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ALASKA INDIAN MYTHOLOGY

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The Alaska Indian Mythology

*Their
Legends
and
Traditions*

*History
of the
Totem Pole*

*Description
of a
Potlatch*

*Issued by the
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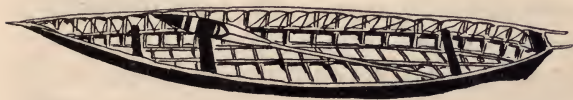
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The Indian Mythology

In the beginning there was nothing but sky and water; in the sky, a moon. A bird came out of the moon with a small ring or moon in its mouth. On coming to the water it got on the back of a large fish. There was no earth. The fish got into shallow water with the bird. The bird dropped the ring from its bill, when a large toad came and swallowed the ring. The toad soon became impregnated, then a child was born from the toad. It was a girl. The bird took it to feed it, and by the time it came to maturity, there sprung up out of the waters a beach with thick woods. The bird left the girl on the beach and went off into the woods to seek food for it, then a bear came out of the woods and went to the girl and hugged her, and from her the first man was born. This is the ancient account or legend of the creation, by the Indians. Consequently they consider themselves descended from the bird, fish, toad and bear. So each family takes one of these as their crest.



WALRUS SKIN CANOE

History of the Totem Pole

Legends and Traditions of Alaska Indians— Also Description of a Potlatch



IDOL

There are, or were, four large and important tribes in Alaska, the names of which, in the Tsimshian language are Kish-poot-wadda, by far the most numerous hereabouts, have for symbols the fin-back whale in the sea, the grizzly bear on land, the grouse in the air and the sun and stars. The next clan, known as the Canadda, have for symbols the frog, the raven, the star fish and the bull-head. The Lacheboo, another clan, had the heron and the grizzly bear for totems. Lackshkeak, the eagle, beaver and the halibut.

These creatures, however, are only regarded as the visible representatives of the powerful and mystical, beings or genii of Indian mythology, and as all of one group are said to be of the same kindred so all the members of the same class, whose heraldic symbols are the same, are counted as blood relations and, strange to say, this relationship holds good should the persons belong to different or even hostile tribes, or speak a different language, or be located thousands of miles apart; and this relationship is perpetuated in the face of obliterating circumstances. The Indians point back to a remote age when their ancestors lived in a beautiful land, where, in a mysterious manner, the mythical crea-

tures, whose symbols they retain, revealed themselves to the heads of the families of that day.

They relate the traditional story of an overwhelming flood which came and submerged the good land and spread death and destruction all around. Those of the ancients who escaped in canoes were drifted about and scattered in every direction on the face of the waters, and where they found themselves after the flood had subsided, there they located and staked out their pre-emption claims and formed new tribal associations.

Thus it was that persons related by blood became widely severed from each other. Nevertheless they retained and clung to the symbols which had distinguished them and their respective families before the flood. Hence the crests have continued to mark the offspring of the original founders of each family.



IDOL

It may interest our readers to know to what practical uses the natives apply their crests.

First—Crests subdivide tribes into social clans, and a union of crests is a closer bond than a tribal union.

Second—It is the ambition of all leading members of each clan in the sev-

eral tribes to represent their rank by carving or painting their heraldic symbols on all their belongings, not omitting their household utensils, and on the death of the head of a family a totem



SPEAR

pole was erected in front of his house by his successor, on which is carved or painted more or less elaborately, the symbolic creatures of his clan.

Third—The crests define the bonds of consanguinity and persons having the same crests are forbidden to intermarry; that is, a frog cannot marry a frog, nor a whale, a whale, but a frog may marry a wolf and a whale marry an eagle.

Fourth—All the children take the mother's crest and are incorporated as members of the mother's family, nor do they designate or regard their father's family as their relations, and therefore an Indian's heir or successor is not his own son, but his sister's son, and in case a woman is married into a distant tribe away from her relations, the offspring of such union, when grown up, will leave their parents and go to their mother's tribe.

