, the casual designation so often encountered of this social pattern of ranked statuses as a "class" or "caste" system with nobles, commoners, and slaves, is a crude over-simplification, except as regards the division of society into freemen and slaves. It will be the aim of this paper first to show that there were no social classes among the freemen, but rather an unbroken series of graduated statuses, and second, to investigate the principles underlying this gradation of rank.

For a working definition of a social class we may take the dictionary formulation: "Class: A group of persons, things, qualities, or activities having common characteristics or attributes;" or, "a group of individuals ranked together as possessing common characteristics or as having the same status."[2] Thus, the fundamental requirement of a class, socially speaking, is the sharing by its members of some trait or traits which set them off as a distinct entity within their society. This common attribute, we may expect, will direct specific attitudes and behavior by them and toward them as a group. Where such attributes distinctive of social *groups* were lacking, we are not justified in speaking of a class system.

If we survey Northwest Coast society as a whole, we find that two great social classes existed everywhere: freemen and slaves. The distinguishing criterion, condition of servitude (whether by capture, birth, or debt does not matter here) placed every individual in one or the other group. As a member of his group he enjoyed certain rights or was subject to certain disabilities—depending on which group he was in—and by virtue of his membership was the object of esteem or scorn, and was entitled to scorn or esteem those of the other class. That slaves were sometimes treated with kindness and given certain concessions made no difference in their class membership; they were still slaves, and as such belonged in a sphere apart from the free.

As a matter of fact, the slaves had so little societal importance in the area that they scarcely need be considered in problems relating to the

[1] Read before the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, December, 1937. The writer wishes to express thanks to Dr Ralph Linton and to Dr R. H. Lowie for their helpful criticisms of the paper.

[2] *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language* (2nd ed., unabridged, G. and C. Merriam Co., Springfield, Mass., 1936).

social structure. "Society," in the native view, consisted of the freemen of a particular group. Slaves, like the natives' dogs, or better still, like canoes and sea otter skins and blankets, were elements of the social configuration but had no active part to play in group life. Their participation was purely passive, like that of a stage-prop carried on and off the boards by the real actors. Their principal significance was to serve as foils for the high and mighty, impressing the inequality of status on native consciousness.

If we seek groupings among the freemen comparable to the division into free and slaves we fail utterly to find them. I do not, of course, mean that all freemen were equals among themselves; but there was no class of nobility set off distinct from a class of "commoners," much less a three- or four-fold class system. We search in vain for any diagnostic traits defining groups within the society of freemen.[3] There were individuals reckoned high and there were those considered lowly, true enough. Those of high rank abstained from menial tasks such as fetching wood and water, they wore costly ornaments and finer garb, and strutted in the spotlight on every ritual occasion. But these were not class prerogatives. They were not restricted to a certain group; there was no point in the social scale above which they were permitted and below which prohibited.[4]

To compare the role of the highest rank member of a Northwest Coast social group with that of the lowliest member gives an impression of a remarkably vast difference in cultural participation. The significant point is that the difference lay in extent of participation, not kind. One less high

[3] Dr Murdock has seen such a criterion among the Haida, in the kind and number of potlaches given by one's parents (Murdock, 1936). While it is possible that the Haida differed from all their neighbors on the coast in tending to synthesize social patterns into neat categories (and this seems unlikely, to judge by Swanton's rich data, and the present writer's brief acquaintance with these people), another explanation appears more probable. For reasons to be enlarged on in another place (footnote 22) it would seem that within late historic times the nature of the Haida potlach has altered even more than that of other groups, though all have been affected—the modifying factors seem to be an increase in surplus goods (through European trade) and decimation of the population. For the period of adjustment to these new conditions, in the case of the Haida from about 1850 until the abandonment of the potlach yet more recently under European influence, Murdock's interpretation must stand unchallenged. The bases of the social order must have been quite different formerly, however, if the Haida shared the broad patterns underlying societal organization of the entire area.

