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## Deconstructing colonial misconceptions potlatch ceremonies of Kwakwaka'wakws First Nations in life writing and fictional discourses

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Romanica Silesiana 6, 35-49

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2011

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## Deconstructing Colonial Misconceptions Potlatch Ceremonies of Kwakwaka'wakws First Nations in Life Writing and Fictional Discourses

**ABSTRACT:** For centuries, Western culture (mis)represented and appropriated the First Nations. Aboriginal peoples were regarded either as primitive, animal-like savages, or they were romanticised and eroticised in order to justify the Canadian policy of civilisation and assimilation of the natives into the monolithic “Britain of the North.” Even though since the time of the signing of the Multiculturalism Act, the concept of Canadian identity has been undergoing major changes embracing racial and cultural minorities, native people still have to fight for recognition and their rightful place in the Canadian discourses. The problem of misrepresentation of indigenous cultures has not been eradicated. This article focuses on the analysis of the potlatch ceremonies of the Kwakwaka'wakws. Using the postcolonial perspective and methodology, it explores both the past and the contemporary culture of potlatches. It also examines the colonial misconceptions of potlatch ceremonies and the current revival of the Kwakiutl potlatching. This postcolonial analysis shows the subversion of the colonial “truths” and looks at the revival of Kwakiutl culture as the aboriginal way of re-reading and re-writing of Canadian history, deconstructing conservative national mythologies and fighting for recognition by the Canadian discourse. The following analysis also reveals changing attitudes toward Kwakwaka'wakws' potlatches and the evolution of opinions regarding this ceremony. The discussion is based mainly on selected published official government documents, books, life writing and information obtained from a personal interview gathered by the author during her research trip to British Columbia in March 2010 (Student Mobility grant obtained by the Canadian Studies Centre, University of Silesia).

**KEY WORDS:** the potlatch, Kwakwaka'wakws, Kwakiutls, First Nations.

The Canadian Northwest Coast is inhabited by various aboriginal peoples. Among them are the Tsimshian, the Tlingit, the Haida, the Nootka, the Bella Coola and the Kwakiutl, more properly termed Kwakwaka'wakws. All these aboriginal peoples hold potlatches; however, the ceremony is not uniform on the

entire Northwest Coast of Canada. Some scholars assume that variations in potlatches in this part of Canada are the result of differences in the social structure, including rank, succession and marriage pattern (ROSMAN, A., RUBEL, P., 1971: 128). However, all potlatches employ complex symbolism and include their own variations of singing, dancing, distribution of goods and hosting a feast. Each society also names potlatch ceremonies differently; for instance, the Tlingit calls it *Xu'ix* while Kwakiutl *P!Esa*. For means of communication with the white people, the Natives adopted the Chinook *patshatl* (BECK, M., 1993: 6). This essay will be entirely devoted to the analysis of Kwakiutl potlatching. The ceremony, which was subjected to examination by various anthropologists, was misunderstood by many white people and, therefore, misrepresented in the colonial times.

In this paper I analyse the colonial misconceptions of potlatches and contrast them with the Native understanding of this event. Thus, both the colonial and postcolonial perspectives are referred to in the first part of this article. The examination of the legacy of the colonial era is crucial to understand the emergence of the false image of potlatching, which was present in Canadian colonial discourse and had little in common with the ceremonies held by Kwakwaka'wakws. The postcolonial analysis which follows, based on two instances of life writing, shows the contemporary aboriginal ways of re-reading and re-writing of the history of Canadian-Native relations.

Before proceeding to the body of the essay, the meaning of potlatch should be explained. Potlatching means giving, and this practice was at one point present on the entire Canadian Northwest Coast. Understanding of the potlatch is commonly limited to a ceremony or a form of celebration which is held on specific occasions and commemorates some unique events in the life of a person and a community. The central place is given to the distribution of gifts to guests, as payment for witnessing the occasion (WHEELER, D., 1975). However, the potlatch has always been far more than just a ceremony, as it has also been a means of governance. Before the white men introduced and imposed their laws on the First Nations, aboriginals governed themselves through the system of potlatching. Moreover, people have been potlatching for centuries to say who they are, who their ancestors were, and where they come from, as well as to show their respect for all living things in the world, and their relationship to the land. Additionally, potlatch was also a very powerful event during which the spirit world was reflected in the forms of clan crests (MILLER, B., 2010). E. Richard Atleo, the Hereditary Chief of Ahousaht, while referring to the distribution of gifts, defined potlatch as a life-giving concept of generosity. Generosity, he says, equals life, while not giving is synonymous with death. Moreover, he claims that the ceremony is all about balance, because when you give something you know that in the future you will also receive a gift (ATLEO, E., 2009).

