

BACKGROUND**6. *Public Witness: Feasts and Potlatches***

Central to most First Nations societies was a cultural institution that brought groups of people together to witness and acknowledge important events and proceedings. This was a core institution for governance.

Such public gatherings are often called feasts in English, but First Nations have words in their own language that give names to specific types of feasts, depending on their purpose. For example, it could be a wedding feast, a naming feast, a memorial feast, or a settlement feast.

Feasts were, and still are, public institutions that connect First Nations spiritual lives, governance, economy, politics, land management, and family or clan history through ceremony, oratory and public witness.

In some First Nations cultures, certain feasts are called potlatches. This is a well-known aspect of many coastal First Nations' cultures.

Feasts and potlatches all are built around cultural protocols, sometimes called "Laws of the Feast House." Each First Nation has its own laws and customs which are important for passing on its identity.

Generally, the Laws of the Feast House express who the people are, their stories that connect them to their ancestors, and acknowledge their lands and resources.

Most feasts and potlatches include the important feature of food, gifts and witnesses. Guests to the Feast House are served with bountiful amounts of food. Often the food has been harvested from the territories of the host family or clan. The hosts announce publicly the source of the food served to the guests.

Part of the proceedings includes the passing out of gifts from the host family or clan to its guests. Depending on the nature of the potlatch, these gifts can have great value.

The role of the guests is to act as witnesses to the important events that take place, and therefore key players in oral traditions. By accepting the gifts, guests acknowledge, recognize and remember the events. For example, they acknowledge the host's rights to manage their resources and territories. As well, the gifts are seen as an investment. There is an expectation that they will be returned to the hosts in the future.

Through feasts and potlatches, family and clan histories are kept alive. Sacred stories linking ancestors and territories are performed in dance and song for the guests. Artists create masks and regalia that dancers wear to create the dramatic performances.

Newcomers, like missionaries and Indian Agents, only saw the surface of feasts. They had little understanding of the protocols nor empathy for the deep cultural meaning. They interpreted the ceremonies through their own worldview, which saw the gift giving as an extravagant waste and the performances as pagan rituals. The Canadian government made these important institutions illegal through the Indian Act. This law was only repealed in 1951.

Despite being banned, and in some cases people being sent to prison, feasts and potlatches have endured. In some communities they were conducted in secret, or disguised as other types of community gatherings.

Today public witnessing ceremonies like feasts have largely returned to prominence as key cultural institutions.