[4] The only institution which resulted in a cleavage of the freeborn social unit was that of the dancing societies ("secret societies") of the Kwakiutl tribes and their immediate neighbors. Even there, so far as modern informants know, there was no well-defined alignment of the populace into potential members and non-members. It appears that the head of a family owning a number of dance performances distributed them among his kin; the point at which the family stock of individual dances was exhausted defined the limits of the initiated and uninitiated groups.

than the highest in rank, participated less fully in ostentatious activities. A person a grade above the lowest participated in these a bit more than the one on the bottom rung. And thus the manifestations of statuses of high and low degree shaded into each other.

What actually occurred was that each society consisted not of two or more social classes, but of a complete series of statuses graded relatively, one for each individual of the group. No two individuals were precisely equal in rank, in fact, equivalences would pose insuperable difficulties. This is brought out most clearly in the potlach. Barnett's keen analysis has brought out the prime function of the potlach in validating status;[5] all I want to do here is to point out the mechanics of the procedure. In the distribution of the potlach gifts, it was manifestly necessary to give them out one by one, else a mad scramble would result. Invariably the giving was in order of rank. The highest ranking individual of the recipient group was named first, and given his allotted share; then the second highest, and so on down the line. This order of giving was, from southeast Alaska to the mouth of the Columbia, the most important expression of the concept of rank. For two recipients to be of equal status would throw the whole affair out of gear, obviously, for neither would submit to being called after the other. An event in recent Nootkan history reveals the difficulties involved in such a situation.

During the latter half of the last century, apparently about eightyy ears ago, the Tlupana Arm tribe, consisting of several local groups who wintered at ō'is, moved down to Friendly Cove, joining the Moachat ("Nootka"). The head man of ō'is stood first in the tribe; he had married a close kinswoman of the Moachat chief, and because of this relationship the latter offered him and his tribe a place at Friendly Cove. (The Tlupana Arm groups had been seriously reduced in numbers both through wars and the usual historic-period causes.) In addition, the Moachat chief "shared" his potlach-seat with his kinsman. For a time, when one potlached the joint tribe, he had to give simultaneously to the Moachat and Tlupana first chiefs, and by analogy, to both second chiefs, and so on down the line. This was extremely confusing; both names and both gifts had to be called out simultaneously. No one was satisfied. Finally the Moachat chief in second place gave a potlach at which he gave to all the Moachat chiefs, from first to last, then began with the Tlupana Arm chiefs. The first chief of the Moachat then tried to establish another order: himself and the Tlupana first chief; the second of Moachat, then the second of Tlupana; the third of Moachat, then the third of Tlupana, etc.

This did not meet with favor; the Moachat second chief was really receiving third, the third fifth, and so on. Nor would the Moachat chiefs approve of a plan to give simultaneously to both first chiefs, then to all the Moachat chiefs and after

[5] Barnett, 1938a.

them the Tlupana men. They insisted on following the lead of the second chief, each giving to his own first chief (Moachat) and his fellows first, then to the Tlupana chiefs. The Moachat chiefs were rich, and did most of the potlaching; whether the Tlupana chiefs desisted because of poverty or from tact I do not know. There came to be considerable feeling over the situation. Finally the first chief of Tlupana potlached, announcing that henceforth he would receive after the Moachat chiefs (and of course his subordinates received after him), so everything was settled. The whole difficulty was, in the informant's view, that the Moachat first chief "had been trying to violate all the rules of the potlach" in interfering with the established order of receiving.

In short, there were no classes of statuses in Northwest Coast society. Each individual had his own particular status in the graduated series from high to low; each person's status had its own attributes which were not quite like those of anyone else. To insist upon the use of the term "class system" for Northwest Coast society means that we must say that each individual was in a class by himself.