## The False Image of the Potlatch Colonial Perspective

The lack of understanding of the potlatch led to the creation of the false image of the ceremony, which forced the Canadian officials to ban it in 1885. However, the outlawed event had nothing in common with the actual ceremonies held by the Native people. This thesis is proved by reading of the official government documents, letters and petitions, which brought a distorted version of the potlatch to the understanding of the Canadian society. Between 1870s and 1930s, various ludicrous accusations against the ceremony appeared. First and foremost, agents and missionaries became obsessed with the potlatch and recognised it as a barrier to civilisation and assimilation of the Natives into the white, Christian Canadian society (mainly due to the fact that the Natives were distributing wealth, instead of accumulating it). The act of giving away property was hard to understand for many settlers who recognised accumulation to be desirable, whereas for people of the potlatch, money had a different meaning (BRACKEN, CH., 1997: 1, 12, 38); namely, they believed in the validity of accumulation only when giving away of wealth was intended (WHEELER, D., 1975). Moreover, white people claimed that potlatching was a wastage of time, which instead could be devoted to work (BRACKEN, CH., 1997: 131). As Gloria Cranmer Webster<sup>1</sup> states, “[i]n the old days, the summer was for work, fishing, gathering berries and other food stuffs, the winter season was devoted to feasting and ceremony. At that time, potlatches often lasted for weeks, with guests travelling great distances to live at the hosts’ village” (WHEELER, D., 1975). Moreover, according to a number of officials, the potlatch was a waste of women who apparently prostituted themselves in order to get money for potlatches (BRACKEN, CH., 1997: 132). There were also others, like Mrs. S. Cook, who in a letter to Duncan C. Scott enumerated three more reasons why the potlatch must be prohibited by the government:

[...] 1st. The Kwagult people as whole will never own Allegiance to the Government or King as long as they are allowed to practice their Allegiance to the Potlatch system, for to them this excludes every other Government, No Potlatchers volunteered to serve overseas.

2nd. It is because of this system that they will not marry according to the laws of Canada. Their system allows them to contract for a wife, and it being made so easy for them to cast one wife away and take another man’s wife, according to the laws of Potlatch. Out of all this agency there are only five couples who have married Legally by Church Laws, and these have left the Potlatch.

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<sup>1</sup> The member of the influential Cranmer family from Namgis First Nation of the Kwakwaka’wakw. She is an anthropologist, linguist, filmmaker and author. She has received an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from the University of British Columbia.

3rd. There is no liberty, in the Potlatch, No Choice whatever. They are all bound and have to practice all the different features of this system or they will lose their caste. Those who have left the Potlatch are looked upon as not Indians or have no standing or voice in any matters affecting their tribe or band. They are practically Outcasts.

SEWID-SMITH, D., 1979: 20—21

## Canadian-Native Relations

Outlawing the potlatch in 1885 is a symbol of the colonial treatment of the First Nations in British Columbia, and the onset of the steady, conscious process of eradication of aboriginal culture. The 18th century marked the beginning of the contact of aboriginal peoples with “white invaders.” At first, the coastal First Nations cooperated with Europeans, as potlatches were considered to be beneficial for both parties. White traders sold goods to the Natives, making it easier for aboriginals to gather goods to distribute during the ceremonies. However, colonists saw the Native people as primitive creatures, detached from history, who had no claim to the land they inhabited. Moreover, they were regarded as a source of cheap labour. With this conviction in mind, Alert Bay was founded, with an aim to establish a fish saltery. Finally, the strong opposition against the potlatch resulted in passing the Indian Act that outlawed the ceremony in 1885. Due to the ambiguity of the law, a new version was passed in 1895. William Halliday, appointed in 1906 as the Kwagiutl agent in Alert Bay, was the first Indian Agent who enforced the new Indian Act. The year 1921 was the culmination of the Canadian Government’s crusade against the potlatch; at the same time, however, Dan Cranmer held his great potlatch on Village Island. In 1922, many participants of this ceremony were arrested and the precious potlatch paraphernalia were either taken away and distributed among various museums in Canada, or sold to private collectors abroad. However, the ban on the potlatch did not eradicate the practice: through the times of its ban the Natives cherished the ceremony underground and preserved it till the lift of the ban in 1951. Then the fight for the return of the artefacts began, which succeeded in a completion of two museums: the Kwagiuth Museum at Cape Mudge and U’mista Cultural Centre at Alert Bay (WHEELER, D., 1975).