Fifth—The clan relationship also regulates all feasting. A native invites the members of his own crest to a feast, they being regarded as his blood relations are always welcome as guests; but at feasts, which are only given for display, all the clansmen within reasonable distance, are expected to contribute of their means and their services gratuitously to make the feast a success, for on the fame of the feast hangs the honor of the clan.

Sixth—This social brotherhood has much to do with promoting hospitality among the Indians.

A stranger, with or without his family, in visiting an Indian village need be at no loss for shelter; he at once goes to the house belonging to one of his crest, which he can easily distinguish by the totem pole in front of it. There he is sure of a hearty welcome and will be received as a brother and treated and trusted as such.

These relations tend to foster peace and discourage wars, and though the tribes in Alaska are civilized, or nearly so, they retain their crest distinctions.

The Potlatch of Alaska

A Barbaric and Picturesque Ceremony

Southeastern Alaska is a treasure house of the picturesque, a mine for the camera and the notebook. Besides gold mines and glaciers and timber-clad islands, there are the quaintly carved totems and the quainter people who carved them, the Tlingits, whose strange customs and arts and fondness for the water have earned for them the appellation of the Venetians of America. And strange as any Oriental feast, with all the accompaniments of noise and superstitious rite, is the time-honored potlatch. The Indians are fast passing, and so is the potlatch. A potlatch—have you ever attended one? It's a sight worth traveling far to see—one never to be defaced from memory's pages.



HARPOON



SPOON

The amount of a man's wealth is estimated by the size of his potlatch and the manner in which he extends his hospitality. His aim is to give away more than does his neighbor. "Potlatch" is a Chinook word for gift. Their gifts are principally of blankets, which are distributed by the hundred. The main object of the potlatch is the benefit of the dead. The Indian believes that food and raiment given away is the same as given to the dead, and that if the feast is not held the dead will go naked and hungry throughout eternity.

Invitations to the feast are issued many days prior to the entertainment and, that those invited should be reminded as the hour draws near, a messenger is sent forth vigorously ringing a bell. About the time the people commence to assemble, the loud boom of cannon is heard; as guests go to the feast house, with faces painted in war-like fashion, dressed in their hideous attire, consisting of gaudily colored blankets or other Indian finery, it gives one the impression of being among a savage and warlike people. Each person carries a large pan or earthen bowl and a cup for coffee. The food, usually, consists of pilot bread, apples, coffee and candy, which are passed around to each guest, all seated on the floor. After the feast the



THROWING STICK FOR SEA HUNTING

large bowl of each guest is filled to take home. Each meal lasts about three hours, during which time they converse, tell stories and give toasts, and loudly the speaker is cheered. The feast is usually given in the daytime, with a dance in the evening, sometimes continuing until early morning.

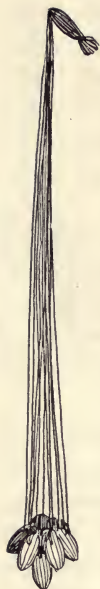
By giving away his property at the potlatch the host hopes also to attain a reputation for liberality and to increase his chance of one day becoming a chief. Each guest is remembered according to his own distribution in the past or those which he is expected to make in the future.

Following the feast comes the distribution of all sorts of gifts—rolls of cotton, muslin, flannel and quantities of blankets. These blankets, representing much of the tangible wealth of the host, in times past have been distributed with lavish recklessness. At many potlatches those which were not carried away were piled high upon the blazing fire and burned. Others were torn into strips, wrapped about the bodies of the dancers and otherwise destroyed.

A few years ago it was not unusual to see garments made from the different pieces of cloth, of various colors and qualities, which were received at the potlatch, reminding one of "the coat of many colors." When the big drum, or "geough," vigorously beats out its monotonous tones, the Indians come forth from



NATIVE BOOTS



SLING

their homes to the dance house, with hideously painted faces and gorgeous attire. The faces of the dancers are painted in black and red streaks. Their headgear is a marked feature of their grotesque attire. It is often trimmed with ermine skins, pending from the band, nearly covering the head and face and flying in every direction when in motion, with a girdle of sealion's whiskers about the top. On one occasion the hollow in the crown of the headgear was filled with swan's down and feathers, which were showered about the room on the guests, while dancing, as blessings. Each one dresses as gorgeously as he can afford, in robes, furs, blankets, including any article of showy dress.