Before undertaking an analysis of the factors contributing to rank, it will be necessary to define briefly the social units within which rank was regulated. First of all, a survey of the source material indicates very clearly that the primary social unit was the local group, a group of people sharing rights to the utilization of economically important places and occupying a common village.[6] Even among the Northern Nootkans, Southern Kwakiutl, and some Coast Tsimshian, where confederacies of these local groups formed larger units at the winter villages, the smaller divisions retained their economic autonomy and moreover manifested it in rituals, for the local groups were the usual participating units.

When we come to examine the constitution of the typical local group of the area, a more striking fact appears: everywhere this social division was no more and no less than an extended family (slaves of course excluded) and was so considered by its members.[7] The individual of highest rank in the social unit was related to the lowliest, distantly, it is true, but nevertheless related. So ties of blood as well as common residence and common economic resources welded the group together.

Now while the economic resources—fishing, hunting, and gathering

[6] Swanton, 1908, pp. 396 ff.; Murdock, 1936, p. 16; Boas, 1916, p. 527; Drucker, Heiltsuk field notes; Boas, 1921, p. 792; Drucker, Nootkan ms.; Barnett, Coast Salish ms.; Gunther, 1927, pp. 200, 263; Olson, 1936, p. 99; Ray, 1938, p. 55; Drucker, 1936, p. 243; Kroeber, 1925.

[7] Swanton, 1908, p. 398; Sapir, 1915, p. 4; Boas, 1916, pp. 482, 488; Drucker, Heiltsuk notes; Boas, 1920, p. 118; Drucker, Nootkan ms.; Barnett, 1938, p. 129; Gunther, 1927, pp. 184, 241, 291; Olson, 1936, pp. 90, 95, 106; Drucker, 1936, p. 243; Waterman and Kroeber, 1934, p. 5.

grounds—pertained to the local group as a whole, titularly they belonged to individuals. We have to do here with two overlapping and apparently not well differentiated concepts of property-right. Characteristically, a man is said to have "owned" an economically important tract. This "ownership" was expressed by his "giving permission," as natives usually put it, to his fellows to exploit the locality each season. At the same time fellow-members of his local group—his relatives—had an inalienable right to exploit the tract. The present writer time and again has heard statements by informants from northwest California to Tlingit country to the effect that a certain man "owned" a particular place, for example, a fishing-site, and that his permission was required before other members of his society could use it. Nonetheless no instance was ever heard of an "owner" refusing to give the necessary permission. Such a thing is inconceivable to the natives. The situation is perfectly clear to the Indians, if not to us. Actually, individual ownership in these cases does not mean exclusive right of use, but a sort of stewardship, and the right to *direct* the exploitation of the economic tract by the local group. The latter it was who held exclusive right.[8]

Nootkan custom illustrated the nature of such rights very clearly. Almost every inch of Nootkan territory, the rarely visited mountainous back-country, the rich long-shore fishing and hunting grounds, and the sea as far out as the eye could reach, was "owned" by someone or other. An owner's right consisted in the right to the first yield of his place each season—the first catch or two of salmon, the first picking of salmon-berries, etc. When the season came the owner called on his group to aid him in building the weir or picking the berries, then he used the yield of the first harvest for a feast given to his group, at which he stated his hereditary right (of custodianship) to the place, then bade the people to avail themselves of its products. Any and all of them might do so. (Outsiders were prohibited from exploiting these owned places, except where they could claim kinship to the owner, i.e., for the time identify themselves with his local group.) The essence of the individual "ownership," was thus simply a recognition of the custodian's right.

The individual "ownership" or stewardship of economic areas was regarded as highly important, giving, as it did, a measure of authority to the incumbent of the position—political authority of a sort, and thus prestige. The rights were inherited according to local rules of inheritance (by the sister's son among Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, and Xaisla; by the son elsewhere in the area), so that it came about that in every Northwest Coast society economic wealth was in the hands of the direct descendants of a single line. Due to a disinclination to divide these holdings equally among a

[8] A few observers have realized the implications of land "ownership" by individuals in the area: Murdock, 1936, p. 16; Barnett, 1938, p. 129.