## Life Writing and Fictional Discourse on the Potlatch

Opinions on potlatches and the Kwakiutls were not uniform in the entire Canadian society. Having discussed selected, very strong accusations against the potlatch that appeared in official government documents, I will now proceed to the analysis of the different approach of white people towards Kwakiutls and their ceremonial life. I will examine two literary accounts of visits to remote Kwakiutl villages. The first of them, Hughina Harold's *Totem Poles and Tea*, is autobiographical, and the second, Margaret Craven's *I Heard the Owl Call my Name*, is fictional. The former takes place in the 1930s and is a description of two years spent by Hughina Bowden, later Harold, at Mamalilikulla on Village Island, where she was employed as a teacher and a nurse at the Christian mission. The latter, is the story of the vicar, Mark Brian, who inhabited Kingcome, the Tsawataineuk people's village. It is presumably set in the 1960s, although the time is not explicitly stated. These two books are going to be analysed with reference to the change of the attitudes towards the Natives and opinions about native ceremonies, with the special focus on the potlatch.

### Change in the Attitudes Towards Natives

A considerable change in attitude towards Kwakwaka'wakws can be traced in *Totem Poles and Tea* (HAROLD, H., 2006). At the very beginning, when Hughina comes to Alert Bay in 1935, her views about the Natives inhabiting the area are typical of many Europeans. Moreover, she possesses a very limited knowledge of the place and the people, which is exemplified by the high-heels that she wears on the day of her arrival (and can barely walk on the muddy road). In addition, when she sees the Village Island for the first time, she says, "[s]o, here I was stranded on the remote island — all because a small band of Kwakwaka'wakw families chose to winter here, and my government was intent on educating them" (HAROLD, H., 2006: 17). Nevertheless, later her attitude changes, as she gets to know the people and their culture. She recollects:

[W]hen I first came to Village Island, unprepared and knowing nothing of the natives and their ways, I had a superior attitude. I thought them dull, unresponsive and unemotional ... it was difficult to get to know or to understand them. But as the months crept by, I learned something of their culture and a few words of their language. I learned to appreciate them as individuals possessing the strengths, dreams and sorrows common to all of us.

HAROLD, H., 2006: 74

The same change of attitude applies to her opinion about Native pupils. When she is recollecting her first day at school, she thinks the children “dull and unresponsive” (HAROLD, H., 2006: 31); however, later she realises that it is the government’s curriculum which is to blame for such a state of affairs, because it is inadequate for the children’s life, culture and environment. She even tries to change it:

[W]hen I realised how completely their lives differed from the ones depicted in the reader, I tried to improvise. We would go for walks along the beaches when the tide was out, and they would teach me things I didn’t know about shells and seaweed. They showed me *dulse*, which was edible. Sometimes we’d ramble in the woods gathering fungi from old stumps.

HAROLD, H., 2006: 71

In contrast, Mark Brian’s opinion regarding the Natives does not change much. From the very beginning he talks about them with respect. The only thing that changes is that, at the end, he has greater admiration for their culture. In a letter to Bishop, he states, “I have learned little of the Indians as yet. I know only what they are not. They are none of the things one has been led to believe. They are not simple, or emotional, they are not primitive” (CRAVEN, M., 2005: 46). Moreover, he is aware of being an intruder, almost a trespasser in the Natives’ land. Therefore, he wants to win their confidence and, at the end, he even manages to become their friend. While describing the Natives Mark says: “[...] Indians belonged here as the birds and fish belonged, that they were as much a part of the land as the mountains themselves. He was a guest in their house, and he knew, also, that this might never change [...]” (CRAVEN, M., 2005: 27—28).

