

Acts of Unlimited Greed in Modern Society: Perverted Forms of Kwakiutl Custom of Potlatches

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ABSTRACT The Kwakiutl Indians, the aboriginal inhabitants of the Northwest Pacific coast region, are better known in the ethnographic analysis of native culture world over, for their peculiar lifestyle, known as 'Potlatch'. It refers to a ceremony in which one chief and his followers arranges a grand feast and give away goods to a rival chief and his followers. Ruth Benedict who made this custom famous, through her book 'Patterns of Culture', argued that it was caused by an obsessive status hunger of the Kwakiutl chiefs and conceived it as an unabashed megalomania. However, a closer anthropological analysis of the custom revealed that it had its own economic and social functions and also served as an adaptive mechanism of the changing eco-cultural conditions. Looking at the custom in its evolutionary perspective, the present paper identifies its existence in the contemporary society in general, and in the Indian context in particular, and views the acts of greed in contemporary society, as perverted expressions of the native potlatches.