The Feast and the Functions of the System Today

The feast is at the core of Wet’suwet’en society. Despite the concerted past efforts of missionaries and government agents to displace the feast from the life of the people the feast system remains central to Wet’suwet’en government, law, social structure and world view. Therefore we begin with a synopsis of the Wet’suwet’en feast. It is in the feast that people are given their titles, their robes and their crests and the authority over the territory associated with those titles. This succession is witnessed by the Wet’suwet’en and the neighboring peoples, the Babine, Nutseni and Gitksan.

At the same time that the feasts make the jurisdiction is based on a deep appreciation of the spiritual qualities of the land, the animals and the holder of the titles.The Chiefs use this authority invested in them in the feast hall to settle disputes and breaches of Wet’suwet’en law within the forum of the feast as well as outside the feast hall. The feast therefore validates authority according to Wet’suwet’en law and provides a format for the exercise of that authority.The Wet’suwet’en word for feast, “denii ne’aas” means “people coming together,” although they also use the word Potlatch, the Chinook or trade language term, when speaking English or Wet’suwet’en.

A funeral feast takes place every time a Wet’suwet’en dies to mark this passing on and to repay the people who have helped bury the dead. If the deceased held a chiefly title the successor is commonly announced at the funeral feast. Approximately a year later the deceased’s clan holds a headstone feast to erect a memorial to the deceased at the gravesite. If the deceased has a title, the title is officially conferred on the successor at the head stone feast.After the death of a Wet’suwet’en the “mother’s side,” that is the person’s clan, holds a meeting or a “smoke party” which is attended by the deceased’s clan, the father’s clan and the immediate relatives of the deceased. At this gathering a light meal is often served and people hired from the deceased’s father clan to help dig the grave, sit up with the body, be pallbearers and pay for the funeral expenses.

Plans for who will bring soup and bread and other goods to the funeral potlatch are made at such a gathering or smoke party and a strong network of support for the bereaved family put into motion. Shame feast “wipe away the blood” within the tradition of feasts are held to settle disputes and/or offer compensation.It is in a feast that ownership and jurisdiction of territory is spoken about, passed on, witnessed and validated.Following procedure for all Wet’suwet’en

Feasts

The guest are seated

They are welcomed

They are fed

Business is conducted (Once all Chiefs have arrived)

There will be statements made by the host and responses by the guest Chiefs

There will be gifts given and thanks rendered

All feasts are conducted with due deliberation.

It ends with a prayer

Settings and Seating

In the past, feasts were held outside the summer village house of the hosting clan. Today feasts are held in the community hall. All the people who come to a feast are recognized by the Wet’suwet’en, and seated, whether they hold chiefly titles or not. At most feasts, the hosting clan hires someone to do the seating. Sometimes two people assist each other, one calling out the person’s title at the door to the feast hall, and another taking the person to his or her seat where he taps the staff in front of the chair the person is to occupy. Within each side of the hall, the chiefs are seated with the head chiefs of the clan in the middle of the back row. The heirs to these chiefs sit in front of them, and the lesser chiefs are ranged to the right and to the left on either side.

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