## Opinions About Native Traditions

Hughina respects aboriginal traditions and does not regard them as inferior to those of the Europeans. Moreover, she is aware of the fact that the native culture is disappearing and is being replaced with the European one, yet she does not pay much attention to it. Nonetheless, there is one exception, namely, totem poles. Because she is fascinated by them, she frequently points out that they are abandoned:

[T]otem poles, ancient and lonely, told their timeless stories, but no one was there to listen. They kept their silent vigil, and the reason for their being seemed long forgotten. They appeared forlorn, standing here and there along

the path, almost like intruders. But the true intruders were the houses, elbowing these monuments of the old culture aside to make room for the new.

HAROLD H., 2006: 23

It is obvious to her that the Native culture is a vanished one, which can only evoke feelings of sentiment and nostalgia.

In contrast to Harold, Margaret Craven is more preoccupied with the idea of aboriginal culture as dying. The main character, Mark, is tormented by the concept of death, the traces of which he sees all around him. It is exemplified by the overwhelming presence of alcoholism and decay that replaces the aboriginal way of life, along with old customs and traditions. The younger generation does not want to stay in the village and live as their ancestors used to live. For instance, Gordon is one of the young ones who is not interested in the past and in the traditional Indian lifestyle, because he looks up to the white men and wants to be like them. The tension between generations is visible when children come back home from the church residential school at Alert Bay. The old Peter explains:

It is always so when the young come back from the school. My people are proud of them, and resent them. They come from a far country. They speak English all the time and forget the words of Kwákwala. They are ashamed to clip their food in the oil of the óolachon which we call gleena. They say to their parents, 'Don't do it that way. The white man does it this way.' They do not remember the myths, and the meaning of the totems. They want to choose their own wives and husbands. [...] Here in the village my people are at home as the fish in the sea, as the eagle in the sky. When the young leave, the world takes them, and damages them. They no longer listen when the elders speak. They go, and soon the village will go also [...] the totems will fall, and the green will cover them. And when I think of it, I am glad I will not be here to see.

CRAVEN, M., 2005: 5

Moreover, the vicar is interested in the Native culture. For instance, he asks how to pronounce different words in Kwakwala and tries to use them. In addition, he bombards Jim, his native guide and later also his friend, with questions regarding various aspects of aboriginal way of life, nature, dancing, and singing. Moreover, in contrast with Hughina, he arrives at Kingcome with some previous knowledge of the Native culture.

## The Potlatch

Hughina is not against the ceremony, but she also does not explicitly criticise the government for enacting the anti-potlatch law. Harold also provides



the readers with “home difference of opinion” regarding the potlatch between Mrs. O’Brien and Mrs. Dibben. The former claims that the potlatch is a harmless party, so she takes Hughina to the ceremony and explains it to her. The latter is sceptical, claiming: “You are aware the potlatch has been outlawed. It is a *heathen* ceremony. If you attend, it will appear you are condoning such conduct. What kind of an example is that to set for the Indians?” (HAROLD, H., 2006: 62). Nevertheless, Hughina and Mrs. O’Brien do not enter the community house but stay outside, as if trying to retain the boundary between them and the Natives. Moreover, Mrs. Bowden acts as an observer interested in the ceremony and is excited by its ethnicity. While describing the potlatch, Hughina does not disapprove of it, even when the *hamat’sa* dancer appears. In addition, potlatches are exotic for her, and appear to be noble gatherings, exciting, colourful, intriguing, full of dancing, singing, speeches and happy children playing all around. She is bewildered by the fantastic, almost supernatural atmosphere. She is in awe of the blankets that she sees on potlatch which “[...] they had shown up so beautifully in the glow of the firelight, with the buttons sparkling and flashing in all the rainbow hues” (HAROLD, H., 2006: 187). This ceremony makes a great impression on her, which is why later she is eager to see photographs depicting potlatches held in Alert Bay some years before. Moreover, contrary to most Europeans, she asks one of the Natives about potlatching. Additionally, she characterises the potlatch and its history in positive terms, concluding that after seeing the ceremony she was “[...] still under the spell of the wildly beating drums” (HAROLD, H., 2006: 67), that she would never forget.

