

BLACK TAMANOUS, THE SECRET SOCIETY OF THE CLALLAM INDIANS*

In the secret society known among the Clallam Indians as "Black Tamanous" is embodied one phase of Indian life which has been withheld from those who have persistently sought for knowledge of the customs of this primitive tribe. The secrecy which surrounded the doings of the Black Tamanous society forestalled any possibility of the public press giving to the world any information regarding it. Very few young men of this generation were admitted into the society; consequently, the number of those who have knowledge of the order and a disposition to disclose the secrets, as I am doing now, is small.

If you will pardon the allusion to myself in this connection, I wish to say that in all probability I am the youngest member living. At the age of seventeen I was initiated into the secrets of this order at a potlatch at Port Angeles. This was in 1893, just before the suspension of their meetings; but many years prior to this, while I was only a boy, I was made an honorary member by the Makah Indians at Neah Bay.

That I may not be accused of breaking faith with the society, some explanation is necessary at this juncture. As a race the Indian is passing away. The representatives yet remaining are fast becoming amalgamated with other races. As a whole, they have absorbed more of these vices than of the virtues of the conqueror; and the effects of these vices are evidenced by a general decrease of vitality, so general that the final outcome must be extinction. The trend of everything is away from the primitive; the time is not far distant when all that will remain of early Indian life will be found in the museum, the song, the story, or the historical records of the exterminators. For this reason I feel that I am not breaking my obligation in stating these facts concerning a society that has lost its existence, that I am justified in giving to the white race a description of the Black Tamanous with whatever of interest may attach thereto.

The summer was largely given to providing subsistence for the camp. After the provisions were laid by for winter, feasting and

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dancing were indulged in with much zest. Whenever a person had accumulated a quantity of property, he invited all the near-by tribes to a potlatch. At these gatherings various games and entertainments were provided for the amusement of those in attendance. Whether or not the potlatch was especially advocated by the Black Tamanous society as one of its teachings would be impossible to state; but I do know that it was always a member of this society who financed the potlatch, and that during its extent secret sessions of the Black Tamanous were held, at which sons of illustrious and honorable men were initiated. One of those initiated was sure to be the son or relative of the man conducting the potlatch.

With all the objections brought against the potlatch as we see it from our viewpoint today, it had, nevertheless, some redeeming features. It prevented too much avarice, and the members of the tribe were taught to render respect and honor to him who had thus deprived himself of his goods to bestow them upon his friends, while he started life again with naught but their good will.

To return to the Black Tamanous: those to be initiated were selected by the leaders, but never from applications. No one in whose veins coursed tainted blood, that is, whose ancestors were slaves, was ever taken in. At the proper time, those selected for initiation were surprised by a crowd of men with blackened faces, and taken to a place where they were kept secluded from all but members. They were taught what to do and how to act during the performance before the assembly. Their faces were blackened also. This drilling continued for several days. The outsiders were led to believe that these young men were dead.

Many stories are told of how they killed those who were unable to follow instructions. The same fate was shared by those who dared to show antagonism to the order. Since the candidates had no choice in the matter, it is said the members sometimes selected their enemies to silence opposition. In that case the candidate was lifeless before being brought into the assembly. Those in charge of the demonstration raised him several times, and then announced that he failed to respond to the treatment to bring him to life again. This was one way of keeping outsiders in fear, and preventing them from talking against the society.

The severest test given to one who was grown up before being taken in or one they had some doubt of being a good candidate was to take him to the beach at low tide and to leave him there, supposedly dead. Woe to him if he made any movement which would give away

to the profane that he was alive! The waves might beat upon him, but he must remain rigid. It meant death if he failed. When the members were satisfied that the candidate lived up to instructions given, he was taken back to the preparation room for the final work.