group of brothers, the bulk of the economic tracts of a local group was under the custodianship of a single individual at any one time: the eldest heir of the past "owner." This was as true in northwest California as in the regions north of the Columbia where the principle of primogeniture was so explicitly phrased.[9] Thus, the economic possessions of a Northwest Coast society were chiefly in the custody of, or nominally "owned" by, a line of eldest sons of eldest sons (or the matrilineal counterpart of such a line). By virtue of their stewardship these men were elevated to prominence. Directing utilization of the natural resources as they did, they were the acknowledged heads of the groups—the heads of the extended families.[10]

The extended family heads are the individuals referred to commonly, as the "chiefs."[11] The close relatives of the chiefs were not lacking in prestige, however, not only because they were intimately associated with the head of the social group, but in addition they customarily held various minor properties, in lands and other things as well.[12] They were ranked according to their nearness to the chief. In the course of a few generations, as the secondary lines of descent diverged more and more from the direct line, and as patrimonies dwindled, descendants of the chief's brothers could claim but a low rank. Nonetheless by virtue of their kinship to the head of the village they retained certain rights and privileges. The rights of utilization of economic tracts by all group members may be reckoned an expression of this recognition of blood-relationship, as was, in the north, the right to receive at potlaches even though in a low place. The significance

[9] For northwest California see: Kroeber, 1925; Drucker, 1936, p. 248. Among the matrilineal tribes of the north, the normal heir was eldest surviving brother or eldest son of the eldest sister, according to the writer's information, although only Murdock gives us a specific statement to that effect (1936, p. 17; see also Barbeau, 1929, p. 6). Elsewhere the first born inherited: Boas, 1921, p. 823; Drucker, Nootka ms.; Barnett, 1938, p. 131; Gunther, 1927, p. 261; Olson, 1936, p. 115; Ray, 1938, p. 55.

[10] Dr Linton has called my attention to the important fact that since the "claims" included all the available territory along the coast it was impossible to gain social prominence by taking up a new claim in virgin territory, i.e., by pioneering. Though once there must have been a frontier, it long ago disappeared, just as has ours in recent times.

[11] It is not, of course, legitimate to refer to the head chiefs of the Northwest Coast as a "social class," for there was but one in each social unit. The effect of confederation of local groups (Northern Nootkans, Kwakiutl) makes this clear: the chiefs of the several constituent units did not form a class of equals, but were arranged in a ranked series.

[12] The statement recorded by Boas in a family tradition that the youngest of the five brothers "was like a slave and a dog" (1921, p. 1097) should be regarded as an exaggeration for the sake of the plot, and not be taken literally. We have similar incidents in our fairy-tales —the princess Snow White was forced to work as a scullery maid—which no one takes seriously for sociologic interpretations.

of these last-named facts is that status in its minimum terms—membership in society—was derived from kinship and expressed in terms of wealth.

Thus far our survey has dealt with the broader aspects of the problem. It appears that social position on the Northwest Coast was determined by two linked factors: heredity and wealth. It remains to be seen how the basic pattern was worked out in each of the major subdivisions of the area. Naturally, in an area as extensive as the Northwest Coast, one would expect to find varied manifestations of the fundamental trends of areal culture. We find a sharp cultural break just south of the Columbia River mouth marking off two sub-areas. The focus of the southern sub-area lay in northwestern California. The northern portion of the coast may be further divided into culturally homogeneous blocs by a boundary drawn across northwestern Washington and around the Straits of Georgia, approximately the northern limits of Coast Salish territory (excepting the Bella Coola).[13] We shall consider the manifestations of the concept of graduated status of each of these divisions in turn.