Reverend Brian also participates in potlatches. His attitude toward the ceremony is similar to Hughina’s; neither before nor after participating in it does he express his discontentment with the potlatch. Moreover, Brian does not act as an omniscient white clergyman who condemns the ceremony and the people who take part in it. Rather, he is an observer, eager to know more about something that he sees for the first time. It is clear that the clergyman possesses some previous knowledge regarding the ceremony, but, contrary to many white officials he wants to consult it with the Natives’ understanding of the potlatch. He watches the ceremony in awe and asks Jim various questions. He finds out that the Native people have a very rich spiritual culture and that dances, songs and various rituals convey a special meaning. Furthermore, Jim tells him about the potlatches of the past, stating that the ones held nowadays are different: “[...] when the government forbade the great dance-potlatches, it gave us nothing to take their place, and changed the deepest purpose of our being. Once they were like the coronations of kings, or inauguration of a president. They were the great rituals of my people, solemn and important. Now the meaning is gone” (CRAVEN, M., 2005: 60). However, Craven also provides readers with a different understanding of the potlatch when he conjures up a figure of the colonial oppressor. For example, one of the RCMP officers claims that the potlatch is responsible for

prodigality of Indians who, according to him, do not care about their possessions. He asserts: "With the Indians it is easy come, easy go. This goes back to the days of the great potlatches. They do not budget what they have, and even when times are excellent, they get into debt" (CRAVEN, M., 2005: 66).

Although both books do not explicitly criticise Kwakiutls, they also do not provide the readers with truthful representations of the Kwakwaka'wakw people and their culture. The images of the Natives are romanticised and trapped in nostalgic and sentimentalised narration of the past. Kwakiutls are depicted as spiritual human beings, closely connected with nature. Thus, their culture is represented as distant and exotic. Moreover, they are regarded as the vanishing race, detached from the contemporary reality and living on the verge of the civilised world.

## The Contemporary Native Perspective A Postcolonial Reading

### Life Writing Discourse

The last part of this essay will be devoted to presenting the native understanding of the potlatch. It will be analysed on the basis of two examples of the life writing discourse: Harry Assu's *Assu of Cape Mudge: Recollections of a Coastal Indian Chief* and Agnes Alfred's *Paddling to Where I Stand, Qwiqwas-utinuxw Noblewoman*. Both texts are not simply autobiographies but complex works — partly family histories, socio-cultural descriptions of the tribe's life over centuries, and partly mythologies, because the narration is interlarded with various mythological references (BUENTE, G., 1990: 81). *Paddling to Where I Stand* also provides some historical, ethnographic and anthropological facts, which, according to Bruce Miller, proves that it is more than an account of Agnes Alfred's voice. Moreover, the structure of the book reveals some references to the academic background, which could not have been provided by Agnes who was a non-literate woman (MILLER, B., 2005: 149). The two books are going to be analysed with reference to two categories, namely, articulation of the status within the community, and the way of referring to the potlatch ceremonies.

Agnes Alfred was an elder noblewoman who was a guide and a teacher of the traditional ways of her people to the young generation of Kwakiutls. She is regarded as the author of the book; however, Bruce Miller does not entirely agree with this claim. He argues that the book is the joint work of three women: Agnes Alfred, her granddaughter, Daisy Sewid Smith, and the French-born scholar, Martin J. Reid. In Carolyn Redl's opinion, however, Agnes Alfred should be

treated as the only legitimate author, and these two women regarded just as interpreters and guides who help to present the Kwakwaka'wakws' world view to the readers. Redl claims that Alfred unveils various elements of the Native culture, with the aim of educating both the white people and future generations of Kwakiutls. The book is, in fact, a dialogue of two women, grandmother and her granddaughter, who, in an informal way, discuss the culture of their people. Moreover, *Paddling to Where I Stand* is an attempt to create what Thomas King calls "interfusal" literature (PINKERTON, L., 2010), as it tries to blend oral and written narratives. Alfred's book retains many features of native oral literature, some of which are fragmented narration, repetitions, code-switching, word play, blend of mythic elements with realism, representation of communal wisdom and world concepts. *Paddling to Where I Stand*, goes beyond the European understanding of autobiography; it is a Native appropriation of this genre, which is inscribed in the Kwakwaka'wakws' worldview.