The peculiar costumes, fierce gestures and monotonous singing of the Indians form a scene of barbaric splendor. Each holds in his hand a rattle which he continually shakes to ward off the evil spirit. The dancing continues until it seems as if they must drop from exhaustion. They keep time to the drum with violent jerks, gestures and motions of the body, these peculiar attitudes being struck in concert, similar to a class of calisthenics, although there may be fifty or more persons dancing at the same time. The whole assembly joins in the chanting.

Louder and more exciting the chanting becomes; swifter the motion of the dancers, and faster the oil is poured upon the burning heap of

logs. With frenzied yells and whoops, they leap into the air and then suddenly crouch on the floor. Their movements become more convulsive, until they become hoarse and exhausted, then suddenly stop and face the host, who makes a speech. The singing ceases and all eyes are directed toward the speaker, as the traditions and history of the tribe are rehearsed. The beating of the drum and pounding on the floor with the noise of the dancing are deafening. During these entertainments all neighboring tribes are invited. They come in large canoes, fifty or sixty feet long, and after the potlatch is over they load the craft to the guards with the treasures that their superstitious feasting has brought to them.

Strangely curious and fascinating are these carnivals of a passing barbarism. The blazing fires without the dance house, the reckless revelry, the wasteful extravagance of things to eat and things to wear, the beating of the drum and the dancing, all combine to form a scene of novel splendor.

There's an echo of early Christian teaching about the potlatch—this giving away “all that thou hast”—and many fanatical and generous Indians have ruined themselves and those dependent upon



NATIVE PLOW

them by their reckless potlatch prodigality. The missionaries have curbed their recklessness somewhat. Gifts at the average potlatch of today are not as many nor as abundant as of yore, but the ceremonial is much the same, the same costuming and dancing, the same foregathering about the fire in the feast house, the same barbaric incidents that make the event one of novel interest in this workaday world, when travelers are apt to complain of naught new under the rising sun.

Go see a potlatch !



TOTEM

Names of Indian Months

The Haida months are:

"Ketas," September, this month they got the cedar bark.

"Kalk Kungas," October, ice month.

"Cha Kungas," November, the bears paw the ground for roots.

"Gwougrangas," December, too cold to sit on the beach this month.

"Lthkither Kungas," January, goose moon.

"Tan Kungas," February, the bears begin to come out of their holes.

"Nyhitgaas," March, laughing goose moon.

"Whitgaas," April, foreign goose moon.

"Tahalte Kungas," May, the month of flowers.

"Hanskite Kungas," June, the berries begin to ripen this month.

"Hanalung Kungas," July, month in which the berries are ripe.

"Chin Kungas," August, salmon month.

"Kishalish Kungas," moon in which they smoke their salmon.

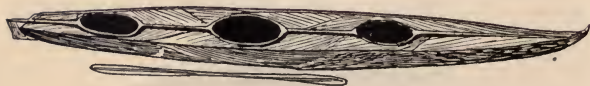
They always smoke their salmon between July and October.



SKINNING KNIFE

Names of Tribes

Chocklolat	Cloochpitch
Mowezet	Choocklecit
Kitkatlahs	Hih Etitcit
Metlakatlahs	Nootka
Machelet	Salish
Klaskina	Hesquoit
Bella Bella	Thompsons
Hamatsa	Tlingit
Haida	Songhees
Soomas	Port Douglas
Clayoquot	Shuswaps
Mockstocies	Seechelt
Nahwittis	Tlaiamens
Chilcotin	Squamish
Quatsino	Loomis
Koskimo	Cowichans
Bella Coola	Tsimshean
Tooquot	Lillooet
Nit Nat	Kyoquot
Yale	Masset



FAMILY CANOE

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