In peripheral northwestern California, where we might expect to find areal patterns expressed in simplest terms, we find that rank was determined primarily by possession of wealth.[14] The reckoning of status according to one's mother's bride-price savors of the hereditary principle, but the cultural accent was on wealth-holding rather than on blood. Nevertheless social position in this region was hereditary, for the simple reason that the status-giving fortunes were inherited, not earned anew each generation.[15] It must be owned that these statuses were only loosely seriated within the group; the elaborate gradation found in the north was unknown. The outstanding figure in each local society was the head of an extended family who by virtue of his capital directed many activities. His custodianship of economically important sites made him preëminent in matters relating to the food quest; his capital of token goods gave him a voice in ritual affairs, for he had to equip the dancers in the wealth display performances, and in the social life, where he contributed to marriage payments and weregild.[16] Next to this proud figure stood close kinsmen, brothers, cousins, and the like, who basked in reflected glory, as they, according to nearness of kinship, could draw on the resources of the head of the group when necessary.

[13] The cultural divisions outlined here have been established by the writer in a synthesis of trait distributions of the entire area, as part of the University of California Culture Element Survey program. There are still smaller blocs, within the two major and two secondary divisions, which could be pointed out, but they have little bearing on the present problem.

[14] Kroeber, 1925, pp. 39, 28; Goddard, 1903, p. 58; Drucker, 1936, p. 244.

[15] Kroeber, 1925, p. 41. [16] Goddard, 1903, p. 58; Drucker, 1936, p. 245.

Grading into this group were lesser men who depended on what scraps of riches they might possess, the amount of bride-price paid for their mothers, and their favor in the eyes of their "big friend." (These are not, of course, categories representing distinct social classes, for they shaded imperceptibly into each other).

From the Columbia to the Straits of Georgia the basis of status was the same as in the south—hereditary wealth—although the fact of heredity was stressed more and more as one proceeds northward.[17] Similarly, more precise systems of ranking within each society are suggested, as we enter the domain of the potlach where order of precedence becomes a matter of great concern.[18]

It was in the societies north of the Salishan-Wakashan linguistic boundary, however, that the concept of formal status had its most luxuriant growth. The principles underlying this gradation may be brought out most clearly if we begin with a type individual to see how he attained his place in his social system. The first thing that set our individual off from his fellows was his name. Names, on the northern coasts, were very definitely hereditary property, and what is more, each name carried with it a particular social evaluation based on its traditional origin and the honor or disrepute of its bearers subsequently. That is to say, the names themselves were ranked from high to low.[19] Each name had a particular status associated with it, a status which was expressed on formal occasions of feasting and potlaching, where the order of receiving was determined by the sequence of the names. So firmly rooted was this association of name and rank that the process of assuming a particular status, social, political, or ritual, consisted in taking (or having bestowed upon one) a certain name. The Kwakiutl, among whom the system of naming reached its most profuse elaboration, had separate names for feasts, for potlaches, and for their secret society performances.[20] A personal name was thus a key to its bearer's status and embodied all the rights, economic and ceremonial, to which he was entitled.

Our friend, then, by taking his real name, defined at a blow his formal

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[17] Ray, 1938, pp. 48 ff.; Olson, 1936, p. 89; Gunther, 1927, p. 260; Barnett, Coast Salish ms.

[18] Ray, 1938, p. 95; Olson, 1936, p. 127; Drucker, Nootka ms.; Boas, 1897, p. 339; Murdock, 1936, p. 11.

[19] Swanton, 1908, p. 422; Sapir, 1915, pp. 23–25; Boas, 1916, p. 509; Boas, 1921, p. 785; Drucker, Nootka ms.

[20] It should be noted that the statuses of the various names to which an individual was entitled were equal; that is, one who held the secular name of highest rank had the highest feast name and the highest dance name also.

status in his society. To assume his name and status two things were requisite. First of all, he had to have a right to the name in question, usually through heredity, though in some regions transfers outside of the direct line of descent might be made: in a repayment of a bride-price, for example, or the name might be captured in war, or seized if a debt was not paid.[21] The sole purpose of the interminable discourses at naming ceremonies was to declare the right of the claimant, through heredity or other legitimate transfer, to the name in question.