### Status Claims

Both books follow the prevalent tradition on the Northwest Coast of making an account of the lives of high-status people of the native communities (MILLER, B., 2010). They are both status claims of the author's families, which, according to Miller, result from the battle for control of the representation of native peoples' history. According to noble people, only they, as high-status individuals, have the right to talk on behalf of their communities. In order to demonstrate the validity of this claim, let me discuss some examples. For instance, Agnes Alfred skilfully utilises modern media to stress her family's noble position in the community, which she does by means of various stories in which she belittles members of non high status families. That is demonstrated by her father's story of breaking of the copper, where she refers to her father's prominent position in potlatches, and the rivalry that occurred between him and another man who was challenging his position in *p̄asa*. Her father broke his copper and, in this way, destroyed his opponent, casting copper pieces into the sea. Broken copper pieces symbolised his prestige, and served as a proof that the destruction was correct. She deprecates Owaʔalagelis family when she refers to the disgraceful act of retrieving her father's broken pieces of copper from the sea, and later using them at *p̄asa* (MILLER, B., 2005: 149—150). Moreover, she explicitly stresses her ancestry. She knows where she comes from and is proud of her roots. She is meticulous in describing her family history, referring to the importance of names that her father possessed, including his potlatch name, and providing the readers with their origins. Worth mentioning is the surname Sewid, which means "people are paddling towards your village by sea [...]". It also implies that the bearer of that name is always giving potlatches to those who are coming to visit him" (ALFRED, A., 2004: 80).

The same device is employed by Harry Assu who wants to differentiate his family from the rest of the society. He achieves this aim by describing his ancestors' deeds, especially those of his father who was the youngest chief of the village of Cape Mudge. The information is repeated several times, not only by the author but also by a white official, magistrate Pidcock, who says, "Your father was the youngest chief on this coast ever to be elected to that position. I remember that he was twenty-four years old at the time because we are the same age, and I was twenty-four at the time he was elected" (ASSU, H., 1989: 57). What is more, Assue constantly refers to his father's authority in his family and in the community. He is proud of his family history, describing in detail who his predecessors were and where they came from, acknowledging at the same time the strength of past generations. Moreover, *þásas* are used to reinforce the greatness of his family. He refers to his father's big potlatch of 1911, stressing the uniqueness of his ancestors on the basis of the prerogatives that his father possessed. Even the gifts distributed at that potlatch were remarkable: seventeen canoes, which were regarded as the most cherished and valuable gifts, handed only to the most important guests, were distributed (ASSU, H., 1989: 39—57).

#### Attitude Toward the Potlatch

My analysis of *Paddling to Where I Stand* reveals that Agnes Alfred concentrates mostly on potlatches held during the time of the potlatch prohibition. It is not surprising, as most of the potlatches she attended were held during restrictive anti-potlatch legislation. She often comments on the prohibition, referring to the importance of the underground ceremonies in maintaining the cultural heritage of the community. However, in brief comments, she examines differences between contemporary and historical potlatches. The fact that she throws new light on the complexities of Kwakwaka'wakw *þásas* is extremely important. First of all, Alfred claims that the term "potlatch" obscures the Kwakiutl understanding of the ceremony, as potlatches are diverse native ceremonies. Therefore, in her narration, she rarely uses the term, and prefers using different Kwakwala words to describe the variety of gift giving events. In this way, it is revealed that the potlatch can be called: *þása*, *maxwa*, *ýagwa*, *k'wilas*, *qəлта* (breaking the copper), *saligēy* (memorial potlatch), *maxwa* (big potlatch) and others. Many of the essential characteristics of her understanding of the potlatch are summed up in the following passage:

*Þása* refers to an inter-tribal distribution of property with the expectation of having one's gifts returned with interest. *Maxwa* (literally, "doing a great thing") also connects large-scale, inter-tribal ceremonies. *Ýagwa* connotes an

event during which property is distributed without any expectation of having it returned (e.g., naming ceremonies, memorial events, and so on.) *Kwilas* is a feast during which property is distributed.

ALFRED, A., 2004: 123

Harry Assu also comments extensively on the potlatch ceremonies. Assu's attitude towards potlatching confirms Bruce Miller's opinion that contemporary potlatches are symbols of recovery after colonial times (MILLER, B., 2010). Assu, in his detailed description of the ceremony, refers to the potlatch as an institution that enables *Kwakwaka'wakw*s to maintain uniqueness of cultural performance and distinctiveness of identity. Moreover, continuity of the potlatch tradition is a sign that *Kwakwaka'wakw*'s culture is vibrant, stable and the *Kwakiutl* have not vanished, although missionaries and Indian agents predicted their end. Assu often refers to the confiscation of the potlatch regalia after Dan Cranmer's great potlatch, and illustrates the event with an aboriginal response: "Our old people who watched the barge pull out from shore with all their masks on it said: "There is nothing left now. We might as well go home." When we say "go home," it means "to die" (ASSU, H., 1989: 104). Fortunately, they did not die, but continued potlatching, and Assu describes the communal sense of exhilaration when the regalia were returned in 1979. What is more, as the Cape Mudge chief, he ponders the value of the Kwagiulth Museum for all the people in the community, especially for the young generation.