On the day set for the final tests candidates were brought before the assembly devoid of clothing and apparently lifeless. The doctors or leaders of the society were supposed to be vested with power to restore life. Each candidate was raised several times and at the appointed moment aroused, supposedly returned to life by the mysterious authority of the doctors. According to previous instructions, the candidates now began to act strangely and usually ran out of the house. As they did so spears were placed in their hands to frighten the uninitiated whom they might meet. They continued to run until they reached the outskirts of the village, where they bathed and immediately returned to the assembly hall. Here all engaged in the dance, followed by a great feast; these two lasted alternately for a week or more.

At the close of this merry-making the master of ceremonies produced the articles to be disposed of, and the potlatch proper was inaugurated. The property was given away in honor of those recently initiated as members in good standing of the Black Tamanous. Then a new name was given each—possibly that of a grandfather or great grandfather—and the ceremony was complete.

During the dances many plans were devised to strike terror to the onlookers. Sometimes a dog was dismembered and the doctors pretended to eat the carcass. Other dancers horrified the audience by spitting out streams of blood. This, I learned afterwards, was accomplished by cutting a gash in the end of the tongue, from which the blood flowed profusely. One story is told which illustrates how carefully they guarded this power as a secret. It is said that on the day following a frenzied dance, one of the leaders was lying on his back, while about him were his wife and children. One of the little girls playfully climbed upon her father's body and while talking to him noticed that his tongue was lanced; whereupon she cried, "Oh, father, your tongue is cut!" He quickly took his knife and killed the entire family by cutting them across the abdomen. To him it was better that they were dead than that he should keep his family and leave any possibility of their disclosing one of the horrible secrets of the Black Tamanous. It was a well known fact that anyone who revealed one of their secrets disappeared and no one dared express an

opinion, even if it were suspected that members of the society might be responsible for the disappearance.

The last part of the ceremony of initiation consisted of explaining the origin of the society. Guards having been stationed about the house to prevent eavesdroppers from listening, the doctors or masters gave the following information to the initiates, as nearly as I can translate the account into English:

"At one time, having returned from a duck hunt, a certain man invited his friends to feast on the game he had killed the night before. While eating and engaging in pleasant conversation, one of the men accidentally tore his tongue with the breast bone of the duck. The blood gashed forth; all eyes were centered on the man in his distress; consternation ensued among the guests, but none could offer relief. This accident had changed a joyous, harmonious group from pleasure and happiness to sadness and distress. It was considered a disgrace that such an event should happen on such an occasion, and they sought for some means of removing the stigma that attached thereto.

"They searched for a word, a thought, or a symbol for this calamity. Many sounds were suggested, but none seemed to be applicable to the thought that would fit the occasion. When they were about wearied of their search and failure was staring them in the face, one of the men who had not spoken, said more as an afterthought, 'Why not try this sound?' and he imitated the growl of an animal. The right chord was struck—the symbol of the desired idea was found and a new society was born. They called it 'Hun-hun-ne-te,' meaning *to growl*, or the sound of growling. These men then made a compact, took their obligation to keep this secret, and agreed that if anyone should reveal what had taken place there, the death penalty should be inflicted."

Thus they had succeeded in restoring harmony by turning this suffering and disgrace into a great movement, the beginning of one of the most feared societies among the Clallam Indians. Whatever of spiritual meaning there is in the society, I am still in the dark concerning it. I sometimes imagine that the spiritual meaning was left to the initiate to solve for himself, and that he could not understand unless he was fully prepared and his life fit to possess this knowledge; furthermore, that one must seek earnestly to find it as the originators had done before finding the sound or word that they searched diligently for. Does it mean that after all there are no mysteries in

life when we come to understand by the light of knowledge and understanding? Or is it the story of the Lost Word?

I have no doubt that in the primitive days to be initiated and to be a member were character builders. These urged the individual to live a life of usefulness, strength, and power, and gave him realization that he possessed something outsiders did not have. This was a stimulus for him to build his manhood strong and noble until he attained that greatest of virtues, Self-Control, and became a real Master—Master of his own forces.

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