The second requisite for name-taking was that it be done formally and publicly, accompanied by a distribution of goods, that is to say, a potlach. Not only was the name itself considered wealth, and connoted wealth, but wealth in token goods was mandatory for assuming it. If our type individual was heir of the head of his social group, there was, of course, no problem. But were his name of lesser status, he would be unable to potlach in his own right. This is one of the most significant features of the Northwest Coast wealth system; the national wealth of each society was definitely limited, and there was no way in which a poor man could make a fortune for himself—at least, not in the days before European trade inflated and completely altered the financial system.[22] Formerly, the token wealth of the entire group was concentrated in the hands of the head of the unit just as

[21] Swanton, 1908, p. 435; Murdock, 1936, p. 9; Boas, 1897, p. 335.

[22] It is on this point only that the present writer is unable to agree with Murdock's interpretation of the Haida potlach as a status-producing force (Murdock, 1936). In early times, it would have been utterly impossible for a man of low rank to advance his own status or that of his children by potlaching because he could not possibly have accumulated enough property to potlach with. This is obvious from the internal evidence of the ancient wealth system, and reinforced by statements of natives themselves, who often point out that before European trade made it easy for anyone to accumulate goods in quantity, even the "chiefs," with the combined resources of their entire groups behind them, were able to potlach but rarely. In other words, only those who had hereditary right to high status, were able to assume it by potlaching. If Murdock's interpretation be taken as applying specifically to recent times, it is undoubtedly a correct and extremely penetrating analysis. This is so because two new factors entered in recent decades. First, it became possible for anyone to acquire a small fortune in trade blankets, etc., from extra-cultural (i.e., European) sources, by such a relatively simple process as killing a sea otter or two, or putting in a lucrative season on a sealing schooner. Second, due to the sharp decline of population, there came to be more high rank statuses vacant than potential incumbents. The places were fixed. One had to demonstrate an hereditary right to claim them, but in the absence of heirs in (or even close to) the direct line of descent there were normally a number of individuals about equally entitled to each place—standing in second, third, or so degree of kinship to the past incumbent. It was such people as these who could, in late times, advance their own or their offspring's status by potlaching to assume a higher rank than that to which they had been born. Anciently, such a thing would have been impossible.

was the custodianship of economic rights. Not only did he have a certain right to surplus products (those beyond the needs of subsistence) of the lands in his trust, but members of his group gave him the fruits of their industry: canoes, blankets, furs. The head of the group was, in a sense, custodian of the token wealth of the family just as he was custodian of the economic resources. Barnett has pointed out this significant fact in connection with the potlach: the entire group of the nominal giver united to support the affair out of motives of group loyality and in return for the patronage and social favors bestowed by the head of the group.[23] It was in this patronage that we find the means by which those of lower rank assumed whatever status they had right to. Names of lower rank were formally bestowed by the chief on those who had the right to them during the course of a potlach. Among the Nootkans (and perhaps among other groups) the correlation between the group assistance and the chief's patronage was made obvious, for it was etiquette for the chief, in announcing the new name and rank of a member of his group, to tell how much property the latter (or the latter's parents) had contributed to the total amount to be given out. Nothing is clearer than the intimate relationship between hereditary status and wealth in the northern region. Not only were the hereditary fixed rankings in society based on economic wealth, and themselves considered a form of wealth, but material wealth was necessary for their formal assumption.

In fine, throughout the Northwest Coast, possession of riches was the basis of social gradation. This wealth was inheritable, and thus status was hereditary. The northern and southern regions differed only in whether overt emphasis was put on wealth-holding or inheritance of wealth. In the south, possession counted for most; the fact that wealth was inherited was little stressed. In the north, the fact of inheritance dominated native consciousness, but wealth was an inevitable concomitant of high rank. Wealth and birth everywhere were absolutely inseparable factors in the determination of status. Whatever schismatic tendencies such a system of social inequality theoretically might have had were negated by the unbroken graduation of statuses from high to low, and the bonds of blood kinship which linked the head of each social unit with his humblest subordinate.

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[23] Barnett, 1938a, pp. 349–50.

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