Contrary to Agnes Alfred, Assue, in his references to potlatches, specifically his wife's memorial potlatch, pays attention to the oratorical skills of various speakers. Persuasive oratory, as Bruce Miller explains, is a very important factor of every *pasá* because speeches rearticulate the values of the society. This is possible because children of high families learn oratory from early days in order to be able to speak in public. Miller is fascinated by the Native peoples' powerful oratorical skills. He says,

[T]hey shift between humour, seriousness, mythological content, they always tell you who they are genealogically, so you know their importance, and you know the sources of the stories they are going to tell, and they shift tone very effectively [...] So the potlatch is a device of socialization, everybody [...] talk about who their ancestors were, what they did, how life should be lived, and they talk in dramatic and forceful and interesting terms and also it is colourful and entertaining [...].

MILLER, B., 2010

The Native people's perspective on the role of a speaker is best illustrated by the words of one of the chiefs: "The speaker gives context to the intent and purpose of each potlatch. His duty is to talk about the genesis of the host clan, their box of treasures, and the chief who is standing up. The speaker makes

the connections between the underpinnings of power, greatness, belonging, and commitment” (JOSEPH, R., 2009).

Above all, Harry Assu recognises the importance of dances, masks and other regalia associated with the potlatch ceremonies. He claims that they represent family rights and reinforce Kwakwaka'wakw's identity. As *pasa* regalia depict animals and spirits, he also elaborates on the close connection between animal, human and spiritual worlds, which meet during every potlatch. It is not surprising, because according to Miller:

[Potlatch] is the myth period reborn. The underlying concept is this, at one time animals and people were here on the earth together, and they could talk, and the animals had the power of changing shape, the shape shifters, they are species and they are also the spiritual beings, and the world was dangerous for people, and it was changed, and now this myth period is reentered into in ceremonial ritual dance, just as in Catholicism when you lead the body of Christ, you are taken back to that moment [...] When they dance those dances they are those dances, those spirit beings, they become that, so that's why you can't play with that, so that's why you put the masks away, that's why there are powerful and dangerous and must be treated properly [...].

MILLER, B., 2010

## Conclusion

To conclude, it is clear that the potlatch prohibited in 1985 was a white European version of the ceremony, which had nothing in common with the real potlatches held by Native peoples. On the basis of the documents, letters and petitions one can observe how the colonial discourse on potlatch was constructed and what techniques it used to oppress First Nations. Furthermore, application of the colonial ideological concepts regarding potlatch and the Kwakiutls is also present in literary colonial discourses. Kwakwaka'wakw are framed there in such concepts as savagism, romanticism, timelessness and cannibalisation. However, opinions about the people and their ceremonies presented in those discourses are mild in comparison with government documents. Nevertheless, the notion of misrepresentation and appropriation of First Nations still applies to both government and literary discourses. Furthermore, examples of the post-colonial native life writing discourse show that Kwakwaka'wakw effectively use English, the previous main tool of colonial oppression, to share their ideas, to present their identity, to fight against stereotypes, simultaneously developing their variation of English, which applies mainly to Agnes Alfred. For centuries, Western values, traditions and ways of thinking, excluded and marginalised non-

Western cultures, including native peoples. Now it is time to speak back, and Kwakwaka'wakws are doing this job, with the suffering of their forefathers in mind.

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## Bio-bibliographical note

Hanna Mrozek-Graniczny (M.A.) has graduated from the University of Silesia. She wrote her M.A. thesis on the colonial and postcolonial representations of the potlatch ceremonies of Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations. Thanks to the Government of Canada Student Mobility Support Program Grant, obtained by the Canadian Studies Centre at the University of Silesia, she went on a Research Trip to Vancouver Island University and Alert Bay in March 2010, to further her research into First Nations studies. She is particularly interested in Canadian indigenous cultures and gender studies.